English language planning and policy for preschool education in China

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Abstract

In the last decade, the Ministry of Education in China has issued a series of policies to curb and prevent schoolification in kindergartens, with the rationale of promoting children's healthy development. Under these policies, the teaching of all primary-level subjects including English has been prohibited in all types of kindergartens. Despite the formal prohibition, an increasing number of children in China have begun to learn English at preschool age (Cheng, 2019; Liang et al., 2020). With this background, this study aims to explore how the local education authorities and different types of kindergartens in the city of Hefei interpret and respond to the government ban on English language education and the reasons behind their responses. To meet these research aims, the study collects qualitative data from five kindergartens (two public and three private) and two local education officials.

The findings reveal that in the context of the top-down Chinese system of education administration, the local officials expressed support for national reforms to prevent schoolification and asserted that all kindergartens should avoid offering English classes. However, unlike the officials, many school participants expressed their belief that learning English at an early age instils and builds children's interests in the English language and enhances opportunities for their future development. Accordingly, the demand for preschool English education is high in all participating kindergartens. Faced with the dilemma that local demand for English is at odds with government policies, different kindergartens make different decisions about providing English language education. The public kindergartens in this study do not provide English teaching while the private settings still offer it as a course independent of the main curriculum. The local education officials are aware of this disparity between public and private provision, but they have been unable to exert the same control over private kindergartens as they do over public kindergartens due to contextual constraints and historical factors. However, this does not mean that private kindergartens can conduct English education freely. With the lack of governmental guidance and support for preschool English provision, there are wide concerns about the quality and development of English language education in kindergartens. Within the kindergarten settings, the opinions of English teachers and children on English provision have been largely neglected. To account for the findings, a model of preschool English language planning and policy in China is proposed.

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Abbreviations

CPC	Communist Party of China
CPH	Critical Period Hypothesis
EFL	English as a Foreign Language
EMI	English Medium Instruction
ENL	English as a Native Language
ESL	English as a Second Language
LEPP	Language-in-education Planning and Policy
LPP	Language Planning and Policy
MOE	Ministry of Education
NCEE	National College Entrance Examination
PRC	People's Republic of China
SES	Socioeconomic Status
TA	Thematic Analysis

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Chapter 1 Introduction

This research aims to explore preschool English language education in different types of kindergartens in China. In this chapter, I begin by introducing the background to the study, followed by an overview of preschool education in the People's Republic of China[1] (PRC, hereafter China). After that, the research questions are specified and the rationale for doing the research is explained. Finally, the chapter describes my personal motivations for doing this research and concludes by outlining the structure of this thesis.

1.1 Origins of the study

The global spread of English has significantly influenced foreign language education in many nations around the world (Gil & Adamson, 2011; Hamid & Nguyen, 2016; Ferguson, 2006). In China, English is the most important foreign language (Dai, 2016; Zhang, 2016) and occupies a crucial position in the education system. As of 2001, the *Guidelines for Vigorously Promoting the Teaching of English in Primary Schools*, issued by the Ministry of Education (MOE), officially lowered the starting grade for English teaching from the first year of junior secondary school (age 12) to the third year of primary school (age 9) (MOE, 2001a). This marked the birth of a new era for English language planning and policy in China; since then, formal provision for English education has been extended from primary to tertiary levels, but notably has not reached the preschool education level (see section 2.2).

For years, there has been much debate on whether Chinese kindergartens should offer English classes (Gui, 2012; Pan, 2013; Li & Zhu, 2012; Yu & Ruan, 2012). Proponents believe learning a foreign language at a young age can improve children's language, cognitive and social skills (Li & Zhu, 2012; Tang & Hu, 2006) while opponents worry that it may place too much burden on children and assert that most Chinese kindergartens are not sufficiently qualified to provide high-quality English education (Gui, 2012; Pan, 2013). With these ongoing debates, even though there is no government-issued, statutory English curriculum, many kindergartens have begun to teach English language (Liang et al, 2020;

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[1] In this research, without specific notification, China refers to the Mainland China, which is the geopolitical and geographical area under the direct jurisdiction of the People's Republic of China.

Yu & Ruan, 2012; Zhou, 2006). According to a nation-wide survey, 67% of 11,775 children had begun to learn English before the age of five (Cui, 2016). In a much larger survey that involved about 20 million participants, this figure was even higher, at 76% (Cheng, 2019; Jiemian, 2018). However, on the other hand, since around 2010, with the aims of improving the quality of preschool education and ensuring that children have happy childhoods, the MOE has promulgated a series of regulations to curb the phenomenon of schoolification, namely primary-oriented education, in kindergartens (see section 2.3). Under these regulations, the teaching of English, being a primary-level subject, has been prohibited in all types of kindergartens (MOE, 2018). Against this background, the present study aims to see how preschool English language planning and policy plays out in practice.

1.2 The provision of preschool education in China

Preschool education is a principal part of basic education and is an important social service led by the government (CPC [Communist Party of China] Central Committee & State Council, 2018; MOE, 1989), but it does not belong to official compulsory education in China. In a broad sense, it covers all types of education and care programmes provided for children before they enter primary school at the age of six (Tsegay et al., 2017). However, given that the majority of children aged one to three years are cared for at home (Hu & Szente, 2009), preschool education typically refers only to full-time programmes in kindergartens (幼儿园[2]) serving children between three and six years of age (MOE, 2016a). Therefore, this research adopts the narrow definition of preschool education as serving ages three to six and focuses on kindergarten programmes in particular.

The first kindergarten in China was established in 1903 in Wuhan (Li & Chen, 2017). Kindergartens in the early days mainly served children from privileged families (Feng, 2017). After over a century of development, the gross kindergarten enrolment ratio had reached 83.4% in 2019 (MOE, 2020a). In general, there are two types of kindergartens that children are enrolled in:

- **Public kindergartens** are also known as state-run kindergartens. They refer to kindergartens that are directly administered by state organs[3], and kindergartens managed

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[2] Literally translated, 幼儿园 means 'garden of children', just like the word 'kindergarten'.
[3] The state organs of the PRC 'include the National People's Congress, the President, the State Council, the Central

by state-owned enterprises, village committees and street offices with public funds or state-owned collective assets (MOE, 2020b).

- **Private kindergartens** are also known as non–state-run kindergartens or kindergartens run by social groups. They refer to all kindergartens that are legally established and funded by non-state organs and non–state-owned enterprises, social groups, or other organisations and individuals (Wang, 2015; Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, 2018).

By the end of 2019, it was calculated that there were 281,000 kindergartens in China, of which 173,000 were private, accounting for 61.6 % of the total number (MOE, 2020a), much higher than the average percentage in OECD countries (32%) (Bullough & Palaiologou, 2019). In Hefei, where this research is conducted, by July 2019 there were 1221 kindergartens city-wide, but only about 40% were public kindergartens (Hefei People's Political Consultative Conference, 2019). The large number of private kindergartens in China is mainly due to the long-term policy since 1979 of co-developing public and private kindergartens, as well as the impact of marketisation of the sector in the 1990s and 2000s (see section 7.2). It is widely agreed in existing literature, and also reflected by participants in this research, that the most salient differences between the two types of kindergartens are funding sources and teaching standards (Fang & Deng, 2014; Hu & Li, 2012; Guo, 2015; Zhou et al., 2017). Partly or fully funded by the government with public funds, public kindergartens usually charge lower fees than private kindergartens (Li et al., 2016; Zhou et al., 2017). In terms of teaching practice, compared with the stable and standardised teaching in public kindergartens, teaching in private kindergartens tends to be more flexible and diversified (Hu & Li, 2012; Guo, 2015). With regard to these differences, there are few empirical studies addressing the question of which types of kindergartens provide better care and education services, but there are widespread concerns about how to guarantee that private kindergartens provide high-quality and affordable services for children (Qi & Melhuish, 2017).

To effectively improve the quality of preschool education and help more children gain access

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Military Commission, local people's congresses and local people's governments at various levels, organs of self-government in national autonomous regions, the people's courts and the people's procuratorates' (State Council, 2014a, para. 1).

to kindergartens, the *National Outline for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development (2010-2020)* was announced in 2010. This publication clarified the government's leading role in developing and regulating preschool education and set the goal of universalising preschool education by 2020 (State Council, 2010a). In line with this goal, the government proposed the notion of '**public-interest kindergartens**'[4](普惠园). This type of kindergarten includes public kindergartens and public-interest private kindergartens. The latter can be understood as kindergartens which are privately owned but are eligible for some public funding and other kinds of government support, and are therefore different from non–public-interest private kindergartens(Chen & Li, 2019; Zeng & Liu, 2019；MOE, 2020b). Because of the emergence of this type of kindergarten, within the broad public/private categorisation, private kindergartens can be sub-categorised as public-interest kindergartens and non–public-interest kindergartens (see Figure 1.1). By 2019, there were 78,000 non–public-interest private kindergartens, accounting for 45% of private kindergartens (MOE, 2020a). Therefore, based on the official data in 2019, in the Chinese preschool sector, private kindergartens accounted for three-fifths of all kindergartens, and among these private kindergartens, the proportion of non–public-interest kindergartens slightly exceeded public-interest kindergartens (MOE, 2020a).
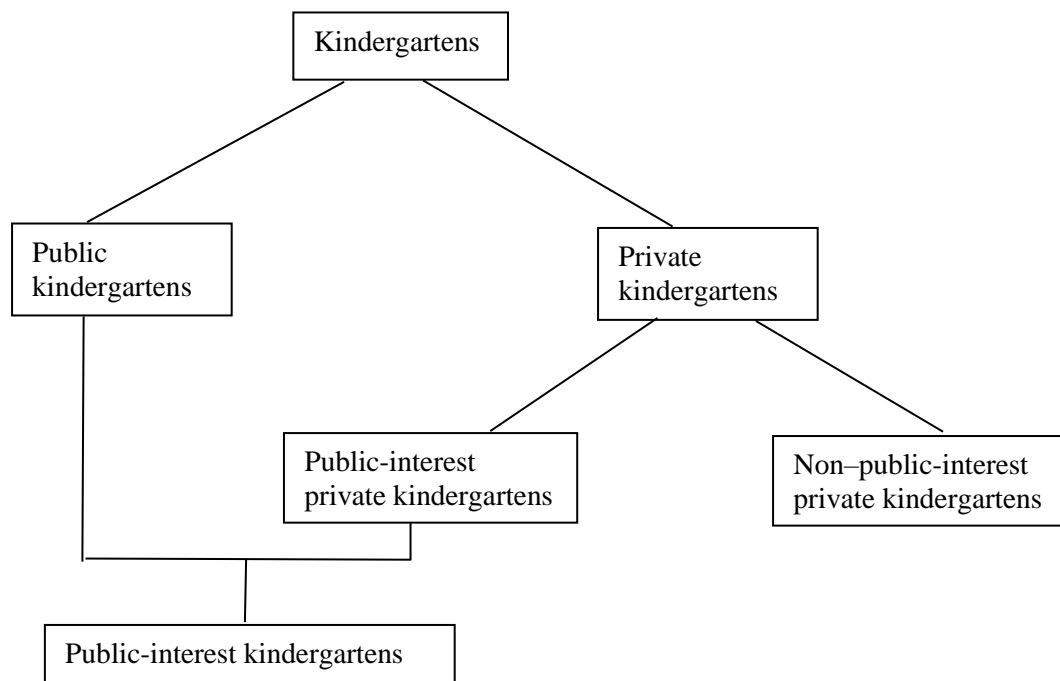
Figure 1.1 Types of kindergartens in China

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[4] Alternative translations include 'universal-access' kindergartens, 'univerversally-benefit' kindergartens and 'affordable' kindergartens.

In the present research, settings in all of the categories – public kindergartens, public-interest private kindergartens and non–public-interest private kindergartens – form part of the study. While the main comparisons focus on the distinction between public and private kindergartens, the differences between public-interest-kindergartens and non–public-interest-kindergartens will also be considered.

1.3 Educational administration system in China

In China's current education administration system, the State Council, namely the Central People's Government, is the highest executive organ of state power as well as the highest organ of state administration (State Council, 2014a). It is chaired by the Premier. The MOE[5], as an agency of the State Council, is responsible for making national plans and coordinating the management of educational undertakings across the whole country, while local education authorities are directly responsible for education within the jurisdiction of the respective administrative region (Standing Committee of National People's Congress, 2015). Within this hierarchical system, the policies generated at the national level will be negotiated at the local level before they finally arrive at schools (see Figure 1.2).
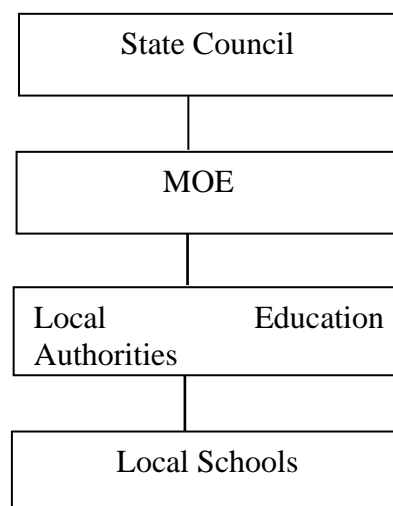
Figure 1.2 Educational administration system in China
(adapted from Shi, 2016)

There are four levels of local education authorities: province, municipality, county and township; each of them is under the leadership of the people's governments at the same level

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[5] The full responsibility of the MOE in China is outlined at: http://en.moe.gov.cn/about_MOE/what_we_do/

(An & Du, 2019). Throughout this thesis, the term 'government', unless clearly indicated as 'national', 'provincial' and 'prefectural', refers to the general governing bodies across all levels, while 'local government' refers to the governing bodies below central government level. Similarly, the term 'education authority' encompasses authorities at all levels and 'local education authority' refers to those below central level.

1.4 Research aims and questions

In the context of China's hierarchical education administration system, this research explores preschool English language education from the perspective of language planning and policy (LPP) at three levels: macro (nation), meso (district) and micro (school). The main aim of the research is to investigate how preschool English LPP is played out at the meso and micro levels, in light of top-down reforms to remove schoolification from kindergartens. Accordingly, there are four main research questions posed:

1. How is preschool English LPP negotiated and interpreted at the meso level?
   - How do local education officials perceive preschool English language education?
   - What corresponding measures have they taken?
   - What challenges have they met?

2. How do different kindergartens respond to the government policies on preschool English language education?
   - Do kindergartens still offer English language education?
   - Why do some kindergartens still provide English language education and how do they provide it?

3. How do school-based actors (headteachers, parents, English teachers and children) perceive and engage in preschool English language education?

4. How do the different policy and planning levels interact, impact and influence each other?

Driven by these research questions, the study is not limited to exploring whether and how kindergartens provide English classes; more importantly, it adopts a dynamic and holistic

perspective to treat English language education as a process that involves different political levels and different actors (people or groups in the process). As well as reviewing relevant policies at different government levels, this study collects data from two local education officials and five participating kindergartens (two public and three private) in Hefei, China. The participants in kindergartens include headteachers, parents, children and English teachers.

1.5 The rationale and significance of the research

This research grapples with the two major changes that Chinese preschool education is undergoing. One is the change in the structure of kindergarten provision and the other is reform to prevent schoolification in kindergartens. Informed by these changes and the discussion on the changes, this study describes and analyses the actual practices of preschool English language education, addressing the local polity context and the internal management of kindergartens. These focuses not only engage with concerns about preschool education reforms in China but also align with developments in the field of English language education.

Since the launch of economic reform and policies for the opening up of China to the outside world (hereafter 'reform and opening up' policies) in 1978, China has gradually evolved from a 'localised nation' to an 'internationalised power' (Shen & Bao, 2018, p.21). During this evolution, foreign language education has played an increasingly significant role in China's overall development and the field itself has seen tremendous improvements (Bolton & Graddol, 2012; Gil & Adamson, 2011; Shen & Bao, 2018). With 0.4 billion people learning (or having learnt) foreign languages, mainly English, China's foreign language teaching and learning sector is one of the largest in the world (Zhao, 2014). To date, although a substantial body of research has investigated foreign language education in China, the perspective from LPP is still new (J. Cheng, 2015; Shen, 2017). The existing research on foreign LPP in China focuses mainly on three aspects: (1) review of the history, current status and problems of foreign language education and discussion of how to initiate education reforms to improve the situation in China; (2) comparisons with other countries' foreign LPP; (3) exploration of the theoretical background of foreign LPP in the Chinese context (Shen, 2017). These studies have deepened our understanding of foreign language education in China, but there has been little attention to either the process of making and implementing the policies (Shen, 2017) or the micro planning and policy (J. Cheng, 2015;

Shen, 2014). Moreover, from an international perspective, even though the focus of much research in the field of LPP over recent decades has shifted from large-scale government-led actions to micro planning and policy, there is still little known about how LPP is interpreted and implemented at the school level and what role school actors play (Harklau & Yang, 2019; Menken & García, 2010).

With its focus on English language education practices in different types of kindergartens, this research is also valuable because it spotlights a phase of education which requires more attention. In China and many other regions and countries, there is a trend for learning English at younger ages (Baldauf et al., 2011; Enever, 2012, 2018). Therefore, as Rixon (2013) and Murphy & Evangelou (2016) suggest, the time is ripe to examine more closely and critically how early childhood settings treat English language learning. As the literature currently stands, most studies on children's English education have looked at primary education. For example, Butler (2015) and Baldauf et al. (2011) have analysed English language education policies in primary schools in Asia, focusing on curriculum, access, personnel, methodology and material, resources, community policy and evaluation policy. In a broader geographical context, the British Council has conducted a global survey to investigate the policy and practice of primary English language education in 64 countries and regions (Rixon, 2013). These studies provide valuable insights into government policies and social contexts around the world for young pupils' English language learning, but English language education in the preschool phase warrants more analysis.

Informed by these research trends and gaps in the literature, the present study will contribute to a better understanding of the relationship between macro policies and micro practices, as well as the political and social context of English language education in China.

1.6 Personal background and motivation for the research

The questions under consideration in this study call for qualitative research. As a qualitative researcher, I am aware that my personal role and experience have significant influence on the research (Cohen et al., 2018; Gray, 2014). This section describes how my interest in this topic has grown with my own education background and my many years of experience learning English.

I am a Chinese person who was born and raised in Hefei, a city in mid-eastern China. With its GDP rising from 416.4 billion yuan (£46.9 billion) in 2012 to 721.3 billion yuan (£81.2 billion) in 2017 – an increase of 73 per cent – Hefei has been identified as one of the fastest growing cities in China (Lin, 2018). As a witness to this rapid development, I have felt the significant impact of the changes, one being the rise of the preschool education market. These days, in major shopping malls and many residential communities, there are various training centres targeted at children. Drawing on statistics for urban household spending on early childhood education, it is estimated that by 2020 the scale and monetary value of the early childhood education market across China will be 800 billion yuan (£90 billion) (Deloitte, 2018). This development reflects the rise in people's living standards and parents' increasing focus on early childhood education. Seeing education as a crucial medium for reproducing social status and improving individual life trajectories, many parents, regardless of their socio-economic status, treat children's education as an important family investment (Lin, 2019; Ng & Wei, 2020). 'Winning at the starting point' (赢在起跑线上) is a maxim and belief held by many parents. Although my own parents have not said such words explicitly, they have always tried their best to provide me with the best possible learning opportunities and environments. In the last years of my primary education, with China successfully bidding for the 2008 Olympic Games and entering the World Trade Organisation, the Chinese government and the Chinese people began to show great enthusiasm for learning English (Jiang, 2003). Reflecting this trend, although I did not officially begin learning English until secondary school, one year earlier my parents had hired a private English teacher to teach me English language every week. Since then, English has become an indispensable part of my life. In my secondary school, teachers would frequently remind us how important English was for our entrance exams for senior secondary schools and colleges, so the majority of my classmates went to great efforts to improve their English skills. To help me stay ahead in English, above and beyond the work required in the school English curriculum, my parents also encouraged me (or even compelled me) to study independently using *New Concept English*[6] and sometimes they also employed a private English teacher.

During my undergraduate studies, I majored in Chinese language and literature but English

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[6] *New Concept* is a series of English language textbook created by Louis George Alexander and first published in 1967. Its revised version was introduced in China in 1997 and gained national popularity.

was still a compulsory subject and students were required to pass College English Test [7] Band 4 in order to get their bachelor's degree. In the second year, I passed College English Test Band 4 & 6 and began to prepare for the English component of the masters degree entrance examination. Although my many years' experience of learning English sometimes made me tire of it, the stronger legacy was my sustained interest in language education. So, I chose to study Teaching Chinese as the Foreign Language in my first masters degree. This experience enriched my knowledge in foreign/second language learning and teaching, but at that time, my study focus was mainly on learners and teachers themselves. After obtaining my first masters degree in China, with family's support, I decided to go to the UK and continue to pursue my studies in this field. As I had not yet made the decision on whether to apply for a PhD, I decided to start with the masters course in Language and Education at the University of Sheffield. The programme covered a broad set of topics in the field, inspiring me to adopt a wider, richer and more holistic perspective on language education especially its relationship with social context. Gradually, my attention was drawn to preschool English language education. I noticed that despite the government ban on English education in Chinese kindergartens, many parents I know still arranged for their children to learn English before starting primary school. As introduced in the beginning of this thesis, there is a younger trend of learning English (Cheng, 2019; Liang et al., 2020). With my interest sparked to explore the tension between macro policy and micro demand, I embarked on my doctoral study and began systematically to read the research literature focused on LPP and English language education. This process of reading and review confirmed the potential value of my proposed investigation and made it apparent that the exploration of LPP should not be focused on one level, but on the interactions between different levels, the school context and the roles of different individuals (Baldauf, 2005a; Johnson, 2013; Liddicoat & Taylor-Leech, 2014). All of these considerations helped to shape the design of this research and the multiple dimensions of my role in this research.

As someone who does not have direct work or research experience in preschool education settings, there were many challenges in accessing participants and building rapport with them. It was very difficult for me to approach a large number of kindergartens and get permission from them. However, the fact that I am a local person from Hefei and a PhD student with an overseas education background, to some extent aroused some participants'

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[7] College English Test is a national English language test for non-English major students in colleges in China.

interest in joining the research and sharing their experiences and opinions (see section 4.3). While my life experiences are unique to me, they do have some commonalities with many other Chinese people. I am aware how important education is in China and the hugely influential role that parents play in their children's education. To seek a comprehensive understanding of preschool English education, I recruited different kindergartens and different actors in this research, doing my best to maintain a reflexive attitude towards my personal influences and create a positive, relaxing and ethically sound environment for participants (see sections 4.3 & 4.8).

1.7 Outline of the thesis

In total, there are eight chapters in this thesis. This chapter describes the origin of the study, specifies the research aims and questions, and explains the rationale for the research and the personal motivation behind it.

Chapter 2 begins with an outline of China's context, followed by a brief history of English language education through different periods and an introduction to the current system of English language education at different education levels. The last section of chapter 2 reviews the government's attitude to schoolification over the history of Chinese preschool education and explains its effect on English language education in kindergartens.

Chapter 3 reviews the literature on LPP and how it relates to the global spread of English. The chapter begins by presenting the definition and history of LPP and then moves on to the discussions of the interaction between different levels and individual actors. Subsequently, the chapter describes the spreading of English around the world and the implications of this for English language education. Through its review of the existing research literature, the chapter is intended to provide the theoretical background for the present study.

Chapter 4 presents the methodology of this research. First, it introduces the research paradigms, the rationale for doing qualitative research, and my positionality. Following these considerations, the chapter details the methods used: where the research fieldwork was conducted, how participants were recruited and selected, and how the data was collected and analysed. This chapter also addresses issues pertaining to research ethics and research quality.

Chapters 5 and 6 set out the key findings of the research. With the aim of gaining a better understanding of the local polity context for preschool English language education and the relations between kindergartens and government, Chapter 5 focuses on the data obtained from the local education authorities in order to describe the overall situation of preschool education in Hefei, the role and authority of local education officials as well as their perceptions and management of preschool English language education. Chapter 6 focuses on a comparison of how public and private kindergartens have responded to the government ban on English language education and how they deal with the relationship with local education authorities. This chapter also discusses the perceptions and roles that different school-based actors have in preschool English language education. Lastly, chapter 6 addresses what challenges that current preschool English language education has encountered.

Chapter 7 is the discussion chapter. To further discuss the findings presented in chapters 5 and 6, the chapter starts by summarising the multi-level process of preschool English language education. Following this, the pull and push relationship between government intervention and the market-driven mechanism is further discussed to explain the disparity between macro policies and micro practices. In addition, the internal interactions within the schools are also discussed. Based on these discussions, the chapter presents the findings as a preschool English education model in which there is a dynamic and complex relationship between actors, schools, and context. Finally, the chapter discusses the potential inequality issues emerging in the current state of preschool English language education.

Chapter 8 concludes the thesis with a summary of the main findings of this study and a discussion of its contributions and implications. The limitations of the research are also addressed, along with my personal reflections.

Chapter 2 Research background and context

To contextualise this research, this chapter begins with an outline of China's context, followed by a brief history of English language education at different periods and an introduction to English language education in China as it currently stands at different education levels. Lastly, attention is focused on the preschool level, examining how schoolification in kindergartens has evolved over time and how this affects preschool English language education today.

2.1 China's context

China is located in East Asia. Covering a total area of about 9.6 million square kilometres, China is a multi-ethnic, united country with the largest population in the world (BBC, 2018; Central Intelligence Agency, 2020). By the end of 2019, the total population of China had exceeded 1.4 billion (National Bureau of Statistics, 2019).

2.1.1 An overview of China's development

China has thousands of years of history. The contemporary China, namely PRC, was established in 1949. After a century of political upheaval and foreign invasion, in the early decades of the PRC, China remained economically undeveloped and isolated from the outside world (National Bureau of Statistics, 2019; Morrison, 2019). In 1952, China's GDP was only 67.9 billion yuan (£7.8 billion), with per-capita GDP standing at 119 yuan (£13.7) (National Bureau of Statistics, 2019). A major turning point in China's history was the launch of 'reform and opening up' policies in 1978. In December of that year, the third Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party was held and it decided to shift the national focus from political reforms to economic development (Fang et al., 2018). After that, China entered into a phase of rapid development. The old planned economy that was introduced after the establishment of PRC was gradually replaced by a market-driven economy and decentralisation became an important strategy for local innovation and economic growth (Fang et al., 2018; Morrison, 2019).

After over four decades of economic development, by 2019 China's GDP was over 99 trillion yuan (£11.4 trillion) and per-capita GDP reached 70,892 yuan (£8140) (National

Bureau of Statistics, 2020), representing increases of 1,459 and 596 times the respective GDP values in 1952. The World Bank has described this rapid growth as "the fastest sustained expansion by a major economy in history" (Morrison, 2019, para.1). Today, China is a middle-income country and one of the world's largest economies (Morrison, 2019; World Bank, 2020). With this massive economic growth, China has experienced great changes. Its industrial structure has gone from relying mainly on primary industries (raw materials) to a position where secondary (manufacturing) and tertiary (service) sectors take up the majority share; urbanisation has significantly increased; basic infrastructure such as transportation, telecommunications and energy has been well developed; the relationship with the rest of the world is closer than ever before; and education access and quality has seen great progress (National Bureau of Statistics, 2019).

2.1.2 The Chinese education system

With around 1.4 billion people, China has the world's largest education system (OECD, 2016a). Overall, the Chinese mainstream education system is made up of preschool, primary, junior secondary, senior secondary and tertiary education levels (see p.15 Figure 2.1). Since 1986, regulations provide that all children who have reached the age of six shall enrol in primary school and receive compulsory education for nine years (six years of primary school and three years of junior secondary school) (Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, 1986). According to official figures in 2019, 99.9% of school-age children across the country were attending primary schools, and the gross enrolment rate at the lower secondary level reached 102.6%[8] (MOE, 2020a). Other education levels, though not part of compulsory education, also had dramatic increases in enrolment rates. In 2019, the gross enrolment rate at the preschool level was 83.4%, and at the senior secondary and higher education stages, the rates reached 89.5% and 51.6% respectively (MOE, 2020a). Alongside the mainstream education system which has seen more and more students enrolling, there are also other kinds of educational settings, such as vocational schools, specialty education centres and adult learning schools, to meet students' diverse needs.

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[8] The gross enrolment rate refers to the number of registered students, regardless of their age, expressed as a percentage of the total population of the official age group corresponding to the education level. As it includes students whose age exceeds the official age group, the figure can exceed 100%.

Tertiary education	Doctorate programme (3 years)	
	Masters programme (2-3 years)	
	Undergraduate programme (4-5 years)	Associate degree programme (3 years)
Senior secondary education	Senior secondary schools (3 years)	Secondary vocational schools (3 years)
Junior secondary education	Junior secondary schools (3 years)	Compulsory education
Primary education	Primary schools (6 years)	
Preschool education	Kindergartens (3 years)	

Figure 2.1 Chinese educational system
Source: Gu et al. (2019); Jiang (2017)

Across the entire education system in China, high-stakes examinations are a significant feature (Kirkpatrick & Zang, 2011; Luo, 2019). This feature can be traced back more than one millennium to the old imperial examination (*Keju*), an open recruitment system for selecting loyal and capable government officials in imperial China (Feng, 1995). It began during the Sui Dynasty (581-618) and lasted over 1300 years until 1905 (Yu & Suen, 2005). The main content of the *Keju* examination was Confucius classics (Feng, 1995). As it was open to all candidates regardless of their social background, *Keju* was seen as a critical step for moving upward (Feng, 1995; Yu & Suen, 2005). There were different levels of

examinations in the *Keju*. The levels changed over the dynasties. In the Ming dynasty (1368 -1644) and Qing dynasty (1644-1912) when the *Keju* was well developed and institutionalised, it consisted of four levels: local, provincial, metropolitan and imperial examinations (Miao, 2014). Candidates were only eligible to attend a more advanced level examination if they had passed the lower level; therefore, by this process of level-by-level selection, only a few candidates ultimately could participate in the final exam administered by the emperor (Feng, 1995; Luo, 2019; Yu & Suen, 2005). Candidates would be assigned to different official positions based on the highest exam level they had passed (Miao, 2014; Yu & Suen, 2005). This process is similar to the entrance examinations in today's Chinese education system. At present, after students complete their nine years of compulsory education, they have to undergo entrance examinations before progressing to the next level (Luo, 2019; Qi, 2017). Among the different levels of entrance examinations, the most influential is the National College Entrance Examination (NCEE), also known as *Gaokao*, which is described as the 'baton of the conductor in an orchestra' because it 'orchestrates and regulates the pedagogy, evaluation, and curriculum of the entire education system that precedes university education' (Luo, 2019, p. 35). The NCEE is held only once a year in early June. Students' NCEE scores directly determine which universities they are eligible to attend. Although the NCEE has undergone many changes in recent years, the three main compulsory subjects — Chinese, mathematics and a foreign language (usually English) — remain unchanged (State Council, 2014b). In order to get a high score on the NCEE, students must dedicate a great deal of time and energy to doing numerous exercises and practice examinations, so the NCEE has long been criticised for the overwhelming pressure put on students and the lack of the critical-thinking training (Kirkpatrick & Zang, 2011). To tackle the issues brought by exam-oriented education, since the 1990s a different approach has been vigorously promoted by the MOE: quality-oriented education (素质教育), which emphasises students' holistic development and potential for creativity and innovation (Chinese Association for Suzhi Education, 2017). The curriculum reforms for English across different education levels and the preschool curriculum reforms described below all reflect this shift (see sections 2.2.2 & 2.3).

However, owing to China's long tradition of unified and standardised testing, 'the transformation of its exam-oriented system is probably not foreseen in the short future' (Beckett & Zhao, 2016, p.274). The NCEE is still commonly accepted as a relatively fair and equitable way to select students across the whole nation (Jiang & Guo, 2020; Yu & Suen,

2005). In 2019, the number of NCEE candidates reached 10.3 million, and although the admission rate stayed around 80%, less than 50% of students who sat the NCEE were able to register in undergraduate programmes (Sohu, 2019). The competition for places in good universities is very fierce. According to one report, the admission rates within two higher education initiatives, Project 985[9] and Project 211[10], were 2.1 %, and 3.1 % respectively in 2018 (Supchina, 2019). In this educational context, alongside the influence of traditional Chinese culture, students' academic attainment is of paramount importance and accorded high priority by parents (Chen et al., 2020; Ng & Wei, 2020) and teachers (Tan & Reyes, 2016; Qi, 2017).

2.1.3 China's national linguistic profile

Out of 56 ethnic groups, Han people account for 92% of the total population (MOE, 2016b). In Hefei, where this research was conducted, the Han ethnic group makes up over 99% (Statistics Bureau of Hefei Municipality, 2020). Due to the large percentage of Han people, the Han Chinese language has become the predominant language in China. Modern Han Chinese language is composed broadly of two categories: Mandarin (commonly spoken, with pronunciation based on the Beijing dialect) and other minority dialects (MOE, 2017a). Mandarin has been promoted by the government across the nation since the 1950s, used as a tool to maintain national unity and to promote economic development and cultural power (Wu, 1958). However, its official status was not set until the 21st century. On 1st January 2001, the *Law of the PRC on the Standard Spoken and Written Chinese Language* went into effect, establishing Mandarin and standardised Chinese characters as the official, standard spoken and written Chinese language (Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, 2000). In light of this law, Mandarin is the language used in the government sector, education, public service, advertisements, broadcast and media. By 2019, the proportion of nationals speaking Mandarin had reached approximately 80%, with over 95% of literates using standardised Chinese characters; therefore, the communication barriers among different ethnic groups have essentially been removed (MOE, 2019a).

Alongside the spread of Mandarin across the nation, many minority languages co-exist.

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[9] The 985 Project is a programme for founding world-class universities in the 21st century and includes only 39 universities (Zong & Zhang, 2019). By 2019, there were 2956 higher education institutions in China (MOE, 2020a).
[10] The 211 Project is a programme aimed at strengthening about 100 institutions of higher education and key disciplinary areas as a national priority for the 21st century. In total, there are 112 participating universities (X. Zhang, 2014).

Among 55 ethnic minority groups, excluding the Hui and Man ethnic groups that also use the Han Chinese language, over 80 languages are used by around 60 million people in total, and 22 of these languages have writing forms (Zhou, 2013). Faced with this multilingualism, the state vigorously protects linguistic diversity and supports the use and development of ethnic languages or dialects in various social sectors, along with Mandarin. Schools and other educational organisations in minority areas, whenever possible, use textbooks and teach lessons in the minority languages of their communities as well as Mandarin (Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, 2001). Thus, while Mandarin is the dominant and national language, many minor languages contribute to the fabric of China's complex multilingual society and culture.

The English language also has an important status in China. In the context of the inexorable, global spread of English, China's increasing international prominence has seen English penetrate many domains of social life in China. For instance, many announcements and signs in the public sector are written in both Mandarin and English, some Chinese companies have adopted English names, the academic arena has seen the rapid launch of English language journals and conferences, and there are more and more English language print and broadcast media (Gil & Adamson, 2011; Tang, 2015). Undoubtedly, English has become the most popular foreign language in China (Dai, 2016; Zhang, 2016). Nevertheless, it is worth noting that no matter how important English has become in current society, China remains a country in the 'expanding circle' according to Kachru's (1985, 1990, 1992) classification: English is only used as a foreign language that has neither a historic nor official role (see section 3.2.2). Between and within ethnic groups, English has never served as a communication tool in China (Tang, 2015). In a national survey including 165,000 households from different Chinese regions, only 7% of the respondents who had learnt English stated that they often used it in their daily life, while 69% reported seldom using it (Wei & Su, 2012). In another national study, Lu and Zhang (2012) found that 78% of 5,611 participants did not need to use English in their work. The lack of an authentic English-speaking environment has become one of the biggest challenges for improving Chinese learners' English proficiency, but it does not inhibit national and individual passions for learning the language (Gil, 2008; Liang et al., 2020; Shi, 2017).

2.2 English language education in China

Foreign language education has a long history in China. Though this research does not focus on the history of foreign language education, a brief historical review helps to better understand the role of English in Chinese history and the factors driving the rise of English in contemporary China.

2.2.1 The history of English language education

As early as 1289, the first foreign language teaching school, 'Huihuiguozixue' (回回国子学), was created by the Yuan government to teach the Persian language (Fu, 1986). With over 700 years of history, foreign language education has passed through different phases and seen great changes.

The early years (pre-1919)

Following the establishment of the first foreign language school in the Yuan dynasty, increasing contact with other countries during subsequent dynasties led to foreign language education in China receiving more and more attention (Chen & Liu, 2009; Fu, 1986). In 1407, the Ming government set up the first Chinese official translator training agency, Siyi Guan (四夷馆) (Fu, 1986). In 1708, the Qing government created the first specialised Russian language school (俄罗斯同文馆). These schools laid the solid foundation for the further development of foreign language education in China, but the languages taught in these schools were mainly limited to those spoken in China's neighbouring countries (Fu, 1986; Hu, 1999) and only a very small number of students had the opportunity to learn these foreign languages (Hu, 1999; Zhong, 2018).

From the beginning of the 17th century, global trade was growing and led some European countries to seek access to China, but due to the 'closed-door policy' of the Qing government at that time, English was used only by a small number of businessmen (Adamson, 2002; Gil & Adamson, 2011). This situation did not significantly change until China was defeated in the First and Second opium wars and forced to sign a series of unequal treaties during the period of 1840s-1860s, which made China realise its technological inferiority and its risk of losing territory (Gil & Adamson, 2011; D. Liu, 2015). In these circumstances, many officials and scholars proposed that the best way to rejuvenate China and consolidate the Qing

government was to understand and learn from Western culture (Adamson, 2002; D. Liu, 2015; Zhong, 2018). Hence, foreign language education rose in importance and the maxim 'Chinese learning as substance, western learning for application' (中学为体，西学为用) proposed by Zhang Zhidong became the fundamental principle of foreign language education (Hu, 1999). In 1862, with the initial aim of training and nurturing interpreters and dealing with foreign affairs, the government set up the Tongwen Guan (同文馆) in Beijing (Feng, 2002; Gu, 2004). In the beginning, only English was taught at Tongwen Guan, but then Russian, French, German and Japanese as well as non-language subjects were also introduced to the school (Gu, 2004). After Tongwen Guan was established, foreign language schools were created in other Chinese cities (Bolton & Graddol, 2012; Zhong, 2018). Outside these specialist language colleges, in mainstream education English became a compulsory subject in the curriculum at secondary school level and above for the first time in 1903 (Hu, 1999). Following that landmark moment, English language education began to spread across the whole nation. The dominant pedagogy in this early era was grammar-translation, an approach which focused on reading and interpretation, with less emphasis on students' functional speech communication skills (Hu, 1999; D. Liu, 2015).

Republican period (1919–1949)

In spite of great efforts made by leaders in the late Qing dynasty to revitalise the country, the decline of imperial China could not be stopped. In 1911, the Xinhai Revolution ended with the abdication of the last emperor of the Qing dynasty, marking the end of 2,000 years of imperial rule and the beginning of the Republic of China. In the following years, China experienced the new Cultural Movement (1917–1923), the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945) and Civil War (1927–1950). Even in this turbulent context, the English language acted as a bridge for communication with the outside world and continued to play an important role in the Chinese education system (Adamson, 2002; Fu, 1986). A significant feature of this period was the role of missionary schools, whose number reached 13,500 by the end of 1921 (Fu, 1986). In these schools, English was widely used as the instructional language in classes (Lai, 2010; Zhang, 2012). In the mainstream education system, with English already compulsory in secondary schools, the national curriculum in 1912 introduced foreign languages (predominantly English and Japanese) into primary schools in well-developed regions; provision began in the third year of school and comprised three classes per week (Lai, 2010). This education system lasted for 10 years and then was

replaced by the Renshu system (Adamson, 2002; D. Liu, 2015). Under Renshu, English teaching was no longer required in primary school but had more importance in secondary education where its teaching time was the same or even greater than the time given to Chinese (D. Liu, 2015). In addition, some schools introduced English language textbooks for mathematics, physics and chemistry (Fu, 1986) and explored a range of teaching methods for English, such as direct instruction and situational teaching (Zhou & Dong, 2016). However, due to the tumultuous social context, none of the curricula set in this period was actually put into effect (D. Liu, 2015). Nevertheless, compared with the previous period, it was clear that English language education in China had gone from being a simply means of learning language and technology to becoming a bridge for Chinese people to explore Western philosophies (Adamson, 2002; Lai, 2010). The nation-wide spread of English education had deep impacts on the Chinese way of thinking, lifestyle and culture, and inspired many people to learn more from the outside world and to travel overseas (Zhou & Dong, 2016). From 1912 to 1927, over 1,000 students went abroad, and this number increased about sevenfold in the next decade after the government sanctioned self-funded overseas study (D. Liu, 2015).

PRC era (after 1949)

In the early years of PRC, given China's close political alignment with the Soviet Union, the status of English declined while the Russian language rose in profile (Adamson, 2002; Lam, 2002; D. Liu, 2015). In this socio-political context, although secondary schools could teach either Russian or English, Russian was much preferred in practice (D. Liu, 2015). This situation lasted until the late 1950s when the relationship between China and Russia worsened. There was a growing urgency in China to maintain and cultivate contact with other foreign countries, and English language teaching was again designated to secondary education (Fu, 1986; D. Liu, 2015). In 1964, the *Seven Years' Outline of Foreign Language Education* was issued, which defined English as the first foreign language and required secondary schools and colleges to substantially increase the number of students learning English and gradually lower the number of Russian learners (Fu, 1986; D. Liu, 2015).

Unfortunately, this flourishing of English language education was drastically interrupted by the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). During this period, all foreign languages were forbidden as they were seen as marks of imperialism and capitalism, and anyone who could speak a foreign language was considered a 'foreign spy' (Adamson, 2002; D. Liu, 2015).

What is worse, this national campaign engendered far more than the downturn of English language education; it significantly weakened the country's economy, culture and society for years (Hu, 2002). Schools across the nation were closed and millions of urban residents were sent to rural communes to learn from farmers and workers and do agricultural work (Fu, 1986). Even in this dark period, it is noteworthy that Zhou Enlai, the first premier of the PRC, still managed to protect and preserve the remnant foreign language majors (Sun, 2011; Fu, 1986; Lam, 2002). Under Zhou's instruction, the students who graduated from foreign language colleges were allocated together to farms or stayed at schools in order to keep practising foreign languages and wait for jobs relevant to foreign language skills (China Daily, 2011; Fu, 1986; Lam, 2002). These people then became the major force in dealing with foreign affairs and teaching foreign languages (Sun, 2011).

Shortly after the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976, the 'reform and opening-up' policies were launched and the English language again assumed greater prominence. In 1978, the MOE held an important conference on foreign language education which declared that in order to realise modernisation and strengthen relationships with other countries, the development of foreign language education was an urgent priority (Hu, 2002; D. Liu, 2015). In the English curriculum issued in the same year, the MOE suggested to introduce English language education in the third year of primary school, but recognised the constraints on poorly equipped schools who could introduce English from the first year of secondary school (Hu, 2005). However, a widespread lack of resources meant that few primary schools were in a position to offer English classes in the 1980s (D. Liu, 2015; Y. Liu, 2015). In the following decades, the English curriculum underwent several rounds of updates. A major feature of these curricula was the focus on developing students' reading ability (D. Liu, 2015; Li et al., 2019). These reforms saw English language education develop at an unprecedented speed and led to the solid foundation for contemporary English language education in China.

2.2.2 Contemporary English language education

With its growing economic power, China emerged into the 21st century with increasing prominence in global events and international institutions. In 2001, China joined the World Trade Organization; in 2008, it hosted the Olympic Games in Beijing followed by the 2014 APEC meeting in Shanghai and the 2016 G20 summit in Hangzhou. In 2013, the Chinese

government launched the foreign policy initiative of One Belt One Road (一带一路) to strengthen the connections with neighbouring countries (Morrison, 2019). China's raised profile in international events has aroused great interest and enthusiasm for English learning, and 'even people working in civil services and public transportation in big cities are required to acquire basic communicative English to interact with foreign visitors' (Y. Liu, 2015, p.78). The principle that education in China must 'face modernisation, face the world and face the future' (MOE, 2001a), has heralded a wave of English curriculum reforms across the entire education system since the early 2000s to promote students' English language proficiency.

As introduced at the beginning of this thesis, 2001 was a watershed year for English language education: in all primary schools across the nation, the starting year for learning English was lowered to year three (MOE, 2001a). Also in 2001, the MOE (2001b) issued the first unified English curriculum covering primary education to senior secondary education (grades 1–12). This new English curriculum overturned the one-dimensional view that English language education is merely instrumental in function, explicitly recognising its humanistic value as well (D. Liu, 2015; Q. Liu, 2017). In other words, English learning not only improves students' language competence, but is a way to broaden the horizons of learners, enrich their life experiences, enhance their characters, and promote critical thinking skills (MOE, 2001a, 2011a, 2017b). Accordingly, the English curricula in China today take a comprehensive approach to English competence, encompassing five main aspects (see p.24 Figure 2.2).

These five aspects are interrelated: language knowledge and language skills are the foundation; cultural awareness facilitates appropriate use of language; emotions and attitudes are important factors that affect students' learning and development; and learning strategies help students improve their learning efficiency and develop their self-directed learning skills (MOE, 2001b, 2011a). Based on these five aspects, the curriculum sets out nine levels of targets for English teaching in primary and secondary school. Level 5 is the minimum level that should be achieved by students completing junior high school. This level requires students to master 1500-1600 words, 200-300 phrases and set collocations, and reach 150,000 words of extracurricular reading (MOE, 2011a). These requirements are higher than any other curriculum set since the establishment of PRC (D. Liu, 2015). To fulfil teaching and learning goals, primary and junior secondary schools are required to offer at least three to four English lessons every week (MOE, 2011a).
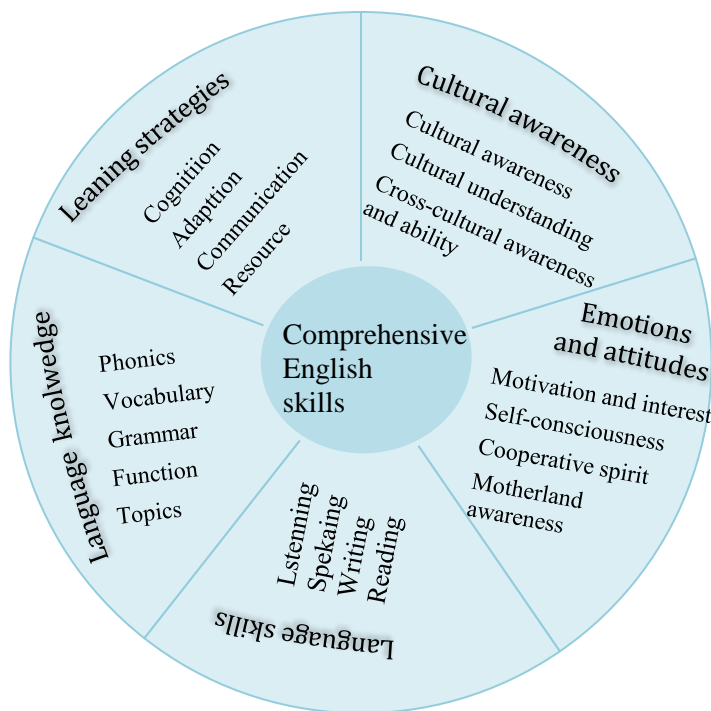
Figure 2.2 English curriculum framework
Source: MOE (2011a)

At the senior secondary level, the latest English curriculum (2017 version) revised the five aspects in Figure 2.2 to four components: language competence; cultural awareness; thinking ability; and learning capability (MOE, 2017b). The curriculum requires schools to provide compulsory courses, selective compulsory courses and selective courses for students who have different needs. All senior higher students must master 500 new words and phrases, attend compulsory English courses (108 lessons) and complete at least 45,000 words of extracurricular reading (MOE, 2017b). For those students who want to take NCEE, an additional 1000-1100 new words and phrases, 144 lessons of selective compulsory courses and 100,000 words of extracurricular reading are required (MOE, 2017b). Students who have completed these two types of courses and who have higher goals and interest in English learning, can attend selective courses such as translation, newspaper reading, English drama and English for tourism (MOE, 2017b). This overall programme design allows schools to develop a more flexible and advanced curriculum rather than seeking for all students to reach the same level.

Similar values and principles apply to English education at higher education level in China. The *College English Curriculum Requirements* announced by the MOE in 2004 and 2007 shifted the emphasis from reading prioritised in the 1999 national curriculum to listening and speaking (Yu & Liu, 2018). In its latest version of curriculum guidance for college English, the MOE went further by stressing the importance of communicative competence and the need to combine the instrumental value and humanistic value of English learning (MOE, 2017c). To meet students' diverse needs, there are three levels of English teaching and three types of courses at higher education level: general English, focusing on students' core language skills and literal understanding; English for specific purposes, focusing on language skills in academia and the professions; and cross-cultural communication, focusing on intercultural understanding and communication skills (MOE, 2017c). These different strands reflect governments' endeavours to help students develop both solid language knowledge and practical skills. The specific teaching time and content is different for each university and college, but the MOE suggests four compulsory English classes every week (MOE, 2017c).

Across the board, from primary schools to higher education, English as a compulsory subject holds an essential position in the current education system in China. With more emphasis on developing students' all-round English ability, traditional teaching approaches which narrowly stressed grammar and vocabulary have been criticised (D. Liu, 2015). Now, the teaching at different education levels focuses on creating authentic environments and meaningful activities to help students learn English through experiencing, practising, and cooperating with each other (MOE, 2001a, 2011a, 2017b). These efforts appear to have borne fruit: nationally, there is evidence that students' English proficiency has improved (D. Liu, 2015). According to the *EF 2019 English Proficiency Index* published by Swedish training company EF Education, China's ranking rose seven places to 40th among 100 countries and regions, compared to the previous year (Zou, 2019). Despite this statistic, considering the tremendous time and effort devoted to promoting English language learning in China, students' actual English skills appear to be far from satisfactory (L. Liu, 2015). For example, Wei and Su's (2012) research found that only 21% of those who had learnt English claimed that they could carry on an English conversation beyond initial greetings, but they fare better in reading competence, with 72% of respondents able to understand at least simple written sentences in English. Echoing these findings, Chinese IELTS test-takers usually score highest in reading and lowest in speaking. In the 2018 IELTS, the mean scores

for reading and speaking were 6.17 and 5.37 respectively (IELTS, 2020). This phenomenon of reading skills outflanking speaking skills can be related to at least two factors: the lack of authentic English-speaking environments in China (see section 2.1.3) and the high-stakes examination system (see section 2.1.2).

English is a core compulsory subject in all entrance examinations. In the latest reforms of English examination content in the NCEE, the biggest changes are the new tasks of continuation writing and summary writing (Liu, 2017; National Education Examinations Authority, 2017). While these changes aim to improve students' all-round English language ability, speaking skills are still not targeted in the NCEE and the listening component accounts for only 20% of the whole test paper (Wang & Zhang, 2018). As a result, in English classes, teachers still place little emphasis on improving students' communication competence (Pan & Block, 2011; Teo, 2017). Driven by widespread dissatisfaction about formal state-led English education, private English training schools and programmes have flourished. In 2017, the size of the market in English language teaching in China amounted to $41.5 billion (£33.6 billion) and was estimated to grow to $75 billion (£60.8 billion) in 2022 (Textor, 2019). This enthusiasm for English learning has also extended down to the preschool stage.

2.2.3 Preschool English language education

At the preschool level, there has never been a statutory English curriculum but English language education has existed since kindergartens were first established in the 1900s. At that time, the majority of settings were sponsored by foreign Christian churches, so English was an important dimension of teaching in these kindergartens (Liao, 2002; Yu & Ruan, 2012). In the Republican period (1919-1949), church-run kindergartens maintained their dominant role in preschool education, and simultaneously Chinese educators began to explore how to adapt preschool English language education for the Chinese context (Liao, 2002). One significant step was made by Chen Heqin, known as the 'Father' of China's preschool education. Drawing on his own experience of having his son learn English from a very early age, Chen personally developed English teaching materials for young children (Liao, 2002). At the heart of his approach was the teaching of English through singing, playing games, storytelling and tongue twisters (Liao, 2002). These techniques made an important contribution to the development of preschool English language education in China

(Liao, 2002; Yu & Ruan, 2012).

Entering the 2000s, with English playing a much more important role in the Chinese education system, a growing number of kindergartens began to offer English courses for their students (Liang et al., 2020; Yu & Ruan, 2012). To investigate this phenomenon, Guo and Li (2003) sent a questionnaire to 188 kindergarten administrators in Shanghai and got 51 back. All the respondents agreed that it was necessary for kindergartens to offer English language education, for reasons relating to children's development, wider social context, family expectation and kindergartens' development as organisations. However, without a statutory curriculum issued by the MOE, kindergartens have been compelled to develop English programmes by themselves. These programmes can be broadly characterised as English immersion or non–immersion programmes (Liao, 2002). Huang (2015) subcategorised these programmes into four types: (1) full-immersion programmes, where every class has a full-time native English teacher and a Chinese assistant. The foreign teacher speaks English with students all the time while Chinese teachers may occasionally speak some Chinese. English in this model is not only taught as a specific subject but also used as a teaching medium in other courses as well as in the school's daily life; (2) half-immersion programmes, where although every class still has a native English teacher, he/she does not stay at school all day and is only responsible for English courses, while other courses and activities are led by Chinese teachers; (3) English course programmes, in which there is no fixed foreign English teacher, but the school provides English classes regularly; and (4) extra-curricular English classes, where English is taught after class and students are free to choose whether or not to take it. These various programmes make English language education popular in kindergartens. In a survey conducted in Nanchang, it was reported that 80% of kindergartens had offered English teaching (Zhou, 2006). However, this widespread phenomenon of English language provision in kindergartens has been largely constrained by the ban on schoolification from kindergartens in recent years.

2.3 Schoolification in Chinese kindergartens

Preschool education plays an essential role in facilitating children's transition from kindergarten to primary school (OECD, 2006, 2017a; Yang & Li, 2019). After reviewing 20 countries' policies and services in early childhood education and care, the OECD (2006) identified two different approaches. One is the social pedagogy approach, which pursues

children's all-round development and encourages respect for children's agency and natural learning strategies, 'that is, learning through play, interaction, activity, and personal investigation' (OECD, 2006, p. 60). By adopting this approach, lower classes in primary schools continue with the same pedagogy used in kindergartens. In contrast, the 'schoolifictaion', also known as the 'readiness for school' approach or the pre-primary approach, is more academically oriented and characterised by classroom experiences and gaining the knowledge and skills useful for primary school (OECD, 2006). Both of these approaches can be identified in the history of preschool education in China.

2.3.1 Preschool curriculum reforms

In feudal China, children were basically educated at home (Yang, 2012). Early childhood education is traditionally called 'Mengxue' (蒙学；Liu, 2013). Literally translated, it means enlightened education. This education philosophy views the child as a blank piece of paper, to be educated and developed in proper ways before their personality is formed in order to cultivate their morality and wisdom (Pu, 1996; Yang, 2012). This way of thinking is implied in many old sayings, such as 'one should begin to educate children when they are babies' (教子婴孩), 'ignorance should be enlightened through early childhood education so children will follow the right path' (养正于蒙), and 'the early childhood period is the best time to start education' (早谕教). Considerably influenced by Confucianism, moral education was the top priority of traditional early childhood education (Liu, 2013; Pu, 1996; Yang, 2012). Another major feature was the emphasis on recognising Chinese characters and reading (Liu, 2013). At the age of three or four, children began intensive literary practice (Liao, 2009, cited in Liu, 2013). After learning about a thousand Chinese characters in one year, children would be able to read relatively easy classic books, such as the *Three Character Primer*, *Book of Family Names* and *Thousand Character Classic* (Liao, 2009, cited in Liu, 2013). This would be followed by learning advanced Confucian classics such as the *Four Books*[11] and *Five Classics*[12] to prepare for the imperial examination (Yang, 2012). Although the texts that children learnt progressed in level of difficulty from easy to hard, there was no obvious division between early childhood education and subsequent education in terms of learning content and learning methods. Under this approach, children were regarded as extensions of

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[11] The Four Books are *The Great Learning, The Doctrine of the Mean, Confucian Analects* and *The Works of Mencius*.
[12] The Five Classics are the *Book of Odes, Book of Documents, Book of Changes, Book of Rites* and the *Spring and Autumn Annals*.

parents; school-level knowledge was taught from a very young age, and the instruction was teacher/adult-centred (Yang, 2012). This traditional way of teaching and learning became a central cultural thread which has shaped current preschool curriculum and practice (Li & Chen, 2017) and can be seen as one origin of schoolification (Yan & Gai, 2014). In the early decades of the PRC, teacher-centred teaching and subject-based learning were encouraged in preschool education (Wang & Tang, 2019). In 1960, the MOE and All-China Women's Federation jointly issued a notice stating that teaching pinyin[13], Chinese characters and mathematics in kindergartens was an effective way to rapidly increase the quality of preschool education and foster individual development (Li, 2018; Wu, 2012). This official declaration essentially legalised academic teaching and learning in kindergartens.

However, since the early years of the emergence of kindergartens, there have been many arguments on whether such traditional teaching is appropriate for children (Li & Chen, 2017; Wang, 2003). In the 1920s, Chinese scholars began to advocate a child-centred, play-based and authentic life learning model in kindergartens (Li & Chen, 2017; Pan & Li, 2012). Unfortunately, these early advances were eroded in the following decades and were not brought to the fore until the 1980s when the implementation of 'reform and opening up' policies led to the introduction of education theories from outside China, including those of Dewey, Montessori, Piaget and Vygotsky (Hu & Szente, 2009; Li & Chen, 2017). Influenced by these ideas, preschool education saw a progressive 'shift from an emphasis on teaching knowledge and skills to an emphasis on the development of children and the acquisition of abilities, from an emphasis on the result of educational activity to an emphasis on the process of activity' (Zhu & Zhang, 2008, p. 2). Ever since, the principles of 'active learning', 'respecting children', 'play-based teaching and learning' and 'teaching and learning through daily life in kindergartens' have been the main themes of curriculum reforms (Liu & Feng, 2005). Accordingly, schoolification, which threatened these new progressive ideas and thought to interfere with children's physical and mental health, was banned (Li, 2018; Yan & Gai, 2014). In 1979, the *Minutes of Meeting on National Preschool Education* formally stated that primary- and adult-oriented education should be avoided in preschool settings (Li, 2018). This principle was repeated in policies that followed, such as the *Regulations on Kindergarten Management* issued in 1989 and the *Guiding Framework for Kindergarten Education* issued in 1999 (Li, 2018). Nevertheless, in practice, the ban on schoolification

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[13] Pinyin refers to the standardised romanisation system used to represent the pronunciation of Mandarin characters.

did not attract high levels of compliance, and for a long time there was not sufficient consensus on what it meant (Song, 2018).

2.3.2 The definition of schoolification

Schoolification essentially refers to treating kindergarten students as primary school students (Huang, 2005; Zhang & Li, 2013); in other words, kindergartens 'adopt practices that are usually more related to primary school' (OECD, 2017a, p.20). It is widely agreed by Chinese scholars that schoolification can be identified by at least two aspects: learning primary-level knowledge in advance, and primary-oriented ways of learning and behaving such as teachers seldom using play as the basic activity and students being required to sit properly in class and obey teachers (Huang, 2005; Yu, 2012; Zhang & Li, 2013). In addition, Zhang & Li (2013) and Wang (2015) asserted that schoolification also includes outcome-focused rather than process-focused assessments; and Yu (2014) proposed the concept of implicit schoolification, which refers to teaching behaviours that occasionally cause children to lose freedom and enjoyment as well as interest and motivation in learning.

With regard to the above debate, in recent years the Chinese central government has issued a series of guidelines and policies for preschool education to prevent and remedy schoolification. Unlike previous policies which had only briefly addressed schoolification, the two policies announced by the MOE in 2011 and 2018 specifically tackled this phenomenon. The 2011 policy stipulated five requirements for the provision of appropriate education for children and the former three were:

(1) To accord with characteristics of children's physical and mental development and **rectify primary-oriented teaching content and methods** … It is strictly forbidden to teach primary course content in advance. Kindergartens are not permitted to conduct intensive training by holding extracurricular, specialty or experimental classes or to assign homework.

(2) To create age-appropriate conditions and **rectify primary-oriented environments**. In order to provide children with rich opportunities to play and acquire knowledge, kindergartens should create a variety of areas with plenty of toys, games materials and books.

(3) To strictly implement the admission policy of compulsory education and **forbid any kinds of entrance examinations** for primary schools. (MOE, 2011b, para. 2-4)

The above stipulations indicate that schoolification involves at least four main aspects: teaching content, teaching methods, teaching environment and assessment. These four aspects were addressed again in another national policy document in 2018, and this document is noteworthy for its explicit banning of certain subjects in kindergartens, including pinyin, Chinese characters, calculation and English (MOE, 2018). It was made clear that English, as a primary-level subject, should not be taught in kindergartens.

Despite the official position, in practice many kindergarten teachers have found it difficult to adhere to anti-schoolification principles, due to the deep-rooted educational traditions, the exam-oriented system, and the insufficient resources and emphasis on preschool education (Qi, 2017; Yu, 2012; Zhang & Li, 2013). In the realm of academia, scholars have also challenged the rationale for the reforms tackling schoolification. Some think the policy has been too abrupt and ignores the complexity of education (Y. Li, 2018; X. Li & Kang, 2014). To ban kindergartens from teaching primary-level subjects in advance effectively denies some children the opportunity to explore and develop their natural talents and abilities in certain subject areas (Li, 2018). Moreover, there is no substantial evidence to support the argument that replacing traditional teaching and learning entirely with play-based activities is guaranteed to bring positive effects on children's development (Liu & Liao, 2012). In fact, in contrast to the Chinese government's efforts to ban schoolification, the practice is gaining increasing traction in some other countries. For instance, in the USA and the UK, governing bodies see schoolification as an effective way of helping all young children acquire basic knowledge and skills such as reading, writing and mathematics, and ensuring continuity between kindergartens and primary schools (OECD, 2006; Ofsted, 2017). Likewise, most Nordic countries have also increased school-oriented practices in early years education (Broström, 2017). Given these trends, many Chinese scholars have pressed for a more rational position on schoolification (Liu & Liao, 2012; Yan & Gai, 2014; Li, 2018). Regarding preschool English language education specifically, many studies have found evidence of supportive attitudes towards English provision in kindergartens and the perceived benefits for children's development (She, 2017; Wang, 2014; Wei, 2015). However, the main focuses of these studies were how kindergartens conduct English

education and how actors perceive this, rather than on how policy influences kindergartens' English practices. This is a main focus of this research.

2.4 Chapter summary

In summary, this chapter has traced the general trajectory of the English language in China, its dominant role in foreign language education, and its ban from kindergarten teaching under recent anti-schoolification reforms. The changing status of English in Chinese history has been inextricably linked to China's relations with the rest of the world, as well as the political, economic and social contexts in China (Adamson, 2002; G. Hu, 2005; R. Hu & Adamson, 2012; D. Liu, 2015). In response to China's 'reform and opening-up' policies in the 1970s and the country's deepening contacts with the outside world, English language education has had an important role in the national agenda. In the 21st century, the changes to the English curriculum at different education phases have set higher standards and requirements for students' English attainment and put more emphasis on developing all-round communication abilities (see section 2.2.2). Simultaneously, at the preschool level, progressive curriculum reforms have involved the prohibition of traditional primary-oriented ways of teaching children in kindergartens. These separate reforms actually have commonalities: they are all initiated in a top-down manner by central government, and they all aim to help students reach their full potential. However, these reforms bring a dilemma to the arena of English language education. On the one hand, English enjoys a high priority at the primary education level and above, but on the other hand, being a primary-level subject, English teaching is forbidden in kindergartens. In this context, the present research puts a lens on preschool English language education to explore how the policy on removing schoolification is negotiated and carried out in practice.

Chapter 3 Literature review

With its main purpose being to examine English language education in kindergartens in China, this research falls squarely into the field of language-in-education planning and policy (LEPP) in relation to the global spread of English. This chapter starts with an introduction to LPP. It shows that the focus of LPP research since the 1990s has increasingly shifted from government-led actions to micro situations (Kaplan & Baldauf, 2007; Baldauf, 2010; Liddicoat & Baldauf, 2008). Informed by this shift, the chapter explores the interaction between different levels of LEPP and examines the agency of micro actors. Following the discussion on LPP, the chapter proceeds with an account of the spread of English worldwide and the implications for English language education in East Asia. Against the background of increasing numbers of children learning English at a young age, the account turns to the assumption about language learning that 'the younger the better'. Lastly, the chapter adopts a critical perspective on the implications of the wide proliferation of English.

3.1 LPP and LEPP

LPP emerged as a branch of sociolinguistics after World War II and has developed as a multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary field that draws not just on linguistics but also on political science, sociology and history (Johnson, 2018; Nekvapil, 2011; Ricento, 2000). LEPP is the main domain of LPP. To better understand the nature and scope of this field, this section traces the general development of LPP as an academic discipline and also its development in China. Following that, the multi-level nature and process of LEPP and the significant role of individual actors at the micro level will be discussed.

3.1.1 The definition and development of LPP

After a half century's development of LPP, 'its initial focus on polity-level solutions for language problems in emerging states has been replaced with a broader emphasis both in geography and scope (micro, meso and macro studies)' (Baldauf, 2010, p. 438). Before tracing the trajectory of LPP, this section looks first at the relevant definitions.

3.1.1.1 The definition of LPP

The two terms 'language planning' and 'language policy' are often used synonymously, but sometimes refer to distinct language activities (Bamgbose, 2004; Kaplan & Baldauf, 1997; Schiffman, 1996). A common distinction between the two terms is that language policy refers to a series of guidelines, laws, norms, regulations and practices for intended language change, while language planning refers to conscious efforts and activities to promote language change (Kaplan & Baldauf, 1997; Poon, 2004). Based on this understanding, one debate addresses precisely what is included within each term. One view is that language policy represents a more general plan while language planning refers to the concrete measures to implement the plan (Baldauf, 2012; Chiatoh, 2008; Schiffman,1996). However, some researchers take another view, regarding language policy as one aspect or step in language planning (Ager, 2001; Bamgbose, 2004; Rubin & Jernudd, 1971; Tollefson, 2011). For example, according to Rubin and Jernudd (1971), language planning is achieved by four steps: fact-finding, policy determination (formulation), implementation and evaluation.

Another way to distinguish language planning and language policy is from the perspective of which authority is involved. On the one hand, some researchers support the view that language planning, mainly led by the government, only occurs at the national level while language policy is not necessarily so confined and can be realised at a number of levels from macro to micro (Baldauf, 2005a; Kaplan & Baldauf, 1997; Poon, 2004; Shohamy, 2006). On the other hand, some researchers propose the converse position (Hogan-Brun, 2010; Tollefson, 2011). However, in either case, researchers tend to agree that both language planning and language policy can be realised at different levels (Baldauf, 2005a; Bamgbose, 2004; Hogan-Brun, 2010; Kaplan & Baldauf, 1997; Tollefson, 2011), hence the boundaries between language planning and language policy have been more blurred.

In China, the debate on the terms of language planning and language policy is in line with the above account, but one point that needs more caution is the definition of language policy (Li, 2016). In Chinese, policy is usually translated to 'zhengce' (政策), which is more concerned with the political dimension, so it usually refers to the ideas or plans set by the government (Li, 2016; Z. Zhang, 2014). In the latest Modern Chinese Dictionary, the most popular and authoritative dictionary in China, 'zhengce'(政策) is explained as the norms of conducting something that have been set by the state and political party to achieve certain

aims (The Dictionary Editing Office in Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, 2016). In light of this understanding, the ambit of language planning is much wider than language policy as it covers all language management activities led by government or non-government bodies, occurring at the national level or other levels (Wang, 2013; Zhou, 2019). However, regarding this issue, there are also scholars who have suggested extending the scope of language policy to other domains and levels, such as family, community and individuals (Dai, 2014; Li, 2015).

To conclude, although the two terms 'language planning' and 'language policy' seem to have distinctive functions and ranges according to different researchers' views, the areas are inextricably linked and their boundaries are far from clear (Chiatoh, 2008; Hornberger, 2006). Both terms aim to bring about language changes at different levels (Hogan-Brun, 2010). That is why a unified term 'language planning and policy' (LPP) has been increasingly accepted by many researchers since the 1990s (Hornberger, 2006; Tollefson & Pérez-Milans, 2018). Combining the two terms together, LPP is a multi-level construct that encompasses the entire process of policy formulation, implementation and evaluation, involving different actors, levels, processes and their complicated interactions with each other (Ricento & Hornberger, 1996; Hornberger, 2006). Thus, this term provides a broader conceptual framework for researching the policy-planning relationship and how it relates to the social context (Hornberger, 2006). In this study, there is no attempt to further elaborate the distinction between language planning and language policy; rather, they are treated as a unified conception of LPP.

3.1.1.2 The types and development of LPP

Having explained the definition of LPP, this section proceeds to trace the development of LPP and its main frameworks developed in different periods.

Early years

The theoretical and systematic study of LPP can be tracked back to the 1960s when Haugen (1959) first introduced the term *language planning* in connection with the development of a new standard national language in Norway. This period witnessed many new states in Asia and Africa that achieved autonomy or outright independence from their European colonial rulers. For these new states, the multilingual situation was seen as a problem for national

development, thus LPP at this time was initially employed by government bodies to deal with language problems and to promote national unification, modernisation and democratisation (Ager, 2001; Rubin & Jernudd, 1971; Ricento, 2000). Against this background, much of the early work of LPP focused on two areas: status planning and corpus planning (Johnson, 2018; Johnson & Ricento, 2013; Ricento, 2000). The former focuses on the social roles and functions of languages, for example, which language should be used in different social domains; while corpus planning deals with matters of language itself, such as graphisation, standardisation and modernisation of language (Johnson, 2018; Kaplan & Baldauf, 1997). As such, in the early development of LPP, linguists played a major role because only they were qualified and able to adapt and develop the structure and forms of a language for users in a non-homogeneous speech community (Haugen, 1966; Kloss, 1969; Johnson & Ricento, 2013).

Additionally, during this period, another focus of LPP was to develop models accounting for the procedure of LPP. One influential model was proposed by Haugen (1966, 1983) in which he delineated four steps of language planning, namely selection, codification, implementation and elaboration (see p.37 Table 3.1). This framework provides both conceptual understanding and practical guidance for LPP, which has been modified and elaborated by many scholars since (Bamgbose, 2004; Johnson & Ricento, 2013). However, the weaknesses of this model are also significant, for example: it does not explain the role of individuals in the process of LPP; in practice, it is difficult to follow the four stages in order; and the boundaries between corpus and status planning are far from clear (Kaplan & Baldauf, 1997). In all, LPP work during this phase was characterised by these features: 1) language was seen as a resource which can be planned to better respond to the society (Jernudd & Gupta, 1971; Ricento, 2000; Pennycook, 2004); 2) LPP was traditionally seen as an attempt led at the national level and aimed to solve language problems by following certain linear procedures (Fishman, 1974; McCarty, 2011); 3) the efforts of LPP to solve language problems depended principally on linguistic work without considering the social context (Jernudd & Gupta, 1971; Johnson, 2018; Ricento, 2000).

Table 3.1 Haugen's four-fold model

	Form (policy planning)	Function (language cultivation)

Society (**status planning**)	1. Selection (decision procedures)
	  a. identification of problem
	  b. allocation of norms
		3. Implementation (educational spread)
		  a. correction procedures
		  b. evaluation

Language (**corpus planning**)	2. Codification (Standardization procedures)
	  a. graphization
	  b. grammatication
	  c. lexication
		4. Elaboration (functional development)
		  a. terminological modernization
		  b. stylistic development

Source: Haugen (1983, p. 275)

1970s-1980s

Since the 1970s, especially after the 1980s, the deficiencies of early LPP have been seriously criticised (Ricento, 2000; Bamgbose, 2004). During this period, there was a rising recognition that language problems were not unique to developing nations, but applied to other nations as well (Kaplan & Baldauf, 1997; Baldauf, 2005b). However, modernisation and democratisation in many new states had stalled and the optimistic solution of one-nation-one-language also began to fade, so the previous belief that language was a neutral means to engineer national development came to be challenged (Wright, 2004; Ricento, 2000). Faced with this change, researchers criticised the descriptive models of LPP, for example Haugen's (1966, 1983; see Table 3.1), for being unable to account for LPP's complexity, so the initial emphasis on the role of the linguistic dimension in modernisation and nation-building was replaced by the focus on social, economic and political influences brought by language contact (Regler, 2003; Ricento, 2000).

With growing interest in the relationship between LPP and the wider sociocultural context (Johnson & Ricento, 2013; Rubin & Jernudd, 1971), Cooper (1989) published his influential book *Language Planning and Social Change* in which he gave four examples of language planning that happened at different times, at different locations and with different focuses. He summarised 12 previous definitions of language planning, and then produced his own definition as the 'deliberate efforts to influence the behaviour of others with respect to the

acquisition, structure, or functional allocation of their language codes' (Cooper, 1989, p. 45). Following this definition, Cooper (1989) proposed the famous accounting model: 'what actors attempt to influence what behaviour for what ends under what conditions by what means through what decision-making process with what effect?' (p. 98). With this model, the scope of language planning has been broadened because the aim of language planning is not restricted to dealing with communicative problems but seeks to influence the target population's behaviour. To meet this goal, extending beyond status planning and corpus planning, Cooper (1989) added acquisition planning as the third category of LPP rather than treating it as a sub-category of status planning (see p.37 Table 3.1), because: 1) much LPP was directed at increasing a language's use in society or increasing language users, but status planning could only deal with the former aspect; 2) the language changes presented in status and corpus planning affected and are also affected by language users. These considerations show that the work of LPP during this period has begun to recognise that LPP cannot be isolated from social contexts and language users. With a primary focus on language users and the systematic efforts to promote their language learning, acquisition planning is also known as language-in-education planning (Baldauf, 2005a; Kaplan & Baldauf, 1997).

1990s - Present

After the 1990s, a period which saw the collapse of the Soviet Union, the re-emergence of small nations and regional languages, the establishment of supranational political communities and the development of globalisation, LPP was understood as a more complex phenomenon (Baldauf, 2006; Tollefson, 2011). Issues which have gained increasing attention include language ecology, language rights, and the place of English and other languages (Baldauf, 2005b). With the focus on the value of language diversity, researchers have suggested taking an ecological perspective to examine the interactions among multiple languages and their changed environments, and how languages co-exist and cooperate in complex relationships (Mühlhäusler, 2000; Pennycook, 2004). From this stance, it is argued that if one language becomes prominent, it does not mean the language itself is fitter than others but is closely associated with the users and other ecological factors (Hult, 2007; Spolsky, 2004). This view further stresses the importance of considering its users and environment when making LPP.

In regarding LPP as a long-term process under the changing social context, it has also been recognised that any kind of planning should carry 'prestige' in order to ensure support from

both the planners and the users of the planned language (Baldauf, 2004; Haarmann, 1990). As such, prestige planning was proposed by Haarmann (1990) as another type of LPP. Closely related to the other three types of language planning (corpus planning, status planning and language-in-education planning), prestige planning affects how the other types are made by policy makers and received by the people (Baldauf, 2004). It does not only highlight the interplay between language planners and language users, but also addresses the importance of evaluating the planning efforts (Haarmann, 1990). With this in mind, Haarmann (1990) proposed an ideal typology of LPP in which language planning can be seen as a continuous process involving different authorities at different levels – government, agencies, pressure groups and individuals. Without wide support from the lower level, national policy and planning can hardly achieved its intended goals (Chua & Baldauf, 2011; Liddicoat & Taylor-Leech, 2014). These developments indicate that since the 1990s, more researchers have begun to extend their interests from government agendas to more specific practices at the micro level (Kaplan & Baldauf, 2007; Tollefson, 2011). LPP has come to be understood not as a state of affairs but as a dynamic process (Bastardas-Boada, 2013; Haarmann, 1990; Johnson & Ricento, 2013). Aside from the explicit, overt, formal and planned aspects of LPP, there are also implicit, covert, informal and unplanned aspects (Baldauf, 2006; Bastardas-Boada, 2013; Schiffman, 1996). To account for the LPP's complexity and dynamics, Baldauf (2006) proposed the language planning goal-oriented framework, in which there are three levels (macro-meso-micro) of each type of language planning, and each level has overt and covert aspects. Hornberger & Hult (2008) suggested that from the language ecology perspective, LPP should be examined in four dimensions: 'relations among languages', 'relations among social contexts of language', 'relations among individual speakers and their languages', and 'relations among these three dimensions' (p. 282). Bastardas-Boada (2013) put forward a framework of eco-sociocognitive complexity to understand how LPP operates as a socio-complex process and how its surrounding ecosystem affects individuals' or groups' language decisions. These frameworks remind researchers to apply more critical thinking to how LPP is affected by and how it affects the social context in which it is located, how it transfers across different levels and how different groups of people affect this process.

The above account of LPP, drawing on other researchers' work (e.g., Baldauf, 2012; Hornberger, 2006; Regler, 2003; Ricento, 2000; Johnson & Ricento; 2013; Tollefson, 2011), conveys that LPP's development can be divided into broadly three phases: 1960s; 1970s to

1980s; 1990s to the present. In the face of rapid social development, LPP has experienced radical changes, in which it has evolved beyond a purely linguistic perspective to become a comprehensive field which draws in multiple levels and actors and cannot be understood apart from its social context (Nekvapil, 2011; Tollefson & Pérez-Milans, 2018). Meanwhile, the scope of LPP has also broadened from status planning and corpus planning to encompass language-in-education planning and prestige planning as key domains of LPP. All these changes have finally propelled researchers to adopt a holistic and dynamic perspective in the study of LPP. Before exploring these issues further, the following section introduces LPP in China with the aim of better understanding the historical and current context of LPP development in China and what gaps exist in the current LPP research.

3.1.1.3 The development of LPP in China

Compared with the general development of LPP as an academic discipline, research on LPP in China emerged relatively late, in the late 1980s when Sun Hongkai first used the term 'language planning' (语言规划) to refer to the official policies, activities and achievements of China's language planning (Blachford, 1999). However, LPP activities can be traced back to long before the contemporary era. In 221BC, Qin Shi Huang[14] implemented the Shutongwen policy to unify and standardise different varieties of Chinese writing for the purposes of communication among China's people (Shen, 2014). Given that systematic attention to the field of LPP in the rest of the world did not begin until the mid-20th century (see section 3.1.1.2), this section focuses on LPP activities in China from 1949 to the present and discusses how these activities affect the development of LPP as an academic discipline.

Broadly speaking, since the establishment of PRC, LPP has undergone three periods. From 1949 to 1980, LPP mainly served the goal of nation building in which the three main tasks were: 1) to simplify Chinese characters to make them easier to use and so to increase the literacy rate; 2) to promote Mandarin for eliminating the communication barriers between different minority groups; and 3) to formulate and promote the pinyin system to help people pronounce Mandarin consistently (Wu, 1958; Li, 2019). To fulfil these tasks, linguistics experts played a major role as they were not only responsible for reconfiguring Chinese characters and romanising the pinyin scheme, but they also enthusiastically took part in the promotional activities to help the public accept these linguistic changes. For example, the

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[14] Qin Shi Huang (259BC–210 BC) was the founder of the Qin dynasty and was the first emperor of a unified China.

distinguished linguists Lv Shuxiang and Zhu Dexi subsequently published articles entitled *Correct Use of the State Language, Striving for the Purity and Health of Language* and *Talking about Grammar and Rhetoric*, to help increase the public's acceptance of language normalisation (Li, 2013). In addition, many books and dictionaries were published at this time to help people learn standard Mandarin (Zhao & Shang, 2016). In fact, these efforts accord with the characteristics of LPP work in the 1960s and 1970s (see section 3.1.1.2), as they both share state-centric features and make links between linguistic function and state unification.

The second period of LPP development in China began in the 1980s and the key features of this period were standardisation and computerisation. During this period, the principal language work continued to focus on the promotion of Mandarin across the nation (Wang, 2014), but one apparent change related to the official attitude towards minority languages. With the widening use of Mandarin, some minority regional languages have been declining (Guo, 2008). Given this situation, after the Communique of the 3rd Plenum of the 11th Central Committee of the Communist Party in 1978, more policies have been set and implemented to encourage the use and development of minority languages (Wang, 2014; Zhou, 2013). A report issued by the State Council in 1991 specified that the main principles of policy on minority languages were to ensure the equality of languages and to guarantee the right of ethnic minorities to learn, use and develop their own spoken and written languages (Wang, 2014). Thus, language standardisation at this time not only related to Mandarin and simplified Chinese characters but also to various minority languages (Li, 2019; Zhou, 2013, 2019). In 1995, a special branch of the National Technical Committee for Terminology Standardisation was created for setting standards in the terminology of the minority languages (Jiang & Wang, 2013).

Alongside the growing attention on minority languages, another hallmark of the second period of LPP development was that informalisation became more important. Due to the rise of computer technology, China was engaged in designing pinyin-to-Chinese character input systems and Chinese character-capable computers (Zhao & Shang, 2016; Zhou, 2019). This technological turn marked a new focus of LPP, with Zhao and Shang (2016) observing that 'information technology-oriented LP (language planning) activities have remained a fundamental feature of most of the ensuing language reforms' (p.31). This development highlighted that ongoing LPP work could not depend mainly on linguistics as was the case

in the previous period, but required involvement of other domains as well. With this emphasis on greater engagement with different groups of people and the rising focus on linguistic diversity, a growing number of Chinese scholars has begun to introduce LPP theories and consolidate LPP as an academic discipline in China (Li, 2016; Z. Zhang, 2014).

Entering the new century, especially after 2005, a major theme in Chinese LPP was 'language life'. It is argued that what the state manages is *language life* rather than languages themselves, so having a deep understanding of language life at different levels is fundamental to LPP (Li, 2015). According to Li's (2015) categorisation, there are three levels of language life: macro (super-nation and nation), meso (region and domain) and micro (individuals and small social units). Guided by this conceptual framework, LPP has extended to various fields of society and realised the importance of non-government agencies and individuals. It is emphasised that at the meso and micro levels, different social sectors and individuals should take their own language initiatives and deal with their own language problems (Dai, 2014; Li, 2015). The value of all languages and their dialect varieties continued to be recognised, reflecting a view of language as 'one of the fundamental preconditions to human development, dialogue, reconciliation, tolerance, and the peaceful existence of human society' (UNESCO, 2019, p.2). In 2019, the MOE and UNESCO jointly issued the 'Yuelu Proclamation' (岳麓宣言)，the first UNESCO document on the world's linguistic diversity (MOE, 2019b). It argues that the protection and promotion of linguistic diversity is a key to sustainable development of all kinds (linguistic, social, economic, environmental) and requires the participation of all social sectors (UNESCO, 2019). Given the multilingual nature of contemporary Chinese society (see section 2.1.3), bilingual and multilingual education has been widely promoted. It is advocated that one person's language ability is illustrated in both mother language and foreign language: mother language is the root of one's ethnicity and nationality while foreign language provides one with more insights and abilities to see and adapt to this world (Y. Li, 2010a). In contemporary Chinese society, English language is undoubtedly the most important foreign language (Dai, 2016; Zhang, 2016). Faced with the complex language demographics in China, the main goal for LPP activities has been to build a harmonious language life that properly deals with the relations between different languages and meet diverse language needs, and this issue is also central to the academic sphere of LPP research (Chen, 2015; Li, 2015).

In all, after decades of development, the overall picture of language use and trends in China

has experienced significant changes: 1) the increasing use of Mandarin has made it undoubtedly the lingua franca in China; 2) notwithstanding Mandarin's dominant role, other languages co-exist in people's lives and serve different functions; 3) language development has kept pace with social development; 4) language ideology has shifted from monolingualism towards multilingualism; 5) the languages themselves have also undergone continued development (X. Guo, 2019). Alongside these changes, LPP as a research discipline has gained more and more attention in China. Since the 2000s, a series of research centres, conferences and publications devoted to LPP study have been established (Hong & Zhang, 2016). In 2005, the first Chinese monograph on LPP, *Study on Language Planning*, was published by Chen (2005). In the following years, influential books on LPP have included but are not limited to Y. Li's (2010b, 2015) *Chinese language planning* and Yao's (2006) *Study on the Chinese Language Planning*. These books focus on the different domains of LPP in China, creating a theoretical framework for the Chinese LPP. Moreover, the language academy of LPP and the *Journal of Language Policy and Planning* have also been established with the aim of fostering researchers' interests in the study of LPP from a variety of theoretical and methodological perspectives and in a variety of contexts.

The evolution of LPP in China aligns broadly with the development of LPP more widely (Zhao, 2016). In the latest developments, the language ideology behind LPP has also shifted from monolingualism to multilingualism and the scope of LPP has expanded to be seen a multi-level process that involves different social sectors and groups, not simply a language activity led by the government (Baldauf, 2006; Bastardas-Boada, 2013; Hult, 2014; Johnson, 2009, 2018; McCarty, 2011). These changes highlight the importance of studying LPP in a multilingual environment. However, there are some gaps in Chinese research on LPP. Until now, the majority of Chinese research has been limited to introducing the theory and development of LPP as an academic field in the world and examining specific LPP activities in other countries (Shen, 2017). The main focus of LPP activities is still on status planning and corpus planning, while language-in-education planning is not yet seen as an independent domain (Chen, 2015). In the field of foreign LPP, though foreign language (primarily English) education has made great progress in past decades (see section 2.2), there is still very little research to study it from the perspective of LPP (J. Cheng, 2015; Shen, 2017) and little knowledge about public needs and attitudes of foreign languages (Lu, 2014; Shen, 2017; Shen & Bao, 2018). Therefore, it is urgent to study the interplay between different policy levels and to understand the role of teachers, students and other people involved in foreign

language education (J. Cheng, 2015; Shen, 2017; Shen & Bao, 2018), and how the government and the market interact with each other to satisfy the diverse public needs of foreign language learning (Lu, 2014). The current research engages with these trends and gaps, exploring how public and private kindergartens respond to the ban on preschool English education in China, and how different individuals perceive and participate in this situation. In line with these aims, the next section provides more details on how LEPP operates at different levels and how it helps to contribute the theoretical foundation of this research.

3.1.2 LEPP

At present, there are four main types of language planning: corpus planning, status planning, language-in-education planning and prestige planning. Language-in-education planning was first proposed by Cooper (1989) to emphasise the role of language users (see section 3.1.1.2). To ensure consistency with the term LPP, this research uses the term LEPP to refer to a broad range of issues concerning home, second and foreign languages in the domain of education (Shohamy, 2006; Xu, 2012). As the education sector is commonly used as the site for conducting the other three types of language planning activities (Kaplan, 2005), it provides helpful insights into micro LPP. However, in spite of decades of LPP development, there is still little knowledge about how LPP is interpreted and implemented at the school level and what role school actors play (Harklau & Yang, 2019; Menken & García, 2010; Payne, 2007). To address these issues, this section starts by exploring different levels of LEPP and then proceeds to discuss the interplay among the different levels and the important role of individual agency at the micro level.

3.1.2.1 The multi-levels of LEPP

It has been widely acknowledged that LPP occurs at multiple levels, broadly categorised as macro, meso and micro levels (Kaplan & Baldauf, 1997; Zhao, 2011). The macro level usually refers to the state level (Higgins & Brady, 2016; Kaplan & Baldauf, 1997). With regard to the meso and micro levels, the general view is that the former is undertaken by communities and institutions while the latter is limited to individual activities (Higgins & Brady, 2016; Payne, 2017). This categorisation is consistent with Ricento and Hornberger's (1996) view: they compared LEPP to an onion with three layers – national, institutional and classroom practitioners.

However, the above classification has not been adopted by every researcher. For example, according to Skerrett (2016), the macro, meso and micro levels represent social and historical context, repeated activity and individual behaviour respectively; but according to Sallabank (2013), the meso level mainly includes institutions, associations, and regional or administrative bodies, while micro planning is carried out within specific schools, businesses and other institutions, or by individuals and families. In Sallabank's (2013) categorisation, both meso and micro levels involve organisations, but she gave no further information regarding what kinds of organisation belong to what particular levels. Instead, Sallabank (2013) admitted that there are 'grey areas' between these two levels. Other researchers go beyond the limit of the three levels, suggesting a more complex continuum. For example, Hult (2014) proposed that LPP can occur at five social scales: supra-/international organisations and governments, national/regional governments, special groups/ organisations, corporations, social/religious institutions and individuals. This classification differs slightly different from Ghasemi's (2015) view that educational planning goes through mega (international), macro (national) and micro (regional), institutional and plan/projects levels. In more complicated frameworks, Chua and Baldauf (2011) put forward an LPP continuum consisting of ten levels, ranging from supra macro (country level) to infra micro (individual level), while Johnson (2013) drew on the institutional structure in USA education, proposing a system where each of the main MACRO, MESO and MICRO levels has three smaller macro-meso-micro levels within it, making nine levels in total (see p.46 Figure 3.1).

Therefore, although the macro-meso-micro levels of LPP have been widely accepted, the boundaries of these levels are somewhat blurred and there are certainly more than three levels (Johnson & Pratt, 2013; Johnson & Johnson, 2015). Figure 3.1 shows that the levels of LEPP can be divided into nine layers or even more. Despite the lack of consensus on number of LPP levels and what each level includes, there is no doubt that the importance of the micro level has been realised (Chimbutane, 2019). In its broadest sense, micro/local LPP encompasses all planning activities that happen in the context of the sub-national levels, which include regional, local, institutional and individual (Baldauf, 2006; Caillods, 1983; Payne, 2017). This understanding draws a significant distinction between macro level and micro level, but the decision on how to divide these levels is determined on a case by case basis, depending on the impact of agency (Chua & Baldauf, 2011; Johnson, 2013). For the purposes of this research, with its aim of exploring the responses of public and private

kindergartens to the same national policy on removing English language education from kindergartens, the levels of LEPP are divided into macro (nation), meso (district) and micro (school).
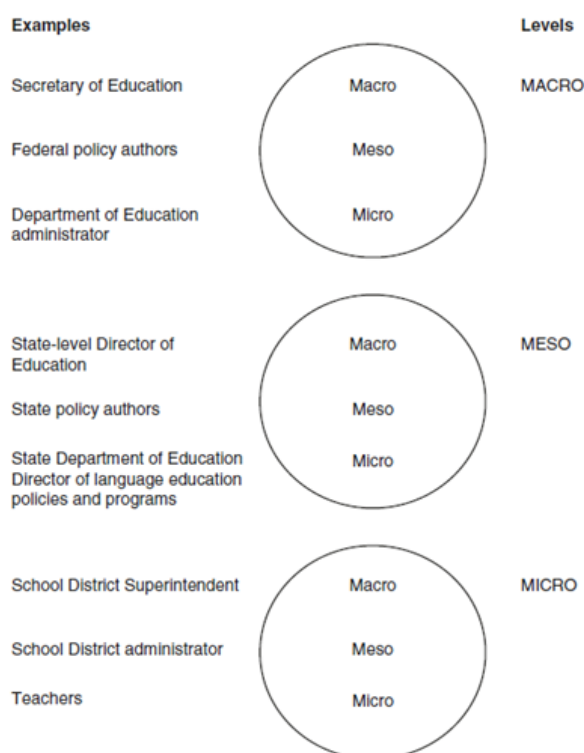
Figure 3.1 Relationships between macro, meso and micro educational language policy
Source: Johnson (2013, p. 193)

3.1.2.2 The interplay of different LEPP levels

Following the above discussion on the multi-level nature of LEPP, this section aims to explore how micro LEPP relates to other levels, by examining different practices in schools' language education.

In a traditional sense, it is thought that LEPP undertakes the main burden of LPP implementation, which means that language-related decisions made by national authorities are carried out and reinforced at the school level in a top-down manner (Kaplan & Baldauf, 1997; Liddicoat & Taylor-Leech, 2014; Shohamy, 2006). This scenario is common to many kinds of language education, for example, the promotion of Mandarin in China. Since 1956, Mandarin teaching has been included in Chinese language courses of primary and secondary schools nationwide, excepting ethnic minority regions (State Council, 1956). With such wide

promotion in schools for decades, by 2019 about 80% of Chinese people could speak Mandarin Chinese (MOE, 2019a). Moreover, in foreign language education, Baldauf (2006) pointed out that in Asia (including China) much of the English language policy for schools is also conducted in a top-down way where central government education agencies are making decisions and teachers in schools are implementing these decisions. Similar evidence can also be found in other regions. For instance, in South Africa, national language policy encourages the recognition of indigenous African languages in higher education. Mashiya (2010) and Nkosi (2014) examined a programme initiated by the University of KwaZulu-Natal in which the main aim was to introduce isiZulu, a South African indigenous language, as the medium of instruction in university courses. Their studies found that despite some challenges, isiZulu had been increasingly accepted by the postgraduate students. All these cases illustrate top-down processes by which national language policy is implemented by different actors in schools, and in this way educators act as 'soldiers' or 'servants' of the education system (Shohamy, 2006).

However, it is not in every case that the decisions made at the macro level can achieve their intended goals. If macro planning and policy does not satisfy local demands, teachers or others may resist complying with them (Baldauf, 2006; Johnson & Johnson, 2015; Liddicoat & Taylor-Leech, 2014). For example, in Japan, as a response to internationalisation and globalisation, a national project called *Global 30 Project for Establishing Core Universities for Internationalisation* has been initiated. At the national level, English-medium instruction (EMI) was seen as key to internationalisation and globalisation in higher education. However, in the University Nishihara Gakuin, Higgins & Brady (2016) found that English was still seen as a foreign or second language rather than the medium language espoused by national policy. In a similar vein, the Malaysian government also called for the policy of EMI in the courses of mathematics and science in primary and secondary school. However, in actual classroom practice, both teachers and students still preferred to use Malay and Kelabit to communicate (Martin, 2005). Moreover, tensions could be found in the Malaysian approach to teaching English. Despite being urged by the government to adopt Communicative Language Teaching[15], the teachers did not clearly understand the principles of this approach. As a result, the traditional strategies of rote, recitation, instruction and exposition were still

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[15] Communicative Language Teaching refers to a teaching approach that highlights the importance of learning and using language knowledge through engaging in meaningful interactions. In this approach, communication is seen as both the process and the ultimate learning goal (Richards, 2006).

employed in class, which severely restricted students' participation in dialogue and discussion (Hardman & A-Rahman, 2014). These examples illustrate an alternative way of implementing macro policies. Educators in schools are not mere implementers, but instead have the capacity to reinterpret the macro policy and create the space to do what they think appropriate to the local situations (Ball et al., 2012; Hornberger & Johnson, 2007; Johnson, 2013; Liddicoat & Taylor-Leech, 2014).

Taking school as a micro site, the above accounts have shown that micro LEPP can either comply with or go against macro LEPP, so when macro planning and policy is being examined, there is a need to look at the entire implementation process (Chua & Baldauf, 2011; Johnson, 2013; Liddicoat & Baldauf, 2008). With these issues in mind, Chua and Baldauf (2011) proposed four stages of planning process (see p.49 Figure 3.2). From this model, it can be seen that macro planning and policy is often deliberately made to stipulate certain processes and standardised outcomes, but after interpretation by a range of actors amid contextual factors, there may be diversified results at the lower level. This translation process highlights the dependence of macro planning and policy on micro levels, but at the same time it also raises concerns about whether micro planning and policy can exist without macro roots. In each of the above cases, LEPP begins at the macro level and then is transmitted down to the meso and micro levels. On this issue, Chua and Baldauf (2011) suggested that LPP does not follow a sequential order but can start at any level and that the policy making, interpretation and appropriation can happen at every level (see also Ball et al., 2012; Johnson, 2009).
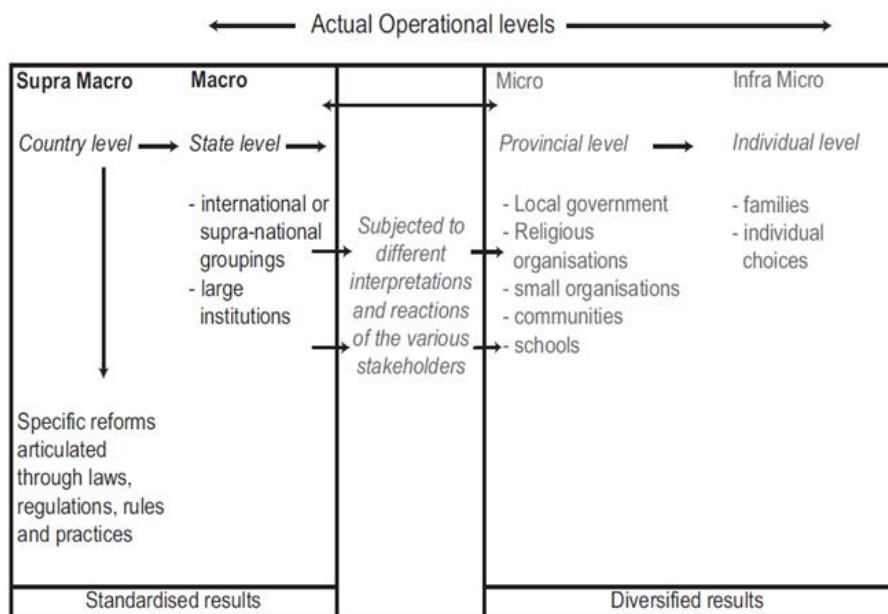
Figure 3.2 The relationships between macro and micro language planning
Source: Chua & Baldauf (2011, p.939)

When micro planning and policy is not directly related to macro activities, it is usually the case that micro sites create and implement programmes for their own needs, for example, to teach and learn the home languages, or where individuals seek opportunities outside the existing provisions to improve their own language ability (Liddicoat & Taylor-Leech, 2014). These cases usually happen on a small scale which does not raise much macro attention (Baldauf, 2005b; Liddicoat & Baldauf, 2008; Chua & Baldauf, 2011). However, this does not mean that micro LEPP can be separated from the macro situation. For example, in the USA, a public primary school carried out a Home Language Plan to help improve students' academic performance and enhance personal identity through maintaining their proficiency in a heritage language such as Spanish and Russian, and ultimately help them become fluent bilinguals in their heritage languages and English (Seals & Peyton, 2017). In spite of the great support from the community, teachers, parents, students and others involved in the programme, and even though the students made substantial progress, the programme still underwent considerable reduction because the school administration changed and the school budget reduced significantly due to nation-wide economic recession (Seals & Peyton, 2017). Thus, along with the necessity of understanding the particular local context of micro planning and policy, it is also very important to relate the micro situations to the broader context (Chua & Baldauf, 2011; Hamid, 2019; Ramanathan & Morgan, 2007).

To summarise, the relations between the different levels of LEPP aid the understanding of how micro planning and policy is initiated and suggest that LEPP is a multi-level, dynamic and interrelated process. On the one hand, through level-by-level translation, there is barely any macro LPP which can be transmitted directly and unmodified to a local context (Liddicoat & Baldauf, 2008). As a micro setting, school is more than a place to implement macro planning and policy: it can shape its own situations (Laoire et al., 2011; Liddicoat & Taylor-Leech, 2014). Thus, instead of 'implementation', researchers began to use terms like 'appropriation' (Brown, 2010; Johnson, 2009, 2013, 2018) and 'negotiation' (David & Govindasamy, 2005; Menken & García, 2010; Utakis & Pita, 2005) to highlight the importance of micro settings and social actors. However, on the other hand, it is important to note that even if micro planning and policy is initiated only at the micro level, it is not independent of macro context (Hamid, 2019). On many occasions, 'local efforts are not powerful enough to make deeper changes' (Canagarajah, 2006, p. 162), so an examination of the micro planning and policy also needs to look at its relationships with the other levels (Hamid, 2019). Only by putting macro and micro together will there be effective LPP (Chua & Baldauf, 2011).

3.1.2.3 School-based actors

The discussion above on the interplay between different levels highlights the role that local actors play in influencing macro LPP and initiating their own LPP. In a general sense, the term 'actors' refers to the persons involved in LPP (Kaplan & Baldauf, 1997). In the school context, many researchers have focused on the role of teachers (Choi, 2015; Nguyen & Bui, 2016; M. Li, 2010), students (Brown, 2015; Hamid, 2019; Mashiya, 2010; Nkosi, 2014), school/university administrators (Chua & Soo, 2018; Fenton-Smith & Gurney, 2016; Pinto & Araújo e Sá, 2019) and parents (Butler, 2014b; Chen, 2011). To understand the language practices they make, Hodges and Prys (2019) pointed out that language ideology and the power relationship are the two important factors.

In considering the different types of language policies, Schiffman (1996) suggested that as well as specific, overt and explicit policies, there are also covert and implicit policies embodied in certain cultures. In her understanding, even if there are no explicit policies, implicit policies will always exist because they are grounded in 'cultural assumptions about

language, about correctness, about the 'best' way to talk or write' (Schiffman, 1996, p. 148). In a similar vein, Spolsky (2004) suggested that within a speech community, members usually share a set of beliefs and values attributed to different languages. These language beliefs, also known as language ideology, have the potential to affect and be affected by the actual practices of language use (Liddicoat, 2019; Spolsky, 2004; Hodges & Prys, 2019). For example, in Liddicoat's (2019) research, language teachers' beliefs about curriculum as a disciplinary space and the role of languages in education strongly influenced the outcomes of language curriculum innovations in secondary schools in Australia.

Moreover, as well as the emphasis on language ideology, the various levels and forms of power exerted by the range of actors, namely their 'agency', are also important in understanding the language practices that they make (Hodges & Prys, 2019; Liddicoat & Taylor-Leech, 2020). In the study of individual actors, one influential approach proposed four types: 1) people with power, who are usually national leaders and high-placed officials; 2) people with expertise, who are qualified professionals in their fields, such as linguists and scientists; 3) people with influence, who include elite individuals from all walks of life. Due to their high position and influence in society, they take the role of language models, affecting the linguistic behaviour of the masses; and 4) people with interests, who can generally be understood as ordinary language users at the grassroots level (Chua & Baldauf, 2011; Zhao, 2011; Zhao & Baldauf, 2012). In fact, this categorisation was originally based on the different levels but it is helpful for us to understand school-based actors from the following perspectives.

The first is that not all actors exercise the same degree of agency (Chimbutane, 2019; Johnson, 2013). In the school context, there is a typical management hierarchy where school leaders 'hold the power to determine how a policy is made, interpreted and operated in that context, which can result in diversified outcomes' (Chua & Soo, 2019, p.193). Against this background, although teachers' agency in LEPP has been widely recognised and discussed (Choi, 2015; Nguyen & Bui, 2016; M. Li, 2010), it is important to remember that teachers themselves are managed by school leaders (Johnson, 2009; Spolsky, 2009). Also, students' perceptions of LEPP are seldom considered (Brown, 2015; Spolsky, 2009). Given the differential distribution of power and influence, researchers proposed the notion of 'arbiter'. This term was initially used to describe teachers' role as the final decision-maker about whether to implement the macro planning and policy (Menken & García, 2010).

Subsequently, Johnson and other researchers expanded the term 'arbiter' to refer to any influential actor (potentially teachers, administrators, policymakers, etc.) 'who wields a disproportionate amount of power in how a policy gets created, interpreted, or appropriated, or instantiated relative to other individuals in the same level or context' (Johnson, 2013, p.100). This definition underlines that the power is differently allocated to different actors, and also conveys that each actor's power is constrained and related to others (Choi, 2019; Bouchard & Glasgow, 2019; Liddicoat & Taylor-Leech, 2020).

In the school context, no matter how powerful headteachers are, no school policy and planning can be successfully implemented without the support and engagement of other actors (Johnson, 2013). Micro level planning and policy is 'not always, or even typically, the work of a single individual' (Liddicoat & Baldauf, 2008, p.6), but the work of a series of individuals (Corson, 1999; Johnson, 2013; Liddicoat & Baldauf, 2008). For example, Zakharia (2010) showed how school administrators, teachers, students and other staff in a largely monolingual neighbourhood all contributed to promoting foreign languages, and how teachers negotiated between the national curriculum and the students' needs. Berryman et al. (2010) described a programme where students, teachers and the community all effectively participated in establishing culturally appropriate and culturally responsive pedagogy to improve students' Māori language ability. Along the same lines, in Seals and Peyton's (2017) research, the community, principals, teachers, parents and students actively took part in a school programme to develop, maintain and sustain students' heritage languages. These cases substantiate how different actors distribute their own power to influence the LEPP at the school level. Even in the case of people who have less power or personal prestige than others, their individual attitudes and actions towards language use also play a significant role in the success of LPP (Fenton-Smith & Gurney, 2016; Zhao, 2011; Zhao & Baldauf, 2012).

In summary, the above discussions highlight not only how individual agency at the school level contributes to LEPP, but more importantly how different actors permeate and interact with each other (Ricento & Hornberger, 1996; McCarty, 2011). It is clear that micro planning and policy involves cooperation between different actors who have different degrees of agency and is influenced by the language ideologies held by the actors (Hodges & Prys, 2019; Liddicoat, 2019). Therefore, when researching micro actors, it is not sufficient to merely identify the key actors, but essential to locate them in an interactive and situated context to observe the ways and extent to which they exercise agency (Fenton-Smith &

Gurney, 2016; Johnson & Johnson, 2015; Liddicoat & Taylor-Leech, 2014; Pinto & Araújo e Sá, 2019; Zhao & Baldauf, 2012).

3.2 The global spread of English and English language education

In recent decades, the phenomenal spread of English has become an undeniable factor affecting LEPP around the world (Gil & Adamson, 2011; Hamid & Nguyen, 2016; Kachru, 1991; Ferguson, 2006). This section begins by outlining how the English language has spread around the world, and then proceeds to describe the English LEPP in East Asia, which includes Mainland China, Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan, Mongolia, Japan and Korea. The exploration of East Asian English language education reveals a trend for introducing English in primary schools, but no country or region has officially taught English at the preschool stage. Echoing the current situation in China, South Korea and Taiwan have issued bans on the teaching of English at the preschool education level, so these two contexts are addressed. The notion of 'the younger the better' in language teaching and learning is then discussed. The section ends with a critical overview of the global spread of English.

3.2.1 The global spread of English

English is now spoken by one quarter of the world's population (British Council, 2013) or even as much as one third (Ricento, 2015). No other language has achieved this worldwide reach (Al-Jadidi, 2009). Crystal (2003) attributed this to English being in 'the right place at the right time' (p. 120). With a view to understanding how English has achieved its current status and how its spread is linked to complex sociocultural factors, it is first necessary to outline the history of the English language's growth around the globe.

The spreading of English took place with the enlargement of the British Empire. After its initial expansion toward Wales, Scotland and (parts of) Ireland, the British Empire began to establish overseas colonies in the 16th century and then grew dramatically in the following years (Crystal, 2003). At its peak in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the British Empire covered around 25% of the world's population and land area (Home, 2013; Green, 1998). The overseas expansion of the British Empire was achieved in two main ways. The first was by population migration. In the 18th century, numerous British people arrived in North America and Australia, bringing the English language to these lands, forming their communities and becoming permanent residents (Crystal, 2003). On the strength of this

demographic movement, English grew to become one of the world's major languages (Brutt-Griffler, 2002; Ferguson, 2006). In the following century, the British Empire extended its colonial reach to parts of Africa and Asia. Inhabitants in these areas had their own languages, but under British rule, English was primarily used in administration, education, media and other public domains (Brutt-Griffler, 2002; Crystal, 2003; Ferguson, 2006). Although most of these colonies gained independence after World War II, English remained as an official or semi-official language in many newly independent states (Crystal, 2003; Ferguson, 2006). Alongside this imperial territorial expansion, Britain's pioneering and leading role in the Industrial Revolution further consolidated many effects of British imperialism and the role of English in the world (Crystal, 2003; Lin, 2007). At that time, Britain was the source of many innovations such as steam engines, high-quality textile machines, and the electrical telegraph. These innovations not only yielded a large number of new terms in English, but more importantly made English a conduit to knowledge and expertise, leading to the rise of English learning around the world (Crystal, 2003).

In the 20th century, the British Empire gradually shrank but the rise of the USA as a superpower continued to promote the spread of English around the world (British Council, 2013; Crystal, 2003; Ferguson, 2006; Xue & Zuo, 2013). Since 1871, the USA has stood unchallenged as the world's single largest economy, accounting for almost a quarter of the global economy (Silver, 2020). Until now, the USA has remained the most powerful country on earth in terms of its economic and political influence, international leadership and alliances, as well as military strength (Baker, 2019). As the most populous English-speaking country, the dominance of the USA in the global arena undoubtedly led to the spread of American culture and the English language to other areas of the world (British Council, 2013; Crystal, 2003; Graddol, 2000). Moreover, forces of globalisation have also contributed greatly to this process.

Globalisation is a phenomenon which brings about the exchange, on a massive scale, of finance, technology, media, ideology and people crossing national borders, so that the world has become increasingly interconnected (Canagarajah & Said, 2010; Sharifian, 2013). Against this background, English as a global communication tool has become more prominent (Hamid & Nguyen, 2016; Kaplan, 2018). This hand-in-hand relationship between globalisation and the English language has fired the world's enthusiasm to learn English (Hamid & Nguyen, 2016; Lin, 2007). It is estimated that among two billion English speakers

in the world, only 375 million people, or less than one-quarter, are English native speakers (Sharifian, 2013). With such huge numbers of speakers, English has grown dominant in a range of important sectors worldwide, such as business, science, education and academia (Choi & Lee, 2008; Xue & Zuo, 2013).

3.2.2 Kachru's three circles of English

To explain the global spread of English, many different frameworks have been proposed, with one of the most influential being Kachru's Three Concentric Circles (Saraceni, 2015; Schmitz, 2014). The three circles in this model are labelled as the inner circle, the outer circle and the expanding circle, which are characterised by 'the type of spread, the patterns of acquisition and the functional domains in which English is used across cultures and languages' (Kachru, 1985, p.12).

(1) The inner circle

The inner circle refers to the traditional bases of English, comprising countries where English is used as the only or main language by the majority population and is used for all social domains. These countries include the UK, the USA, Australia, New Zealand and Ireland (Kachru, 1985, 1990, 1992).

(2) The outer circle

The outer circle consists of countries and territories where English is not the native language, but due to their colonial history involving English-speaking countries of the inner circle, English is maintained to serve various institutionalised functions even after independence (Kachru, 1985, 1990, 1992). For example, in India, English has been designated as an associated official language (Meganathan, 2011); in Singapore, with English being a major language used in public domains, the government has consistently encouraged Singaporeans to become bilinguals with equal proficiency in English and their mother languages (Wee, 2013). Other countries in this circle include, but are not limited to Nigeria, Malaysia, the Philippines, Pakistan, Tanzania and Kenya (Björkman, 2013; Kachru, 1985, 1990, 1992; McKenzie, 2010).

(3) The expanding circle

The third circle is the expanding circle which encompasses most of the rest of the world's

countries and territories that do not fall within the inner and outer circles (McKenzie, 2010). Without the history of colonisation by countries in the inner circle, English in this expanding circle of nations has neither official status nor major domestic functions, so it is mainly used for international communication (Björkman, 2013; McKenzie, 2010; Park & Wee, 2009). China is categorised in this circle. Holding the largest group of English speakers, the expanding circle witnesses and consolidates the rising status of the English language in the world (Björkman, 2013; Kachru, 1985; McKenzie, 2010).

Informed by the history of the spread of English, Kachru's model shows the different functions and uses of English in the diverse socio-cultural contexts of the world, as well as drawing attention to English linguistic diversity and world Englishes (Canagarajah & Said, 2010; Park & Wee, 2009). Corresponding to Kachru's three circles, the designations English as a native language (ENL), English as a second language (ESL) and English as a foreign language (EFL) are also widely employed (Jenkins, 2003; Kachru, 1990, 1992; Schmitz, 2014). ENL is 'the language of those born and raised in one of the countries where English is historically the first language to be spoken' (Jenkins, 2003, p.14). The major difference between ESL and EFL is that English has an institutionalised status in the ESL context while EFL implies that English is neither a native language of the majority population nor serves for communication within the country (Choi & Lee, 2008; Gerritsen et al., 2016; MacKenzie, 2017).

Nevertheless, despite the merits and wide use of this model, it is not without its shortcomings. A common criticism is the difficulty of accurately categorising every country into one of the three circles (Kachru, 1985; MacKenzie, 2017). For one thing, the language situation in one country may change from time to time. For example, a number of linguists have argued that the designation of English in the Netherlands is in the course of changing from EFL to ESL, which leads to a debate on which circle the Netherlands belongs to (Gerritsen et al., 2016). For another thing, according to Kachru's model, each country represents a distinct sociolinguistic unit but within the country there are a number of languages and dialects used by different speech communities (Fenyő, 2003; Park & Wee, 2009; Pennycook, 2003). For example, English is only one of the 11 official languages in South Africa and only spoken by about 8% of people at home (Nkanjeni, 2019). For those who speak English as the native language, South Africa may be designated to the inner circle, but this is clearly inappropriate for other speech groups. Addressing this problem, Kachru (1985) himself also conceded that

the complex language situations in countries like South Africa and Jamaica make it difficult to classify these countries in a particular circle. In fact, Crystal (2003) identified no fewer than 75 territories 'in which English has held or continues to hold a special place, as a member of either the inner or the outer circles' (p. 60). In addition, as a circle-based framework, the model also fails to account for distinctions within the circles. Taking Malaysia and Singapore as examples, these two countries were both colonised by the British and are geographically close, but their people's use of English varies almost in every social domain (Saraceni, 2015). As such, the Kachru model does not adequately capture the heterogeneity and dynamics of English usage within and across countries (Park & Wee, 2009) and the boundaries between the different circles are not clear (Kachru, 1985; Jenkins, 2003).

Moreover, together with the categorisation issue, this model is also often challenged on the issue of language equality. From Kachru's (1985, 1992) perspective, English speaking in the inner/outer/expanding circles is characterised as norm-providing, norm-developing and norm-dependent respectively. This means that the norms of the English language are produced in the inner circle, and then developed in the outer circle while the expanding circle depends only on the norms set in the inner circle. Although Kachru himself did not intend to imbue the inner circle with any superiority (Jenkins, 2003) and he supported the view that all English varieties are equally valid for their own contexts (Kirkpatrick, 2014), this distinction between native and non-native speakers is still criticised for privileging English native speakers over the others (Graddol, 2000; Park & Wee, 2009; Pennycook, 2003). With the continuous expansion of English, references to English as a 'global language' (British Council, 2013; Caine, 2008; Nunan, 2003), an 'international language' (Choi & Lee, 2008; Shen, 2009; McKay, 2002) and a 'lingua franca' (Kirkpatrick, 2013; Shim & Park, 2008) have been increasingly used to describe English use across Kachru's three circles. In addition, it has been suggested that second language should be understood as any language that is learned after the first one (Andrews, 2008; Kasgari, 2013; Sumanna & Tamilselvi, 2017). In this regard, ESL can either refer to the use or learning of English by non-native English speakers living in predominantly English-speaking environments, for example immigrants and other minority groups in the USA, Australia and the UK (Baker & Murphy, 2011; Talebinezhad & Aliakbari, 2002), or can be used interchangeably with EFL in non-English speaking environments (Chiu, 2009; Friedrich & Matsuda, 2010). From this perspective, second language has broader scope than foreign language. In this research, to better understand the role of English in China and other contexts, I classify ENL/ESL/EFL in terms

of Kachru's Three Concentric Circles and distinguish second language and foreign language by whether the language has an institutionalised role in the social context. Understood in this way, English is undoubtedly a foreign language in China.

3.2.3 English LEPP in East Asia

As a response to the important international status of English, many countries in the world have been promoting English language education in order to maintain or boost participation and competitiveness in global markets (Graddol, 2006; Leong, 2016; Stroupe, 2012). In the African continent, English is not just a foreign language, but is also an official language of 26 African countries and the working language of the African Union, a body consisting of 55 member states (Plonski et al., 2013). In the domain of education, English has been used as a language of instruction at different education levels in many African countries including Ethiopia, Kenya and Rwanda (Negash, 2011; Plonski et al., 2013). In the European Union, the vast majority of pupils start to learn English as the first foreign language in primary school (Eurostat, 2020). It is estimated that even after Brexit, 'English will continue to be the dominant language in Europe and remain the preferred second language for most Europeans in 2025' (British Council, 2018, p.13). In a similar vein, Asian countries are also committed to the promotion of English language.

With around 2500 languages spoken by 4.6 billion people, Asia is characterised by its cultural and language diversity (Kirkpatrick & Liddicoat, 2017). Now the global spread of English has made its language situation more complex. As introduced in section 2.1.3, English does not have institutional status in China but it has penetrated to many social domains and raised national and individual appetites for learning it. Considering China as an East Asian country, the section below chiefly analyses the implications and trends of the contemporary English LEPP in East Asia. Based on geographic proximity and ethno-cultural ties, East Asia includes Mainland China, Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan, Japan, North Korea, South Korea and Mongolia (Horioka et al., 2018; Lee, 2005; Kort, 2005). Among these East Asian countries and regions, only Hong Kong belongs to the outer circle according to Kachru's (1985, 1991) definition. Hong Kong is a special administrative region of China where most of the locals speak Cantonese, a dialect of Chinese (Evans, 2017). Before Hong Kong was returned to China in 1997, it was a British colony for over 150 years during which time English was the sole official language in administration, business, education, law and

other formal domains until 1974 when Chinese was added as another official language (Evans, 2017). Given its historical importance, these days English still has a high official status in Hong Kong. Through the vigorous promotion of biliteracy and trilingual education, it is expected that students who graduate from secondary school will be proficient in writing Chinese and English and able to communicate confidently in Cantonese, Mandarin and English (Hong Kong Education Bureau, 2014; I. Cheng, 2015). With the exception of Hong Kong, other countries and regions of East Asia all belong to the expanding circle, in which English is taught as a foreign language and not commonly used for communication in daily life.

After World War II, East Asia entered a new era. In order to rapidly reconstruct their nations and raise their international profiles, almost every country and region in East Asia was committed to developing English language education (Shen, 2011). In the period 1945 to 1947, English was gradually introduced into secondary schools in Japan (Hosoki, 2011), Korea (Lee, 2015), and Taiwan (Research, Development and Evaluation Commission, 2011). In the following years, especially after 2000, with globalisation as the backdrop, it became more accepted in East Asia that English is not just a tool for communication with the outside world, but more importantly that knowledge of English has become a basic skill in modern life and a strategic resource for developing international competitiveness (Shen, 2011). To improve citizens' English competencies, the governments across East Asia have been increasing their emphasis on English language at multiple educational levels (Shen, 2011; Stroupe, 2012). One significant initiative is lowering the starting age of learning English. In Hong Kong, English is officially taught from the first grade at the primary level (Lee, 2005; Nunan, 2003; Jeon, 2016). In other countries and regions, English was traditionally introduced at the secondary and tertiary education levels in the first few decades after World War II, but in more recent years English language has generally been taught in primary schools. In Mainland China, English education since 2001 has officially been offered from third grade in primary school. That same year, some other East Asian countries and regions also decided to offer English classes at the primary level, but the starting grades were different. Like Mainland China, in South Korea, English education also starts from third grade (Lee, 2015), but in Mongolia it is from fourth grade (Cohen, 2004, 2005) and in Taiwan it is from fifth grade (which was then extended to third grade in 2005; Chen & Hsieh, 2011). Compared with the strategies of these countries and regions, Japan took much longer to take such initiatives. It was not until 2011 that English was finally introduced as a

compulsory subject for fifth and sixth grade students in primary education, but many primary schools had already opted to include English in their curriculum before that year (Aspinall, 2012; Kitano, 2008).

Along with the trend for teaching and learning of English from an earlier age, reforms to enhance students' communicative proficiency have also had much attention (Hamid & Nguyen, 2016; Hu & McKay, 2012; Shen, 2009). In Mainland China, English teaching and learning at different educational levels emphasises the importance of improving students' abilities in listening and speaking and functional communication skills (see section 2.2.2). To achieve these aims, the latest English curriculum recommends that teachers create authentic English-speaking environments and guide students to learn and use English through experiencing, practising, participating, and cooperating (MOE, 2011a, 2017b). In a similar vein, in Japan, South Korea and Taiwan, communicative language teaching approach has been promoted in the national English curriculum for decades (Chen & Tsai, 2012; Hagerman, 2009; Lee, 2014). Also, to fully support the development of students' communication competence, English is promoted as the medium of instruction in the English class. For example, at the secondary level in Japan, the new national English curriculum requires English to be taught only in English (Glasgow, 2013, 2014), and in South Korea, the policy of *Teaching English through English* aims to apply EMI to both primary and secondary levels (Choi, 2015). At the higher education level, EMI is applied not only in English courses but in other academic subjects as well. In Hong Kong and Macau, EMI is widely used across the curriculum at the tertiary level (Evans, 2017; Young, 2011). In other countries and regions, governments have also enacted relevant policies to promote EMI in universities. Examples are the *Top Global University Project* in Japan (see Rose & McKinley, 2018) and the *Project of Undergraduate Teaching Quality and Teaching Reform* in Mainland China (see MOE & Ministry of Finance, 2007). With EMI gradually extending across different areas and education levels, native English teachers have been recognised more and more as key to the provision of authentic English learning environments for students. As early as 1998, the Hong Kong government launched the *Native-English Speaking Teachers Scheme* to recruit English native teachers to secondary schools and primary schools (I. Cheng, 2015; Lee, 2005; Wen & Gan, 2012). In more recent years, Taiwan initiated the *Foreign English Teacher Recruitment Project* (A. H. Chen, 2013) and South Korea launched the *Five-year English Education Revitalisation Plan* to ensure that every primary and secondary school has a native English teacher (Burton, 2020). These

continuous and intensified polices reflect these governments' determination to increase the English proficiency of the younger generation and so enhance their nations' global competitiveness (Lin, 2007; Price, 2014).

From the above review of English LEPP in East Asia, it can be seen that although the majority of East Asian areas belong to Kachru's expanding circle, English language education has been given foremost attention. Although the nature of English education varies considerably from one context to another, it is important to note the considerable efforts going into improving students' communicative competence and the trend for English to be formally introduced into primary school. In fact, the lowering of the starting age for learning English is a tendency not limited to East Asian countries and regions, but is 'a truly global phenomenon and possibly the world's biggest policy development in education' (Johnstone, 2009, p. 33). Outside East Asia, the English language may be formally introduced at ever earlier levels and ages. For example, Belgium, Cyprus and some parts of Spain have already provided official foreign language instruction to children at about three years old (Baïdak et al., 2017). This trend has raised some concerns and debate about learning English in the early years.

3.2.4 Early childhood English language education

With regard to early childhood English language education, especially for preschool aged children, top-down policy is certainly influential but what also has an important role is parental demand (Butler, 2015; Ng & Rao, 2013). In Hong Kong, nearly all kindergartens are privately run (Yang & Li, 2018; Ng & Rao, 2013). Driven by parental demand, the majority of these settings provide some kind of English teaching (Ng & Rao, 2013). However, parental demand in East Asia for children's English learning cannot be satisfied in all countries and regions. In Mainland China, where this research is located, English teaching is officially banned in kindergartens. Similar situations have also emerged in South Korea and Taiwan. Given the parallels with the Chinese situation, this section analyses preschool English education in Taiwan and South Korea to explore why these policies were made and how the public responded. This analysis is followed by a discussion of the assumption of 'the younger the better' for second/foreign language teaching.

3.2.4.1 Two cases of preschool English language education: South Korea and Taiwan

As introduced above, English in South Korea is officially taught from the third grade in primary school (Lee, 2015). After English became a compulsory part of the primary school curriculum, the 'English-only kindergartens' with native English staff began to boom, although this kind of school usually charges two or three times as much in fees as regular kindergartens (Shim & Park, 2008; Yoon, 2014). In 2017, underpinned by a special law aiming to normalise public education and prohibiting teaching ahead of the government-set curriculum, the South Korean Ministry of Education announced its intention to ban English classes for first and second graders in primary schools (Se-jeong, 2018; So-hyun, 2018). Subsequently, preschool English language education was also prohibited and the ban was scheduled for implementation in March 2018 (Se-jeong, 2018; So-hyun, 2018). Government officials explained that these policies were made to minimise the negative impacts of English language education in the early years: according to many English education experts and neuroscientists, the appropriate age to begin learning English was the third grade, and before that age, students should first progress their Korean language fluency and literacy as well as their social and skills and cognitive development (Civinini, 2018; Ghani, 2018). Together with the ban, the South Korean Ministry of Education issued a warning and reminder to Korean parents to 'treat English as a second language' (Ghani, 2018, para17). However, this move did not subdue the feverish enthusiasm for English language learning which had penetrated in South Korea. Instead, the ban drew much criticism from many parents and teachers as they worried that it would increase the demand for expensive private English institutions and widen the gap between children from different family and social backgrounds; in the long run, children from low-income families might fall further behind in South Korea's highly competitive society (Civinini, 2018; Ghani, 2018; Min-ho, 2018). Some education experts echoed these concerns and pointed out that the strategy of prohibition could only succeed if governments sought to curb and regulate excessive English education in private settings (Se-jeong, 2018). Facing mounting criticism, and only one month after announcing the ban on English teaching in kindergartens, the South Korean Ministry of Education decided to suspend the ban and take more consultations before coming up with specialised policy guidelines (Min-ho, 2018; Se-jeong, 2018).

Another example of banning preschool English education is in Taiwan. As early as 2004, Taiwan's Education Department had prohibited kindergartens from providing full-time

bilingual (Chinese and English) education and separate English classes (Shen & Huang, 2004; Gao, 2004). This policy was made based on two considerations. Firstly, the priority for language learning in kindergartens should be Chinese rather than English (SCMP Reporter, 2004; Shen & Huang, 2004). It was believed that an early start for learning English would interrupt students' Chinese learning and negatively influence their cognitive development (Shen & Huang, 2004). Secondly, this policy also sought to standardise management over preschool education: while English-language schools could only be registered as 'cram schools', they could also recruit pupils of preschool age like other registered kindergartens, which made it difficult for parents to distinguish 'cram schools' from registered kindergartens (Chen & Xu, 2004; SCMP Reporter, 2004). It was hoped that this policy would rectify this confusion and promote the development of preschool education (Shen & Huang, 2004). Regulated by this rule, kindergartens which fail to remove English teaching from the curriculum are penalised with fines (SCMP Reporter, 2004), but there are still some kindergartens providing some forms of English education (Shang et al., 2007; Zheng, 2018) and the number of bilingual kindergartens has been increasing (A. H. Chen, 2013). According to a survey across four cities in Taiwan, two-thirds of the children have already started to learn English at the preschool level (Chang, 2008). Thus, the prohibition of preschool English education has not been successful in regulating the starting age for learning English; rather it may cause parents to rush to make their children learn English at a younger age (Chang, 2008; A. H. Chen, 2013). At present, the ban is still in effect but there may be change ahead. With an ambition to create a Chinese-English bilingual environment by 2030, English language education is seen as a key to achieving this goal (Hsiu-chuan, 2018). It is expected that as students' English proficiency improves, English will be more widely and effectively used in daily life and places of work, which will ultimately boost Taiwan's profile internationally (Taiwan's Financial Supervisory Commission, 2019; Nguyen, 2018). In this regard, William Lai (赖清德) has called for an end to the ban on preschool English language education (Chuan & Hsu, 2018; Strong, 2018). Influenced by this proposal, the relevant government departments have already been working on drawing up administrative plans and timetables for implementing related policy (Chuan & Hsu, 2018; Strong, 2018; Zheng, 2018). However, some experts are worried that in light of Taiwan's history and current situation, the goal of becoming a bilingual society seems unrealistic (W. J. Guo, 2019; Xia, 2018; Zheng, 2018). In fact, this is not the first time that the Taiwan government has attempted to make Taiwan a Chinese-English bilingual society. As early as

2002, the former leader Chen-Suibian (陈水扁) expressed a similar aspiration and then Yu Shyi-kun (游锡堃) announced that English would be the 'semi-official' language in Taiwan within the next six years (Ko & Lindy, 2002). Apparently, this goal has failed to be achieved. In the present circumstances, it remains difficult to estimate when and whether English will become a compulsory part of Taiwan's preschool curriculum.

In both the cases of South Korea and Taiwan, it is notable that the bans on preschool English language education are not effectively put into practice. In South Korea, the ban has been delayed due to the strong opposition from the public; in Taiwan, although the ban is not cancelled, it apparently has not stopped English teaching for preschool children. Each of the two cases presents a strong upward pressure and determination from parents for their children to learn English from an earlier age (Chang, 2008; Enever & Moon, 2009; Şahin et al., 2013). Thus, it is clear that the high status of English is achieved not only by top-down process, but also by bottom-up influence (Baldauf et al., 2011; Butler, 2015; Ng & Rao, 2013). These two kinds of impacts serve to increase the complexity of LEPP and suggest that the implementation of macro LEPP is contingent on the meso and micro situations (Chua, 2018; Kaplan & Baldauf, 2003; Liddicoat & Baldauf, 2008). To better understand this complexity, it is necessary to take a multi-level perspective on LEPP and regard it as a process in which different actors at every level are involved.

3.2.4.2 The younger the better?

The assumption of 'the younger the better' in language learning is widely acknowledged among the general public and it is often quoted as a rationale for conducting early childhood foreign/second language programmes (Butler, 2014a; Murphy & Evangelou, 2016). The understanding of this assumption cannot be separated from the discussion on the critical period hypothesis (CPH).

The CPH was first proposed by Penfield and Roberts (1959) who asserted that there was a biologically determined phase (before age nine) when children are more sensitive to language stimuli and learning languages is easier. About one decade later, Lenneberg (1967) published the landmark work, *Biological Foundations of Language*, in which he advanced the notion of a critical period for natural language acquisition and specified its age range as about two years old to puberty (usually about 14 years old). He attributed this phenomenon

to brain plasticity and brain lateralisation: that is, before the critical period, the brain has not finished developing completely, so the left and right hemispheres of the brain are both responsible for language function; however, after puberty, all language work falls to the right hemisphere, so the natural acquisition of language is blocked. Based on this biological assumption, Lenneberg (1967) suggested that 'foreign accents cannot be overcome easily after puberty' (p. 176). Following in his footsteps, numerous studies focusing on second language learning have also found evidence that learners' second language proficiency tends to decline with exposure at a later age (Abrahamsson, 2012; DeKeyser et al. 2010; Johnson & Newport, 1989; Patkowski, 1980).

However, since its advent, the CPH has generated a lot of controversial debate about various aspects of the theory. The first is the length of the critical period. As mentioned above, Lenneberg (1967) asserted that the critical period lasts from two years old to puberty. Many researchers have contested this age bracket. As Murphy (2014) has noted, currently the proponents of the CPH tend to agree that critical period starts from birth (or even before) and ends much earlier than puberty. By contrast, in a recent study, Hartshorne et al. (2018) investigated two-thirds of a million native and non-native English speakers and found that their grammar-learning ability did not begin to decline steadily until they reached adulthood (17.4 years old). Regarding the different assertions about age spans for the critical period, some researchers have suggested that the CPH should be considered in terms of different domains of language. Long (1990, 2013) argued that in order to achieve native-like pronunciation, the close of the critical period may be as early as age six but for native-like morphology and syntax it may not close until the mid-teens (around 15 years old); however, according to Ruben (1997), the critical period for phonology ends in infancy, at around 12 months, and the periods for semantics and syntax run until the 4th year and the 15th or 16th year respectively. Although Long (1990, 2013) and Ruben (1997) proposed different durations for the critical period, they do agree that there are multiple language domains affected by CPH. However, other researchers assert that the critical period only applies to certain language areas. For DeKeyser (2000), CPH can only apply to 'implicit learning of abstract structures' (p.518) while for Scovel (1988) the critical period only influences learners' pronunciation, not their grammatical competence.

The research studies summarised above, although varied in focus and results, suggest that children may have some kinds of natural advantages in learning second/foreign languages.

However, not all research has been able to reach such a conclusion. Some studies have not found a sharp reduction in second/foreign language improvement when learners past the ages of puberty (Tokudome, 2010; Wang & Kuhl, 2003); others have found that late-learners (usually starting to learn at or after puberty) are able to achieve high proficiency in second/foreign languages or even perform better than younger learners (Boxtel et al., 2005; Lecumberri & Gallardo, 2003; Pfenninger & Singleton, 2017; Snow & Hoefnagel-Höhle, 1978). Moreover, it is important to note that much CPH research is conducted within language immersion contexts, for example, English learners living in an English-speaking environment, but the reality is that foreign language learning usually takes place in the instructional context with limited exposure time (Butler, 2014a; Pfenninger & Singleton, 2017). All things considered, there is little research so far providing unequivocal evidence to support the assumption of 'the younger the better' in non-naturalistic learning settings (Butler, 2014a; Rixon, 2013; Murphy, 2014). In a nutshell, CPH is far from consensus on its existence, age span and affected language domains.

Over decades of development, the vast quantity of CPH research has enriched our understanding of the age factor in second/foreign language acquisition, but conflicting evidence and contrasting claims also remind us to remain cautious towards CPH. Age may be a factor related to learners' language progress but should not be the only factor. Instead, it is important to consider age along with other individual and social determinants (Hakuta et al., 2013; Murphy, 2014; Rixon, 2013). In a study conducted by Sun et al. (2016), researchers compared the impact of internal and external factors on learners who started to learn English as a foreign language at two to five years of age in an instructional setting in China. The results showed that children with older onset ages of learning English had better learning outcomes than children with earlier starts; however, compared with the age factor, external factors – especially the quality and amount of input – contributed more to the children's English proficiency. In a similar vein, other research has also provided substantial evidence that school and family learning environments have significant influences on young children's language attainment (Murphy & Evangelou, 2016; Mourão & Lourenço, 2014; Unsworth, 2013; Walk et al., 2015).

In all, based on the substantial evidence, it is 'almost certainly wrong' only to consider the age factor when introducing foreign language to children at very early ages (DeKeyser, 2013, p. 55). First, the debate on CPH is far from clear, so researchers, governments, parents and

educational institutions all should remain exceedingly cautious about the assumption of 'the younger the better' and its translation into policy and practice (Bland, 2015; Enever & Moon, 2009). In addition, the external learning environment should receive more attention. Without appropriate learning conditions, introducing English to children at a young age will be problematic (Murphy & Evangelou, 2016; Sun et al., 2016; Rixon, 2013). Therefore, it is essential to have a sound rationale for any position taken on the value of learning English at a younger age in instructional contexts.

3.2.5 A critical examination of the global spread of English

The preceding discussion on the global spread of English has highlighted its significant influence on LEPP in different countries and people's language behaviours (Hamid & Nguyen, 2016; Kaplan, 2018). Alongside the worldwide dominance of English are various concerns and debates among scholars and the public.

3.2.5.1 English linguistic imperialism

One of the major concerns is English linguistic imperialism. Phillipson (1992, 2009) has argued that the spread of English is a kind of linguistic imperialism initiated by core English-speaking countries (principally the USA and the UK) to maintain their dominance and perpetuate the dependence of peripheral countries (ESL and EFL countries). To achieve their aims, in recent decades the USA and UK have initiated a series of strategies not just to increase access to English but to build up qualifications of English language education (Phillipson, 1992, 2009). The above review of English LEPP in East Asia indicates a trend for learning English at an early age, a preference for native English teachers, and a preference for EMI, all of which in Phillipson's (1992, 2009) view are fallacies of English language education. Influenced by these arguments, substantial material and immaterial resources have been allocated to English learning, which in turn consolidates the profits of global English education, as well as the power and influence of core English-speaking countries (Phillipson,1992). In a 2013 report, the British Council asserted:

> English gives the UK a competitive edge. For the UK today, it provides a strong competitive advantage in culture, diplomacy, commerce, media, academia and IT, and in the use and practice of soft power… The UK needs to continue to invest in sharing English. (British Council, 2013, p.3)

The above quote shows that the global spread of English has benefited the UK's development in many ways. As Phillipson (1992) argued, linguistic imperialism is a distinct type of cultural imperialism, which penetrates media, science and education. In Europe, 70-80% of TV fictional programmes (e.g. dramas) shown are American while in the USA the market share of foreign films is only 1%; moreover, in both the UK and USA, far fewer foreign books have been translated and published than the translations of English books into other languages for other countries (Phillipson, 2015). Through 'the establishment and continuous reconstruction of structural and cultural inequalities between English and other languages', the 'dominance of English is asserted and maintained' (Phillipson, 1992, p. 47). As a result, other languages and cultures are undermined (Phillipson, 1992, 2009, 2015). The centre countries are moving into monolingualism while in periphery countries English has penetrated many aspects of life (Phillipson, 1992, 2009). Following Phillipson's lead, many other researchers have produced empirical evidence supporting the notion of English linguistic imperialism (Choi, 2003; Khodadady & Shayesteh, 2016). In the Chinese context, some researchers have questioned the worth of making so much effort to learn English and raised concerns about the negative effects on Chinese languages and culture (Hao, 2014; C. Chen, 2013; Luo, 2015).

Nevertheless, the notion of English language imperialism has also been strongly criticised. One criticism is that the framework overemphasises the top-down efforts, ignoring the agency of language speakers (Ferguson, 2006; Smith, 2018; Spolsky, 2004). As highlighted above, LPP involves a range of levels and actors, and is not exclusively the result of macro level initiatives and management (Baldauf, 2006; Bastardas-Boada. 2013; Hult, 2014; Johnson, 2009, 2018; McCarty, 2011). In spite of government's support for multilingualism, many people still regard English as more important than other languages (Dombi, 2011, cited in Le Donne, 2017; Tsui, 2004). In the cases of South Korea and Taiwan, it is clear that the governmental ban on preschool English education does not stop parental demand for it (see section 3.2.4.1). Also, there is a body of evidence showing that many Asian and African countries with a British colonial history have used English as a form to resist colonialism (Brutt-Griffler, 2002). English education was typically only provided for the elites in these countries while the masses were usually educated in the local languages, so the subjugated citizens realised that learning English was a way to improve their situation and struggle against colonial rule (Ferguson, 2006; Kirkpatrick, 2007). Therefore, an alternative

explanation for linguistic imperialism asserts that the global spread of English in most countries is indigenous and serves their own interests (Ferguson, 2006; Spolsky, 2004). At the level of the individual citizen, English competence is a necessity for social mobility and material gain; at the national level, English language education is seen as a tool to maintain or boost participation and competitiveness in global markets (Le Donne, 2017; Graddol, 2006; Pan & Block, 2011; Kirkpatrick, 2007). This stance is closely related to the notion of the pragmatic value of English (Pan & Block, 2011; Kirkpatrick, 2007).

Meanwhile, researchers have also raised doubts about how the spread of English affects other languages. The fact is that many languages in the world are in danger of dying out, but it is hard to say whether English has a direct relationship with that phenomenon. Graddol (2006) showed that there was a downward trend in linguistic diversity before the proliferation of English. Also, in Africa and the Pacific, the speakers of dying languages do not shift to English, but to regional languages or vernaculars (Ferguson, 2012). Hence it is necessary to take a broader and more dynamic perspective to observe language use trends (Graddol, 2006; Hornberger & Hult, 2008). In many countries where English is heavily promoted, governments and people make huge efforts to protect their home languages (Bulusan, 2019; Le Donne, 2017; Ferguson, 2012). Some scholars have proposed that acquiring English in a multilingual environment does not necessarily mean denying speakers' own cultures and languages; instead English can facilitate intercultural communication and help shape speakers' hybrid identities (W. Baker, 2011; Le Donne, 2017). This position has been advocated by the Chinese government (MOE, 2001a, 2011a, 2017b) and researchers (Lu, 2014; Shen, 2018) who emphasise that English language learning not only helps students to gain more knowledge and skills to support them in the globalised world, but also serves to broaden their horizons and enhance their cross-cultural awareness and humanistic accomplishment. Addressing concerns that English could have negative influence on Chinese, Huang (2015) investigated the English and Chinese language abilities of 945 students in six primary schools in Shanghai, China. The results showed that children in first grade and third grade who had learnt English before entering primary school were more likely to get high scores in both the English and Chinese language tests. These findings have been confirmed in a more recent study conducted by Chen et al. (2020). This empirical evidence supports the view that although English has affected China's language profile to some extent, it should not be seen as a threat to the Chinese language (Pan & Seargeant, 2012; Zhao, 2014). All in all, these arguments suggest that it may be too simplistic to adopt

the paradigm of English linguistic imperialism to explain the global spread of English (Ferguson, 2006; Spolsky, 2004).

3.2.5.2 English and social inequality

Another concern about the spread of English and English language education is the relationship between English and social inequality (Graddol, 2006; Ferguson, 2006). In the contemporary world, it is widely believed that English proficiency benefits personal development in different ways (Ferguson, 2012; Johnson, 2009; Tsui, 2004; Park, 2009). For example, in China's education system, the higher the students' English scores in entrance exams, the greater their chances of enrolling in the better universities (see sections 2.1.2 & 2.2.2), mirroring the situation in Japan and South Korea (Hu & McKay, 2012). Moreover, English proficiency is also a major criterion in employment and job performance evaluation (Hu & McKay, 2012; Johnson, 2009; Song, 2011). These benefits have driven people all over the world to invest a lot of resources in learning English, but this cost may represent a burden or barrier for some families and individuals, because English resources are not equally created and distributed.

In some countries, for example in China (see Guo, 2013; Ruan & Leung, 2012) and Vietnam (see Chinh et al., 2014), there are great disparities between urban and rural areas in terms of English provision. In general, education settings in urban areas have much better teaching resources and better qualified teachers. But there is also variation in provision even for citizens living in one city or region. For example, LaDousa (2014) found that in the city of Varanasi, India, many parents would send their children to the local English-medium schools while children from more elite families were typically sent to English-medium schools in more developed cities like Delhi. In South Korea, the middle and upper social class families tend to favour the option of extra private English tutoring for their children outside school hours (Park, 2009; Song, 2011). Unequal access to English has led many scholars to worry that English has become a tool to maintain and intensify existing power relationships (Johnson, 2009; Hu & McKay, 2012; Park, 2009; Pennycook, 2016; Song, 2011). With more and better quality English resources distributed to families who can afford high tuition fees for English, it is common to observe that lower socioeconomic status (SES) children underperform compared to the higher-level classes (Butler, 2014b; Hoff, 2013; Howard et al., 2014; Lamb, 2011). As a result, English proficiency becomes an indicator of elitism and

social stratification (Mohanty, 2017; Smith, 2018; Song, 2011). Researchers have proposed different strategies to tackle the English inequality issue. Yung (2020) reported a case describing how a financially disadvantaged student in Hongkong managed to find the money for English private tutoring to overcome existing educational inequalities. Other approaches involve increasing the value and utility of local languages, raising the starting age of English learning, promoting teachers' quality, and expanding English availability, but it is uncertain how effective these strategies are (Ferguson, 2012; Hayes, 2017).

This complex picture suggests that English language education 'may have as much to do with the creation as the alleviation of inequality' (Pennycook, 2016, p. 27). Therefore, it is important to develop a multifaceted understanding of the spread of the English language and English education, and the role and effect of English must be examined on an individual basis (Mohanty, 2017; Smith, 2018). The issues discussed in this section will be further elaborated in section 7.5, drawing on the data collected in this research but bearing in mind that this study's findings cannot be generalised to other research sites (Bryman, 2012; Cohen et al., 2018).

3.3 Chapter summary

In this chapter, I introduced and discussed LEPP in relation to the global spread of English. After decades of development, it is apparent that LEPP is more than a domain that is responsible for implementing official government directives regarding language education. LEPP is a multi-level process where actors at each level assume agency and impact the actual practice (Chua & Baldauf, 2011; Chua & Soo, 2019; Johnson, 2013). Hence, LEPP cannot be examined separately from the social context and the role of individuals at the micro level. In the contemporary world, the global spread of the English language significantly influences the government's decisions on LEPP and also highlights some social issues (see section 3.2.5). The review of English LEPP in East Asia shows that learning English at a younger age has become a common phenomenon, but it is rare for countries or regions to officially introduce English into the preschool curriculum (see section 3.2.3). By contrast, like the situation in Mainland China, South Korea and Taiwan have banned English education in kindergartens (see section 3.2.4.1). However, due to significant pressures exerted by parents, the bans were not successfully put into practice. The reality is that there is an increasing tendency to allow children to begin learning English at a very young age (Baldauf et al.,

2011; Enever, 2012, 2018), even though the CPH is not supported by substantial evidence (see section 3.2.4.2). Drawing on the existing research in this field and motivated by the gaps in the literature, the present study aims to explore the multi-level process of preschool English LEPP in China and the roles taken by different actors in this process.

Chapter 4 Methodology

This chapter describes how the research on preschool English LEPP in China was designed and conducted. First, the chapter introduces the methodological considerations for the study, including the research paradigms, the rationale for doing qualitative research, and my positionality. Following these theoretical considerations, the methods and steps for sampling, data collection and data analysis are described. Lastly, the chapter considers issues of research ethics and research quality.

4.1 Research philosophy and paradigm

Underpinning every piece of research there is a basic set of philosophical ideas, namely the research paradigm, which guide and influence researchers in the design, conduct and interpretation of research (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006; Morrison, 2002). So, before going on to introduce specific procedures and techniques for a research undertaking, it is necessary first to specify the paradigm into which the research fits. This study, with its focus on kindergartens' responses to the Chinese government ban on English language education, as well as on individuals' roles and understanding of this phenomenon, is situated within the interpretivist paradigm. The sub-sections below explain the rationale for choosing this paradigm and compare it with positivism in terms of the different ontological and epistemological stances.

Ontology is the study of being, dealing with the very nature of existence – that is, what exists there to be known (Gray, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Accordingly, the fundamental ontological issues are whether reality exists independently of human consciousness and whether reality is singular (Bryman, 2012; Ritchie et al., 2014). Related to ontology, epistemology is concerned with how to understand and enquire into reality (Cohen et al., 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018). It primarily deals with the questions of the nature of the relationship between researchers and who or what is researched, whether studies of social reality can follow the same principles, procedures, and ethos, and how to obtain the required knowledge (Bryman, 2012; Snape & Spencer, 2003). Bringing together different ontological and epistemological positions, many different research paradigms have been proposed, among which positivism and interpretivism are two main ones (Gray, 2014; Morrison, 2002).

Positivism is primarily associated with natural science, but from the 1930s to the 1960s it also dominated the realm of social science research (Gray, 2014). Its core ontological argument is that there is only a reality external to the minds of humans (Flick, 2018; Gray, 2014). In order to search for the general laws governing the reality, the acquisition of knowledge is based on careful observation, measurement and recording (Thomas, 2017; Ritchie et al., 2014) and is advanced from the accumulation of verified facts (Snape & Spencer, 2003). In this approach, random samples are often selected as representative of the total population under study (Flick, 2018) and researchers are assumed to be independent of and have no influence on the data (Bryman, 2012; Matthews & Ross, 2010). While these assumptions have been widely accepted in natural science, there is critical questioning of whether the social world really operates in the same way as the natural world, and so there is a long-standing debate about the appropriateness of applying this paradigm to the study of the social world. In many social science researchers' opinions, the social world is not regulated by universal and causal laws, so it cannot and should not be understood only by the senses (Matthews & Ross, 2010; Ritchie et al., 2014). Instead, social world research should follow a different logic of research procedure which is able to highlight the distinctiveness of actors engaged in social actions (Bryman, 2012).

With the debate ongoing, interpretivism emerged in the 1970s as a counter to positivism, seeking 'culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social life-world' (Crotty, 1998, p.67). The central assumption is that social reality is not objectively determined, but the product of people's interaction with the world (Crotty, 1998; Robson & McCartan, 2016; Gray, 2014). This assumption has two main implications: first, the importance of understanding the phenomenon in the context where it exists; second, the active role of social actors. Interpretivism holds that each individual constructs knowledge and meaning according to his/her own experiences, and as a result there are multiple realities rather than the single reality asserted by positivism (Robson & McCartan, 2016; Matthews & Ross, 2010). In order to grasp the complexity of the phenomenon under study, researchers must spend considerable time in the field and use multiple methods to seek and understand how people make sense of the world that they live in (Bryman, 2012; Creswell, 2014; Ritchie et al., 2014). It is worth noting that this process of interpretation not only addresses the significance of different subjective accounts and experiences of the research participants, but also puts value on the role of researchers: because they interact directly with participants,

their own experiences and background affect how they interpret participants' views and behaviours (Bryman, 2012; Creswell, 2014). In other words, when taking an interpretivist stance, the knowledge of the studied phenomenon is mutually shaped by both research participants and researchers.

The above passages compare the way positivism and interpretivism embed principles of epistemology and ontology. The purpose of comparing the two paradigms is not to determine which paradigm is right or wrong but to gain a fundamental understanding of the differences and why the present research has adopted interpretivism. As emphasised in section 3.1, LPP is neither a static structure nor a predefined entity, but a dynamic process which is constructed, negotiated and shaped at different levels led by different actors (Chua & Baldauf, 2011; Johnson, 2013; Liddicoat & Baldauf, 2008; McCarty, 2011). Taking this view, the study of LPP has tended to examine the micro contexts and 'how people are doing what they are doing, and why, from the perspectives of the participants, i.e. the meanings they give to their actions' (Lin, 2015, p.25). Mindful of these trends, I agree with the notion that there are varied and multiple context-specific realities that participants construct. Accordingly, I have chosen to frame the main research questions as: 1) How is preschool English LPP negotiated and interpreted at the meso level; 2) How do different kindergartens respond to the government policies on preschool English language education; 3) How do school-based actors (headteachers, parents, English teachers and children) perceive and engage in preschool English language education; 4) How do the different policy and planning levels interact, impact and influence each other. Qualitative data was collected and analysed to answer these questions.

4.2 Research approach

A research approach can be understood as the overall plan and procedures for the research. In general, there are three types of research approach: qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods (Bryman, 2012; Cohen et al., 2018; Creswell, 2014; Gray, 2014). This research, being underpinned by the interpretivism paradigm, is qualitative in nature. Compared with quantitative research, qualitative research is more committed to gaining in-depth, rich and detailed understanding of meanings, actions, behaviours and attitudes that underlie researched phenomenon (Bryman, 2012; Cohen et al., 2018), so it essentially addresses 'how', 'who' and 'why' questions and is appropriate to explore phenomena that are not well

understood (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Gray, 2014; Ritchie et al., 2014).

In China, although preschool English language education has existed for a century, only in recent years has it been challenged by pressures to remove primary-level content from kindergartens (see sections 2.2.3 & 2.3). In light of this newly emerging phenomenon, there is little research comparing public and private kindergartens' English language provision from the perspective of LPP (see section 1.5). Personally, I did not have much knowledge of this phenomenon either, at the outset of the research. To build an in-depth understanding of what has happened or is happening in Chinese kindergartens, it is necessary to enter into the real-world settings, get close to participants, and remain open to whatever emerges (Cohen et al., 2018; Gray, 2014; Patton, 2002). Unlike quantitative researchers who often test hypotheses deductively, for qualitative researchers there is a large degree of spontaneity and adaptation occurring during the research process, and typically an inductive approach is taken (Bryman, 2012; Robson & McCartan, 2016). First, they ask the research question(s), followed by decisions on sample selection and choice of data collection methods (see p.77 Figure 4.1). After that, researchers begin to gather and analyse data and finally to reach conclusions. However, this course is not always linear; it can be a back-and-forth process until a saturation point is reached where no more new information and themes emerge (Bryman, 2012; Cohen et al., 2018; Flick, 2018). In line with these principles, before starting fieldwork I did not have fixed ideas about how long I would stay in each participant school and when I would finish data collection; instead, I expected to be gathering and analysing data, and updating the research questions, until the point that I was unable to generate new ideas (see section 4.5.3.5).
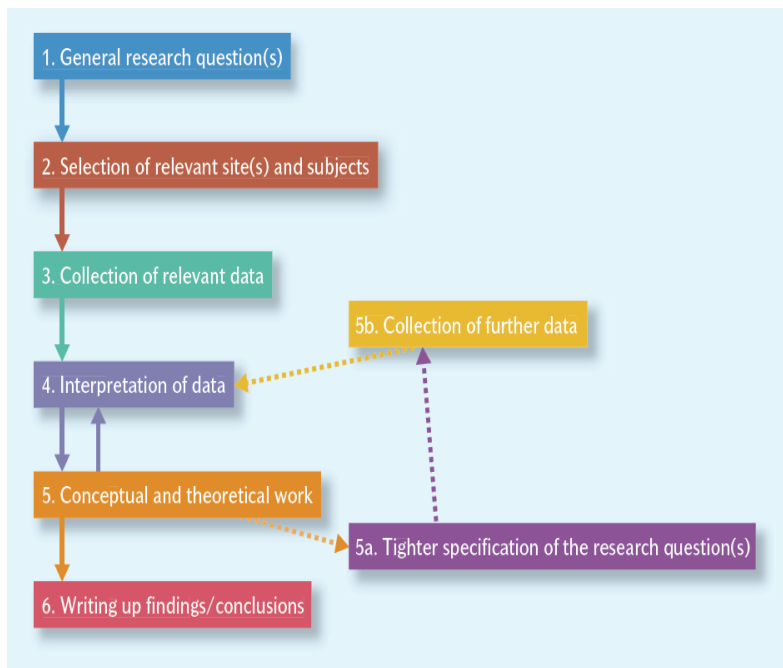
Figure 4.1 The main steps of qualitative research

Source: Bryman (2012), p.384

As qualitative research is characterised by the collection of exploratory and inductive data in natural settings, it enables researchers to gain multiple insights from participants and to develop a **specific** and **holistic** understanding of the phenomenon being investigated (Bryman, 2012; Cohen et al., 2018; Ritchie et al., 2014). Qualitative research is specific because it is context-based, recognising the unique value of every participant and setting (Bryman, 2012; Cohen et al., 2018; Ravid, 2020). The findings obtained in one research context are hardly generalised or transferred to others (Bryman, 2012; Creswell, 2014). It is holistic because the specific phenomenon is seen as a complex system in which multiple interpretations and factors must be considered in order to understand the phenomenon (Cohen et al., 2018; Greene & Hogan, 2005; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Therefore, qualitative researchers usually seek the relationships between factors in a whole system rather than build cause-effect relationships between different variables (Cohen et al., 2018). Given these features and advantages of qualitative research, it is hoped that the present study can help to present a holistic and unique picture of preschool English LEPP in China. However, qualitative research does have its weaknesses, for example, the researcher's presence during data gathering may unavoidably influence the participants' responses (Anderson, 2010; Flick, 2018). The limitations of qualitative research and strategies to compensate for these drawbacks have been carefully taken into account to ensure that the data gathered is as valid

and reliable as possible (see section 4.7).

4.3 Researcher positionality

As emphasised above, within the interpretivist paradigm, research is value-laden and researchers are seen as the instrument for gathering, analysing and reporting data (Cohen et al., 2018; Robson & McCartan, 2016). Thus, it is vital for researchers to explicitly identify what role they perform in the research and how the role affects the research. Having stated clearly what my philosophical position is, in this section I describe other relevant aspects of myself, including bias, assumptions, expectations and experiences, and how they influence the research (Bryman, 2012; Greenbank, 2003).

Prior to embarking on my PhD study, I was awarded a bachelor's degree in Chinese language and literature, and a masters degree in language education (see section 1.6). Since my masters study, I have been working in China and the UK as a teacher of Chinese as a second or foreign language. Although I have studied and worked in the field of language education for several years, my experiences have been focused mostly on Chinese language education. I have not trained or worked in English teaching. However, my growing awareness of the Chinese public's enthusiasm for learning English and the government's increasing focus on preschool education gradually led to my interest in the topic of preschool English language education in China (see section 1.6). This background shapes multiple positionalities for me as the researcher.

With its aim to explore and understand the state of preschool English education and actors' subjective attitudes and experiences, this study involved collection of qualitative data in kindergartens via class observations and consultations with relevant people, such as education officials, school headteachers, English teachers, children and parents. At first, I regarded myself as an outsider as I had neither membership nor a close relationship to any of the studied groups (Breen, 2007). This position brought the challenges of approaching participants and establishing rapport with them (Cohen et al., 2018). In the initial stage of participant recruitment, I did not know which individuals would want to take part. So, two to three months before data collection began, I had already begun to approach potential participants to ask them whether they were interested in taking part in this research. To my surprise, my status as a PhD student at a UK university appeared to facilitate engagement of

participants. Even though I had little knowledge of English language education in China, I was experienced in language education and therefore perceived as having the requisite expertise. My experience of studying abroad also piqued some prospective participants' interest in talking with me.

My participants' welcoming attitudes did not mean that I had become a de facto member of the groups, as my outsider status continued to be obvious after I began to collect data. For instance, I did not get involved in any teaching work and was rarely allowed to attend staff meetings. Out of five participant schools, I was allowed to audit staff meetings in only two kindergartens (and only once or twice) whereas other kindergarten teachers had meetings at least once per week. During the meetings, I remained silent and no one asked for my opinions. In addition, every time the headteacher introduced me to teachers, or teachers introduced me to colleagues, parents and students, they were explicit that I had no intention of assessing class performance and working at the school. Even so, some of the teachers appeared quite anxious when I began to observe their classes. To reduce the influence of the perceived power imbalance and to minimise the distance of researcher-participant relationships, throughout the entire research process I was very careful with my behaviours and did my best to get along well with participants and to create a relaxed environment (Bryman, 2012; Cohen et al., 2018; Robson & McCartan, 2016). I made it clear that for any queries they had, I would be glad to share my experience and provide any help if they needed.

Fortunately, as the research proceeded, the distance between me and the participants became smaller and smaller. It turned out that my temporary presence at each school and my outsider role actually helped many participants feel more able to express their personal opinions, because they felt comfortable and safe to talk with someone who was outside the preschool education system. Indeed, they even hoped that my research could reflect some 'true voices'. Prior to data collection, I was worried that some participants, especially officials and headteachers, might be guarded in their interactions with me, given that the research was addressing the issue of resistance to government policies. However, in the formal interviews and casual chats at break times, participants often raised the subject of schoolification and offered their personal opinions on this. Their supportive attitudes and my rapport with them reflected the advantages of my role as an outsider researcher. However, I was not an entirely 'outsider', because certain personal characteristics afforded me some 'insider' perspectives in conducting this research.

This study was conducted in my hometown, Hefei (see section 4.4.2). Being a Chinese person who was born and raised in Hefei, I am an insider in terms of broader cultural background. Bonner and Tolhurst (2002) summarised three key advantages of an insider-researcher: a natural intimacy with the participants; a superior understanding of the group's culture; the ability to interact naturally with participants. All three advantages apply to my own research. Firstly, there was no language barrier between me and my participants. If participants spoke the Hefei dialect with me, I would respond in it as well. If they used Chinese idioms to express their attitudes, I could quickly understand the underlying meaning. Secondly, while I did not belong to any group of participants in my research, our similar cultural backgrounds and educational experiences meant that it was easy for me to catch the meaning in conversation. For example, the interviewees often said 'You know in China / Hefei…' or 'When we were young…'. As a Chinese person, I could well understand parents' enthusiasm and concern about their children's English learning. Therefore, in summary, the insider role afforded me greater access to information and enabled me to respond sensitively about issues related to Chinese society and people, more so than researchers with less experience and knowledge of Chinese culture (LaPrairie, 2014).

It is also interesting to note that another dimension to my positionality emerged when I was with the foreign English teachers in the kindergartens, which was not anticipated at the beginning. My experience of living abroad, studying English as a foreign language and being a language teacher gave me some common ground with these foreign teachers. Also, my own English communication skills helped them to feel closer to me. My feeling was that right from the start there was not much 'distance' when I approached these foreign teachers. They all immediately agreed to participate in the research and set their interview times very soon after. In the interviews, they were eager to share their study and work experiences, to discuss the difference between eastern and western cultures, and provide suggestions for my research. It was apparent that my prior experiences and language skills unconsciously helped me develop a deeper rapport with foreign English teachers than I had anticipated.

To sum up, my background growing up in China, my educational and working experience and my language skills generally provided many conveniences in collecting and analysing data. The insider/outsider dichotomy is too simplistic to adequately capture the role I occupied throughout the research. In fact, my positionality never reached or reaches stability,

but is subject to the ongoing process of being formed, shaped and reconstituted. As the research proceeded, my knowledge of preschool English language education also grew. While it may have felt that my outsider role was diminishing, nevertheless it did endure because I did not contribute to English education in any of the participant kindergartens and nor did I become one of the participant groups. In fact, to some extent, I purposely kept some distance with participants, because I was conscious that an outsider perspective helps me remain objective and more capable of identifying valuable properties that insiders may overlook (Hayfield & Huxley, 2015). As a qualitative researcher, I am aware that bias and subjectivity are not inherently negative but they are unavoidable, and my role as a researcher is an inseparable part of the final creation (Cohen et al., 2018; Robson & McCartan, 2016). Therefore, over the whole research process, rather than try to eliminate the effects of my role I have remained reflexive, making my role clear and coherent for readers and consciously seeking to understand how it affects the research (Cohen et al., 2018; Sutton & Austin, 2015).

4.4 Research samples

Sampling concerns how to select research sites and individuals from a wider population (Flick, 2018). As a piece of qualitative research, this study did not intend to recruit samples that could represent the entire population, but rather to recruit some who can provide in-depth and detailed information about the phenomenon under investigation (Cohen et al., 2018; Flick, 2018). Accordingly, this section explains the rationale for selecting non-probability samples and provides general background information about the samples.

4.4.1 Sampling strategy

In general, there are two main types of sampling: probability and non-probability sampling (Bryman, 2012; Cohen et al., 2018). In probability sampling, researchers select the sample on a random basis, while the goal of non-probability sampling is to deliberately select a particular group that is relevant to the research questions (Bryman, 2012; Cohen et al., 2018). Within the framework of qualitative research, this research adopts non-probability sampling.

In non-probability sampling, all samples are purposively hand-picked by researchers and have certain common characteristics that are related to research questions (Cohen et al., 2018). My initial motivation for doing this research was my knowledge that some kindergartens were teaching English despite the government ban, so initially the main aim

of the research was to explore how and why kindergartens conduct English education. With this goal in my mind, I planned to recruit only kindergartens that had English classes. However, as the research progressed, I came to realise that basically only private kindergartens were offering English classes while public kindergartens did not. This division spurred my interest in comparing the different types of kindergartens to get broader insights into this phenomenon. Therefore, in the later stage of sampling, I also included public kindergartens in my study. In spite of these changes in the criteria, all selections were still undertaken for the specific purpose of exploring preschool English language education in China.

Together with purposive sampling, due to the need for rich data from different kindergartens and different participants, convenience sampling is also used to overcome the problem of gaining entry (Cohen et al., 2018; Wellington, 2015). With this strategy, pre-existing personal contacts and links to participants are very helpful (Wellington, 2015), especially when approaching powerful or senior stakeholders who may be very busy and possibly more worried about what they can or cannot say (Cohen et al., 2018; Walford, 2012). In this research, my personal links facilitated the process of getting permission from education officials and kindergarten headteachers. These links did not classify me as a member of a participant group or alter my role as a researcher, but the connections helped participants better understand me and my motivations.

4.4.2 Selection of city

Adopting the principle that samples should be both relevant to the research topics and accessible by the researcher, I selected Hefei as the research site. Located in mid-east China (see p.83 Figure 4.2), Hefei is the capital and largest city in Anhui province. It is also the city where I was born and grew up. As a local person, it was easier for me to get permission from participants, and also meant that I have insider perspectives to better understand the phenomenon I am researching (see section 4.3). In addition, selecting Hefei as the research site also took into account the following considerations.

Figure 4.2 The location of Hefei

First of all, Hefei's language profile reflects the mainstream picture in China. As introduced in section 2.1.3, the majority of people in China are of Han ethnicity and Mandarin is the official language. In Hefei, over 99.2% of the total population are Han, while the ethnic minorities comprise only 0.8% or a population of 44,000 (as of 2010) (Statistics Bureau of Hefei Municipality, 2020). The Hefei dialect spoken by local Hefei people belongs to Jianghuai Mandarin. However, due to mass immigration after the establishment of PRC, the Hefei dialect became much closer to standard Mandarin (Wan, 2014). Research has shown that almost all people under age 25 in Hefei speak standard Mandarin both at home and in the public sphere (Sun, 2009). During the fieldwork in participating kindergartens, almost all teachers, parents and students spoke standard Mandarin although some of them had Hefei accents or accents from regions other than Hefei. As a Chinese who can only speak Mandarin, conducting the research in Hefei avoided the challenges of dealing with ethnic language and culture.

Another important reason for selecting Hefei is its increasingly important role in national development. With GDP rising from 416.4 billion yuan (£46.9 billion) in 2012 to 721.3 billion yuan (£81.3billion) in 2017 – an increase of 73.2% – Hefei is one of the fastest growing cities in China (Lin, 2018). It was ranked 30th among 293 prefecture-level cities in terms of comprehensive economic competitiveness in 2018 (Xu, 2019). Hefei's prominence is not limited to its economic power. Other sectors have also been experiencing rapid development. In science, together with Beijing and Shanghai, Hefei is now one of three national comprehensive science centres pursuing cutting-edge research in quantum

communications, nuclear fusion, smog prevention and cancer treatments (Zhu, 2019). In transportation, Hefei is expected to be one of China's central areas for the construction of high-speed railway, trunk railway and highway, and will become a key transportation hub for China's Belt and Road Initiative (Wu, 2017). With its more significant role in national affairs, Hefei has also sought to expand its international presence and be a leading area in the inland regions (The People's Government of Hefei Municipality, 2017). With all these advantages, Hefei is attracting an increasing number of international companies and schools (Lu & Guan, 2018; Zhang, 2018) and has become one of the most attractive cities to foreigners (Zhu, 2019). Hefei's increasingly internationalised character made it a good choice of city in which to observe the rising demand for and development of English language education, and the role of social context.

4.4.3 Selection of kindergartens

As introduced in section 1.2, within the broad categorisation of public and private kindergartens, private kindergartens can be sub-categorised as public-interest kindergartens and non–public-interest kindergartens. In order to get a fuller picture of preschool English education, all three types are included in this research. After making contact with over ten potential schools, I ultimately selected and recruited five kindergartens as my research sites. The selection factors included: 1) the five kindergartens are different in terms of the school type; 2) the kindergartens' headteachers and teachers expressed genuine interest in my research and indicated they would provide full support for it; 3) the kindergartens have lower, middle and higher classes; 4) convenience in terms of access and transportation to and from the kindergartens.

Kindergarten A and Kindergarten B are both public kindergartens. The other three are private kindergartens: Kindergarten C is a public-interest private kindergarten while Kindergarten D and Kindergarten E are non–public-interest private kindergartens. In this research, the main comparisons focus on the distinction between public and private kindergartens, but the differences between public-interest-kindergartens and non–public-interest-kindergartens are also be considered. The details of each participant kindergarten will be further described in section 6.1.

4.4.4 Selection of classes and individual participants

Each participant kindergarten has lower classes for 3-year-old children, middle classes for 4-year-old children and higher classes for 5-year-old children. In my study, the main focus is the higher classes because these are at the kindergarten-primary transition, and the ban on English language kindergarten education is part of the movement to remove schoolification from kindergartens. Additionally, initial contacts with headteachers and teachers suggested that children in higher classes were more capable of expressing their perceptions and opinions than pupils in lower and middle classes. Given the duration of my fieldwork in each kindergarten (about one month) and the need to obtain rich data from different groups of participants and via different methods, it was not feasible to study every higher class, so only one higher class per kindergarten was chosen. Usually it was the headteachers who decided which class I would observe but first they discussed the matter with administrators and class teachers to see who wished to take part and whether it was convenient for me to observe. As well as these class observations, I conducted interviews with five headteachers, four English teachers, fifteen parents and five groups of children from the observed classes (see Table 4.1). More details about the recruitment of individual participants are in section 4.5.3.

Outside the five participant kindergartens, two officials working in the local education bureau also participated in this research. Both of them have rich experience of formulating and implementing preschool education policies and were very familiar with the overall situation of preschool education in Hefei. Their perceptions played a major part in helping me understand how English LEPP initiates at the meso level and how it influences practice at the micro level.

Table 4.1 Numbers of kindergarten participants

	Kindergarten A	Kindergarten B	Kindergarten C	Kindergarten D	Kindergarten E
Headteachers	1	1	1	1	1
English teachers	/	/	1	2	1
Parents	2	3	3	4	3
Students	5	4	4	5	4

The sampling structure is depicted in Figure 4.3. From the choice of research city through to individual participants, all settings and participants were purposively selected according to the needs of the study and accessibility requirements. The following section describes in more detail the procedures and methods used for collecting data.
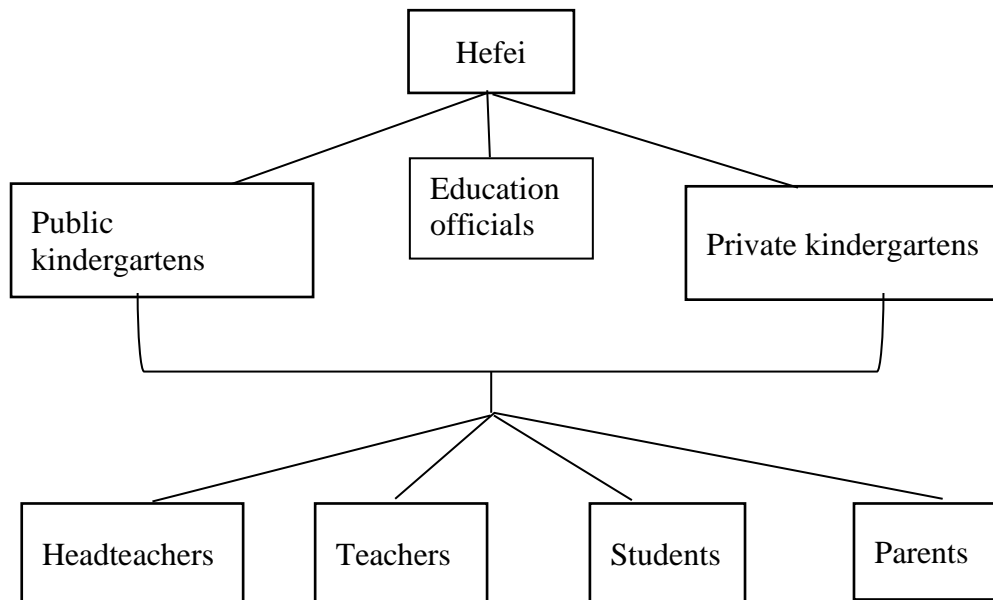
Figure 4.3 The sampling structure

4.5 Data collection

As outlined above, this research has a qualitative framework and involves the collection of data from multiple kindergartens and individual participants. When designing the study, I was mindful of the need to find the optimal ways to gather useful data and to be alert to what issues might arise, so I conducted a pilot study before the main study. This section summarises what I learnt from the pilot study and proceeds to introduce the methods and procedures of data collection in the main study.

4.5.1 Pilot study

Before the main study, I carried out a pilot study to test the flexibility and suitability of the initial research design (Bryman, 2012; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Matthews & Ross, 2010). Applying the principles of convenience, access and geographic proximity (Yin, 2018), I chose a kindergarten near my home location as the pilot site. The headteacher there was very interested and supportive of my research. It was a private kindergarten which had seven

classes in total – three lower classes, two middle classes and two higher classes. Every Thursday, an English teacher, who was from South Africa, came to the school and taught the higher classes first, followed by the middle classes and then the lower classes. English was only taught on Thursdays and each class lasted 20-30 minutes.

In the pilot study, the headteacher assigned me to a higher class which had under 10 students. Most of the time, I stayed in this class but sometimes I also walked around the school to observe the surroundings, facilities, everyday activities, teacher-student language, etc. However, observation of the English classes and the English learning environment was my main focus. All observations were done seeking not to disturb the school's arrangements in any way. In addition to my observations, I interviewed one headteacher, one English teacher and one parent, and conducted a focus group interview with four children. I did not carry out a pilot interview with education officials at that time because I had not yet had an opportunity to access them; besides, my pilot observations and interviews were providing clarity and direction for the interview questions for officials.

The pilot study lasted two weeks after which I had a general understanding of the context of preschool English language education in Hefei and the management structure within the kindergartens. I had also gained research experience in how to recruit participants and develop relationships with them. In the pilot study, I came to realise the importance of Chinese class teachers. Although they were not significantly involved in the research, it was the class teachers that parents and students were more familiar with and more likely to trust. The Chinese class teachers helped me considerably in recruiting participants and building rapport with them.

More importantly, the pilot study led to adjustments to the research plan, informed by my class observations and evaluation of participants' responses and feedback. For example, during the pilot I noticed the different practices of private and public kindergartens in response to the government policies, so I added relevant questions to the interview schedules for school staff, parents and officials to explore their understanding of these differences. My pilot observations also led me to consider recruiting kindergartens that did not provide English classes. Additionally, I made minor modifications to the procedures for collecting data from children. In the initial protocol for researching with children, I planned first to take photographs of school activities and then to ask children to order these pictures according to

their preferences. In this way, I hoped to gauge whether children liked English classes and how important they were for them. However, in practice, there were so many different activities and extra-curricular classes in the pilot school that when the pictures were presented, the children were easily distracted by whether and how they appeared in the pictures, rather than attending to the activities depicted. Thus, in the main study, I did not ask children to order the pictures but did sometimes use these pictures to elicit children's responses and discuss their school activities.

In the pilot study, the procedure for gaining access was the same as for the main study and other ethical issues were considered carefully as in the main study (see sections 4.5.3 & 4.8), but the data obtained from the pilot was not included in the main analysis.

4.5.2 Research methods

Informed by the lessons of the pilot study, I used documentary analysis, observation, individual interview and focus group to collect data for the main study. Each of these methods is particularly suited for obtaining a specific type of data and can be used with other methods to gain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under study (Bryman, 2012; Stebbins, 2001).

4.5.2.1 Document analysis

The term 'document' covers a wide range of data resources and in its broadest sense refers to 'any object which has been shaped or manufactured by human activities' (Pole & Lampard, 2002, p.151). By reviewing various kinds of documents, researchers are able to track the changes and developments in a particular project, activity or phenomenon, develop understanding about the historical and contemporary contexts, grasp and compare the complexity of one phenomenon across different contexts, and verify findings or corroborate evidence from other research (Cohen et al., 2018; Pole & Lampard, 2002).

In this research, documents specifically refer to written texts which are produced without the intervention of researchers (Silverman, 2020). This definition distinguishes documents from the primary source material gained from other methods, such as interviews and observations, and narrows its scope to secondary sources of data that already exist (Braun & Clarke, 2013). In dealing with secondary data, one issue is their accessibility (Bryman, 2012; Scott, 1990;

Silverman, 2020). All documents used in this study were obtained ethically. At the national and regional levels, only online open-access documents, such as government policies, research reports and media news, were reviewed. At the school level, materials such as textbooks, teaching plans and timetables were all accessed with permission from headteachers and teachers.

As a qualitative researcher, I regarded these written texts not as stable and standardised artefacts and the representation of facts or reality, but as material to connect with actions and to explore their functions and impact on social interaction and organisation (Prior, 2011; Silverman, 2020). For example, when analysing policies, the focus is not just on the contents but also on how these relate to actions taken by the policy-makers and by the audiences that documents are intended for (Prior, 2011). In conjunction with other methods, the review of relevant documents helps me to acquire background information about government positions on kindergarten English language education, as well as gain a fuller picture of the dynamic process of English LEPP and the disparity between policy and practice.

4.5.2.2 Observation

Observation is another method employed in this research. It affords opportunities for directly seeing what is happening in the natural environment, perceiving things that are not accessible or noticed through other methods, and gaining additional information that participants may be unwilling to say or simply unaware of (Cohen et al., 2018; Morgan et al., 2017). All observations in this research were conducted following a semi-structured format with a set of pre-established categories and criteria for making notes, but what data was finally gathered depended on the different contexts of settings and the research purposes (Cohen et al., 2018; O'Leary, 2013). With the main aim of finding out whether and how kindergartens provide English language education, the focus of the observations was the schools' English environments and English classes, including English use in everyday routines, the instruction of language, teaching materials, learning aids, and interactions between teachers and students.

When doing observation, the role and position of the researchers are of vital importance. Broadly, there are two types of observation: participant observation and non-participant observation (Flick, 2018; Yin, 2018; Matthews & Ross, 2010). If researchers choose to be

participants in the group being observed, they play certain roles and even engage in the activities and interactions with other group members, so the data is usually gained through the insider perspective (Cohen et al., 2018; Flick, 2018; Yin, 2018). Alternatively, non-participant observation requires researchers neither to actively take part nor to influence the situation they are observing (Cohen et al., 2018; Flick, 2018; Matthews & Ross, 2010; Yin, 2018). In this study, I acted as a non-participant observer and did not play any part in the actual practice of English language education. However, at times when there were communication problems, I was brought in to translate between English teachers and Chinese class teachers, but this did not interrupt the original teaching schedule.

The research design and procedures and my role in the research were clearly explained to all participants prior to the observations. All observations were conducted overtly with permission, meaning that participants were aware that they were being observed (Cohen et al., 2018; Flick, 2018; Matthews & Ross, 2010). For the class observations, I followed headteachers' and class teachers' suggestions and usually sat at the back of the classroom because this location minimised my influence on the class as far as possible, but I could still see and hear what was happening.

Throughout all observations, I made detailed field notes in both Chinese and English, recording a description of the observed settings and my own interpretations. As field notes can be written both in and away from the situation (Cohen et al., 2018), I reviewed the notes every day as soon as I arrived home, to see whether there were missing details and to add further notes reflecting my growing insight and understanding of the research. With participants' consent, I also took some photographs as an additional source of data to enrich my records of the studied phenomenon (Bryman, 2012).

4.5.2.3 Individual interview

Interview is one of the most popular methods of data collection in qualitative research (Bryman, 2012; Clark et al., 2019; Cohen et al., 2018). Compared to observation and document analysis methods, a major advantage of interviewing is that it can readily probe into different participants' perspectives and experiences of particular events (Clark et al., 2019; Wellington, 2015; Yin, 2018). This advantage reflects the interpretivist view that reality is multiple and constructed through human interactions (Cohen et al., 2018;

Wellington, 2015). In this study, one-to-one face-to-face interviews were conducted with kindergarten headteachers, English teachers, parents and education officials, in order to explore the phenomenon of preschool English language education in China from different perspectives. Each interview took about 30 minutes to one hour.

Interviews can be categorised as structured, semi-structured and unstructured, reflecting different degrees of openness and flexibility (Basit, 2010; Clark et al., 2019; Wellington, 2015). In structured interviews, the aim is to ask interviewees to answer a set of pre-determined and fixed questions in the same order (Bryman, 2012; Clark et al., 2019). This type of interview is similar to the close-ended questionnaires typically used in quantitative research to minimise the impact of context effects (Bryman, 2012; Cohen et al., 2018). At the other end of the spectrum, the unstructured interview has much greater flexibility and freedom because there is not a specific set of questions to be asked in a pre-planned sequence; instead, it is an open situation where no one can predict the directions of the interview (Cohen et al., 2018; Wellington, 2015). Although researchers may prepare some topics or questions before starting an unstructured interview, the interviewee can amend these questions and direct where the interview goes (Basit, 2010; Wellington, 2015). This type of interview 'is useful when researchers are not aware of what they do not know and have to rely on interviewees to tell them' (Basit, 2010, p. 102). After completing the pilot study and having contacted different kindergartens, I had gained some knowledge of how kindergartens taught English and what the interviews should focus on, so I chose to do semi-structured interviews, which, as the name suggests, stands between the structured interview and unstructured interview and is characterised by a set of prepared, mostly open-ended questions (Basit, 2010; Bryman, 2012; Wellington, 2015). This interview approach on the one hand can guide the entire interview process, but on the other hand also leaves room for emerging questions as the interview progresses.

To ensure that the semi-structured interview questions were relevant to the research focus, I prepared different interview schedules for different groups. For example, the interviews with officials mainly focused on their understandings and explanations of government policies and the practical challenges (see Appendix IV-A). For interviews with headteachers and English teachers, the emphasis was on their experiences and perceptions of English education (see Appendix IV- B & C). For parent interviews, another major topic was children's English learning outside kindergarten (see Appendix IV- D). However, these

interview guides were flexible and the specific research questions and their order could be tailored to each interviewee (Bryman, 2012; Cohen et al., 2018; Wellington, 2015). In the course of each interview, I responded sincerely to whatever the interviewee said, and if they had anything that they wanted to tell or ask, I was happy and open to listen and share my experiences with them.

To optimise communication with each interviewee, the interviews with Chinese participants were conducted in Chinese and the interviews with English teachers were conducted in either English or Chinese according to the interviewees' preferences. All interviews were audio-recorded (with the interviewees' permission) and written notes were also made. Given that interactions between researchers and participants are not limited to verbal communications but also involve other sensory experiences (Cohen et al., 2018), the notes recorded the important points of the conversations as well as observations about the interviewees' body language, facial expressions and movements which would aid my understanding of what meaning the interviewees expressed.

4.5.2.4 Focus group

This research involves children as participants as well as the adult participants. As children are active social actors with their own opinions, it is important to explore their perspectives and understanding directly from their own voices (Gibson, 2012; Smith et al., 2005). Considering the young age of kindergarten children, focus groups were employed instead of one-to-one interviews.

A focus group is a form of group interview in which several participants, who have something in common, discuss specific topics related to the research (Bryman, 2012; Cohen et al., 2018; Matthews & Ross, 2010). As children in the participating schools usually sat in groups of five, each focus group in this study consisted of four to five children. Compared with individual interviews, a group setting provides a more natural and familiar context for children to communicate with researchers as well as with other participants (Cohen et al., 2018; Gibson, 2012). The purpose of a focus group is not to arrive at a consensus, but to observe people's interactions with each other within the group and to generate different viewpoints reflecting different experiences of given topics (Clark, 2009; Bryman, 2012; Matthews & Ross, 2010). It is interesting to note that during the focus groups, after I initiated

a question, children naturally began to share, discuss and debate the questions with each other. To keep discussions on track, I used a checklist prepared in advance and consisting of several general open-ended questions (see Appendix IV-E). Additionally, objects such as photos, toys and books were used to elicit children's commentary and make the process fun for them (Cohen et al., 2018). For example, I might use a toy and picture to help children recall their experiences and feelings about English classes and to review the words they had learnt. As with the observations and interviews with adults, field notes were taken during the focus groups and then fully written-up as soon as possible afterwards. All discussions were recorded with the participants' and their parents' permission.

To summarise, in total four different research methods were adopted in this study according to the different participants and purposes of the data collection. The chosen methods complement each other, improve the validity of the research and ultimately contribute to a comprehensive, in-depth understanding of preschool English LEPP in China.

4.5.3 Data collection procedures

Having introduced the choice of data collection methods above, this section describes the procedures for gathering the data.

4.5.3.1 Stage one: Desk-based preparation

Prior to research fieldwork, the first priority is to review the existing literature to gain insights into the latest developments in the chosen research area, determine which are worth studying, and decide how to build a theoretical and methodological framework to achieve research aims (Cohen et al., 2018; Creswell, 2014). At this stage, I reviewed a large number of national and local policy documents, together with the literature in the field of LPP and English language education. The majority of the literature was obtained from the library catalogues of the University of Sheffield, Google Scholar, CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure) and government websites. In addition, I borrowed and purchased relevant books and papers. This process took almost an entire year after I commenced my PhD study, and by the end of this stage I had formulated a research plan which outlined the key themes in the field of LPP, identified the central issues and questions that needed to be explored, established the methodological framework, and set out a timeline for further work.

4.5.3.2 Stage two: Getting access to kindergartens

On completion of the initial review of relevant literature, the next main task was to approach kindergartens to invite their participation and obtain their permission to carry out the research in their settings. It is a well-established principle that the earlier one gets access, the better the opportunity 'for researchers to present their credentials as serious investigators and establish their own ethical position with respect to their proposed research' (Cohen et al., 2018, p.134). I began to contact kindergartens as soon as ethical approval was granted by the University of Sheffield (see Appendix I). To approach the potential research sites in the most effective way, the first step was to identify and contact significant figures or 'gatekeepers' (Cohen et al., 2018; Jensen, 2008) who in this research were mainly the kindergarten headteachers. Having reviewed kindergarten websites and my personal networks, I listed the kindergartens which best fitted my research aims and were conveniently located. I systematically contacted the headteachers on the list, one by one, by telephone and Wechat[16]. At this preliminary stage, I was still based in the UK, so not all of the headteachers were able to get in touch easily, but there was one headteacher who expressed strong interest and support for my research and agreed to me conducting the pilot study at her school. As soon as I returned to China, I met this headteacher in person and set out all relevant details for the pilot study (see section 4.5.1). At the same time, I contacted the other headteachers who had expressed interest and met them in person if they agreed.

In the meetings with all potential participant headteachers, I thoroughly explained my research design including the research purposes, positionality, methods, procedures, involvement of individual participants, time commitment, and the rights of participants (Bryman, 2012; Cohen et al., 2018; Robson & McCartan, 2016). I also sought the headteachers' opinions and suggestions and gave them plenty of time to consider whether to agree to the research participation. To facilitate their understanding of my research, I also provided them with the written information sheet (see Appendix II) and consent form (see Appendix III) and asked them to sign the consent form if they wished to join in the research. From my personal perspective, gaining informed consent to participation was more like a negotiation process in which I introduced my research and reassured the potential participants with detailed explanations of how I would conduct the research appropriately

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[16] Wechat is China's most popular messaging app.

and ethically in their schools and classes. It is worth noting that I did not get permission from all headteachers at the same time, but gradually, one by one. I kept regular contact with potential participating headteachers during my fieldwork and discussed the appropriate times to enter their schools. Typically, by the time I had finished collecting data in one kindergarten, I had obtained permission from the next one.

4.5.3.3 Stage three: Getting permission for class observations

After agreeing fieldwork timings with each participant headteacher, he/she would discuss the issue with administrators and class teachers, and then make a decision about which class I would observe. In effect, the headteacher was helping me get permission and cooperation from class teachers and English teachers before I entered their classrooms. Even so, when I met these teachers, I took the time to explain my research design in detail, answered their queries and asked formally whether they were willing to take part. If they wished to proceed, they were required to sign a written consent form.

With permission obtained from headteachers, class teachers and English teachers, the next step was getting consents from the relevant children and their parents. With children of a young age, it is not ethically sufficient only to obtain children's permission; the consents of parents or guardians are also required (BERA, 2018; Cohen et al., 2018). On the advice of headteachers and class teachers, I communicated with parents mainly when they dropped off and picked up children at kindergarten. Every day I arrived at kindergarten one hour earlier than the start time of classes and I left after all children in the observed classes had departed. When I chatted with parents, at least one class teacher accompanied me and helped me introduce the research. In the case of children who were brought to and from kindergarten by their grandparents or other carers, I would introduce my research briefly to the carers and give them the information sheet and consent form to pass on to the children's parents. My Wechat number and phone number were also given to the carers. Meanwhile, to save time, class teachers also helped me reach out to parents through Wechat and asked them to contact me directly if they had queries. Consent forms were signed by all participants who wished to participate in the study or were happy for their children to take part (Bryman, 2012; Cohen et al., 2018; Robson & McCartan, 2016). The main focus of these initial communications with parents was permission for the class observations because the interviews and focus groups were not scheduled until a while afterwards, but I also took the opportunity to explain

about the other research methods. I kept notes on which participants showed interest in interviews and/or focus groups, and kept in touch with them.

At the time of gaining parental permission, I also introduced my research to the children. On my first day in the kindergarten, the class teacher would tell the children who I was and why I was there. Given that some children might find words such as 'PhD student' and 'researcher' unfamiliar or strange, class teachers usually explained my role as a university student or guest teacher who was staying for the next few weeks. When I introduced the research with the help of the class teachers, we would emphasise that I was not there to assess the children's performances, so what they needed to do was behave as usual and express their true opinions. After these explanations, there was ample time for the children to ask questions and consider whether or not to participate in the research. If there were no more questions, I or the class teacher would ask them whether they would like to take part, and if so, to raise their hands. As with the procedure for recruiting parents to the study, children's permission for class observations came first and recruitment to focus groups came later. Students who agreed to take part were required to sign a written consent form and information sheet which were shorter and simpler than the adults' version (see Appendix II). Given their young age, I would explain verbally what these forms contained. The whole consent process was witnessed by the class teachers. In most cases, children were quick to decide to take part in the research after I introduced it; for pupils who seemed hesitant, I would suggest not hurrying but instead they should carefully think about it and discuss it with their parents, friends and teachers. Although my research got great support from participants, it was unavoidable that a small minority of children or parents did not want to take part. I fully respected their choices and did not involve them in the research.

After permissions were obtained, during the first one to two weeks of on-site fieldwork, I attended school every day and stayed all day. In subsequent weeks, I visited schools only when they had English classes or other events of interest. Although I defined myself as a non-participant observer who did not actively take part in or influence the situations I was observing (Cohen et al., 2018; Flick, 2018; Matthews & Ross, 2010; Yin, 2018), in order to build rapport with participants, I often had conversations with children and teachers at break times and helped teachers or headteachers to arrange some classes or activities. From my perspective, these actions did not affect my role as an outsider observer because I did not get much involved in their actual teaching. However, it cannot be denied that my relations with

teachers and students became closer.

4.5.3.4 Stage four: Recruiting participants for interviews and focus groups

As research progressed, teachers and students felt more comfortable and natural to see me in classes, and I began to recruit adult participants for individual interviews and children for focus groups. Similar to the procedure for observation consents, I explained these research methods fully before participants signed the consent forms.

In each participant kindergarten, there was no fixed rule for how many people could take part or a fixed sequence of interviews. It all depended on the situation and when saturation point was reached (Bryman, 2012; Cohen et al., 2018; Flick, 2018). The numbers of participants who joined in one-to-one interviews and focus groups are shown in Table 4.1 (p.85). In addition to the staff and parent interviews and the children's focus groups, two education officials were recruited but these interviews took place after I had completed fieldwork in two kindergartens, so that I would have a good general understanding of what was going in kindergartens. To minimise inconvenience to participants, each individual was asked where and when they wished to have the interview (Cohen et al., 2018). All kindergarten staff interviews took place in the schools and the interviews with education officials were conducted in their workplace offices. I did my best to conduct all interviews and focus groups ethically and to encourage participants to share their opinions with me willingly and openly (Bryman, 2012; Cohen et al., 2018; Robson & McCartan, 2016).

4.5.3.5 Stage five: Reaching saturation and the end of data collection

In total, five kindergartens and two education officials took part in the main study and one kindergarten was recruited to the pilot study. As emphasised above, qualitative research is not conducted in a linear manner, but is a circular process proceeding to a saturation point when no more new information arises (Bryman, 2012; Cohen et al., 2018; Flick, 2018). Before entering the field, I had neither an exact schedule for when to finish data collection in each kindergarten nor a fixed idea of how many schools and participants I should include. During the period of collecting data, I also began to transcribe and analyse the data and was able to compare the newly gathered data with the information collected earlier. This demonstrates that 'sampling, data collection, and analysis proceed concurrently' (Bowen, 2008, p.139). I remained in the schools until such time as I could no longer generate new

ideas.

However, it is important to note that although the notion of 'saturation' has been widely used in qualitative research, it is not the only criterion for completing data collection (Braun & Clark, 2013). Sometimes accessibility is a determining factor (Robson & McCartan, 2016). For example, in Kindergarten A, I interviewed only two parents. In fact, I was very eager to interview more but during my fieldwork period, all parents and teachers were busy with a drama production and all their free time including after-school time was occupied in rehearsals, so it was hard to find appropriate times to collect data.

Table 4.2 sets out the timeline of fieldwork in each participant school. Except for the pilot school, I stayed about one month in each school, but the exact periods of attendance to conduct data collection varied from one kindergarten to another. Usually I commenced work on site in a new kindergarten only after work in the previous setting was complete, but sometimes there was overlap. For instance, in the second kindergarten, I had finished all data collection except the interview with the headteacher who was very busy when I was in the school. To optimise time, I started work in the third kindergarten while keeping in touch with the second kindergarten's headteacher and waiting for her to agree an interview date and time.

Table 4.2 Timeline of fieldwork

	Time Period
Pilot study	October 2018
First kindergarten	November 2018 – December 2018
Second kindergarten	December 2018 – January 2019
Third kindergarten	January 2019 – March 2019
First education official	January 2019
Fourth kindergarten	March 2019 – April 2019
Second education official	April 2019
Fifth kindergarten	April 2019 – May 2019

In all, the fieldwork lasted for about eight months, but if the time taken to approach potential kindergartens before the pilot study is accounted for, the overall period was longer. In each kindergarten, the data collection process followed a general procedure from stage two to

stage five. During the entire period, I continued to write field notes to record events as well as my reflections and insights into ways of doing the research and my influence on the research itself (Cohen et al., 2018). All data was kept on a secure, password-protected computer for further analysis.

4.6 Data analysis

Qualitative data analysis concerns how researchers use the gathered data to understand, explain and interpret the phenomenon being studied (Bryman, 2012; Cohen et al., 2018). Unlike quantitative research in which researchers follow sequential steps of data collection, then data analysis, and finally report writing, in the course of qualitative research, data analysis goes hand-in-hand with data collection and writing up (Cohen et al., 2018; Creswell, 2014). At the same time as collecting data, I began to analyse the information and organise the structure of the thesis. To integrate and make sense of the data collected from different methods, thematic analysis is employed in this research. This section begins by examining the rationale for using thematic analysis, followed by a description of the stages of data analysis. Lastly, issues relating to the translation and the use of Nvivo are discussed.

4.6.1 Thematic analysis

Thematic analysis (TA), is a widely-used tool for identifying, analysing and reporting themes (patterns) within the qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2013; Flick, 2018). Braun & Clarke (2006) have suggested that TA should be the foundational method for qualitative data analysis and the first method that the qualitative researcher should learn, as it provides 'core skills that will be useful for conducting many other forms of qualitative analysis' (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.4).

Unlike other approaches to data analysis such as grounded theory, content analysis and discourse analysis, TA only deals with the analysis of data and is compatible with a range of theoretical positions. It can be used for various kinds of qualitative data and to address almost any kind of research question (Braun et al., 2019; Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2013). In TA, a theme is conceptualised as 'a pattern of shared meaning, organized around a core concept or idea, a central organizing concept' (Braun et al. 2019, p. 845). Accordingly, the generation of meaning-shared themes can help the researcher move beyond the micro-language, identifying and describing both implicit and explicit meanings in a large body of data (Braun

et al., 2019; Braun & Clarke, 2013; Matthews & Ross, 2010). Choosing TA for this research permits the analysis of data collected from different sources, to find similarities and differences within and between different kindergartens and participants, to examine the factors that affect preschool English language education in China, and to summarise key features across the dataset.

However, the flexibility of TA can also lead to mismatch and inconsistency between theory and data (Javadi & Zarea, 2016). Although TA is designed specifically for analysing qualitative data, Braun & Clarke (2019) point out that some studies claiming to use TA are actually underpinned by positivist stances. Given this situation, Braun and Clark in their more recent work emphasise that TA should be used as a *fully* qualitative method (Braun et al., 2019; Braun & Clarke, 2019; Clarke & Braun, 2018). That means TA should only be used for qualitative research that 'regards meaning as contextual or situated, reality or realities as multiple, and researcher subjectivity as not just valid but a resource' (Braun et al., 2019, p. 848). This position further justifies the use of TA methods in research like the present study which is within the interpretivism paradigm (see section 4.1). To distinguish their stance from other schools of TA, Braun & Clarke claimed that the TA they initially proposed in 2006 was reflexive TA (Braun et al., 2019; Braun & Clarke, 2019). In reflexive TA, themes neither exist in the data waiting to be discovered nor passively emerge from the data, but are the production of the 'intersection of the researcher's theoretical assumption, their analytical resources and skills, and the data themselves' (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 594). Therefore, it is essential for researchers to articulate the theoretical assumptions they hold and the exact procedure of enacting TA (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Braun et al., 2019).

4.6.2 Stages of data analysis

Mindful of Matthews & Ross's (2010) suggestion of remaining in touch with the raw data throughout the data analysis, this section outlines the five stages of transforming a massive and 'messy' raw dataset into a comprehensive and meaningful picture of the studied phenomenon.

4.6.2.1 Stage one: Transcription and familiarisation with the data

When engaging in data analysis, the first step is to get immersed in the data and prepare it for analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2013). Given that individual interviews and focus

groups form the larger portion of data in this research, a major task was to transcribe these verbal data into written words (Creswell, 2014; Flick, 2018). In general, there are two ways to approach audio recordings: transcribe every word uttered or write the summary of data and analysis directly (Cohen et al., 2018). I chose the former method because it could better enable me to familiarise with all aspects of the data and also generate some initial ideas for analysis (Clark et al., 2019). However, word-for-word transcription is very time-consuming; sometimes a one-hour recording might take four to six hours. When transcribing, typically I would play a short segment once and then type what I heard. After finishing a small section, I rewound the recording to check for anything missing and then did at least one full check after completing the transcript. At the transcription stage, analysing the meaning beneath the words was not the goal, so all recordings were transcribed verbatim in their original languages. However, beyond the spoken words, in order to preserve certain contextual information, the obvious non-verbal signs, such as long pauses, laughs, or sudden changes of tone, were also marked in the transcripts (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Cohen et al., 2018).

Apart from transcription, stage one of data analysis also involved typing up field notes and creating a computerised database (Creswell, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2018). The data corpus comprised over 400 pages of interview transcripts and field notes, over 200 photos, and a wide range of school and government documents. For easy categorisation and access, all data collected in relation to one school was stored in an individual electronic folder. All interview transcripts and observation notes were uploaded to Nvivo for further data analysis (see section 4.6.4).

4.6.2.2 Stage two: Initial coding

After getting all data prepared, I immersed myself in the contents and continued to write down notes of interesting aspects, which automatically led me to start coding (Vaismoradi et al., 2016). Coding is a process of breaking down the texts into small pieces and then creating labels to categorise and organise these pieces (Bryman, 2012; Cohen et al., 2018; Creswell, 2014; Flick, 2018). At the earliest stage of coding, Braun & Clarke (2013) recommend systematically working through all the data and coding anything that is potentially relevant to the research questions. With this in mind, I began coding sentence by sentence. Sometimes the same segment could be ascribed to more than one code (Cohen et al., 2018; Elliott, 2018).

When coding texts, one important consideration is how the codes are derived, whether they are drawn from theoretical models and literature or emerge from the data (Cohen et al., 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018). These two approaches can also be understood as deductive orientation and inductive orientation (Braun et al., 2019). In practice, there are no clean boundaries between them, because researchers may start with some pre-determined codes and then add, delete and modify the original codes according to the obtained data (Braun et al., 2019; Cohen et al., 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Elliott, 2018). Before I formally started coding, I had some tentative codes from reading other researchers' work and from familiarising with my own data, but these codes did not constrain my analysis. Instead, they were just the starting point of data analysis. Throughout the analytical process, I kept an open mind, going back and forth to make sure that all the codes were generated based on the raw data and relevant to the research questions.

At this stage, another consideration is the level of meaning that the coding conveys. In general, there are two kinds of code: semantic codes, which focus on the explicit or surface meaning of the data, and latent codes which look for underlying meaning (Braun & Clark, 2006; Braun et al., 2019). These two types represent the ends of 'a continuum of ways of looking at data, rather than a binary' (Braun et al., 2019, p.853). In the process of developing codes to themes, Braun and Clarke point out that the theme should be coherent and meaningful and underpinned or united by a central concept (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Clarke & Braun, 2013, 2018). This addresses the importance of grasping the latent meaning behind the words. In my analysis, to ensure the accuracy and clarity of the codes, the initial coding tended to be very detailed and descriptive, so the codes created at this stage were usually directly based on the semantic meaning of participants' words (Bryman, 2012; Elliott, 2018; Punch, 2014). For example: 'English teachers know/do not know about the English ban' and 'change in English language education in past years'. Although this process was time-consuming, it did help me capture the complexity of the data and gave me a thorough understanding of what I was exploring (Cohen et al., 2018). At the end of this phase, the data irrelevant to the research questions were excluded and a wide range of codes was compiled.

4.6.2.3 Stage three: Developing and revising themes

As the analysis developed, coding moved beyond the descriptive level and looked more

deeply at the data. Following the principles of comprehensiveness and mutual exclusiveness, codes were compared and contrasted in terms of similarities and differences and then were reorganised (Vaismoradi et al., 2016). In order to summarise the key features across the whole dataset, I revisited individual documents and compared documents within and across different kindergartens and different groups of participants. Apart from the individual files for each school, I also created files by participant type, for example, the interview transcripts from parents across the five schools were put in a file for easier access and comparisons in Nvivo. Through this process, there was more focus on recurring and related codes, as 'they are seen as most revealing about the data' (Byman, 2012, p.569). These similar codes, together with the corresponding data, were grouped into one candidate theme (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Braun et al., 2019; Vaismoradi et al., 2016). Unlike a code which captures only one idea, a theme is built on a central organising concept (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Braun et al., 2019). For example, at the beginning of the coding process, various codes for different participants' roles in school management were identified, which ultimately were combined in the theme of 'top-down decision-making process in the school'.

Having devised a set of candidate themes, the next stage involved refinement and revision. To ensure that themes capture the main features of the dataset in relation to the research questions, it is important to review and revisit the codes and themes, as well as the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2013). Hence this phase consisted of two levels of work: the first was to read all the coded extracts to see whether their meaning had been conveyed in the themes; and the second was to review the dataset to see whether there were missed data in the earlier stages and to consider how each theme related to others (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun et al., 2019). Through these two levels of analysis, themes which had overlapping meanings were further defined and some data which had been ignored in the previous stage were added.

4.6.2.4 Stage four: Finalising themes and writing up

Through the process of continually revising and defining the themes and codes, I began to prepare 'a concise, coherent, logical, non-repetitive, and interesting account of the story the data tell - within and across themes' (Braun & Clark, 2006, p.23). Even though I believed I had developed a set of workable themes, the writing-up was still very challenging. It was not enough simply to describe what I had found in kindergartens and how actors interpret and

perceive phenomena. I had to draw out arguments from the findings convincingly and organise them in a way that readers could easily understand. Considering the different policy and practice levels that this research involves, I decided to first present the findings at the meso and micro levels (see chapters 5 & 6) before providing more in-depth analysis (see chapter 7). During this writing process, the themes and research questions were further revised to make them more coherent with each other.

By the end of this stage, the final themes were set down and encompassed the major findings of the research (Flick, 2018). Each theme not only had its own purpose, scope and focus, but was also related to other themes, providing a coherent and insightful story about the data in relation to the research questions (Braun et al., 2019; Braun & Clarke, 2013). Section 8.1 presents seven main findings concluded from the data, addressing directly the four main research questions set out in section 1.4. For each finding, I have provided detailed analysis and evidence and explained how these contribute to answering the questions.

In summary, the above account describes the four stages of data analysis undertaken. Although the steps appear to be linear, in practice they were interrelated and not always sequential (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Cohen et al., 2018; Creswell, 2014). From the earliest stages of data analysis, I was already writing up preliminary ideas about important themes and considering the structure of the thesis. Throughout the analysis process, I remained in touch with the raw data and stayed open to making revisions to the codes and themes to ensure the analysis was consistent across the report (Braun et al., 2019).

4.6.3 Translation

The above sections introduce the method and process for analysing data. As this study involves cross-language research, translation is an important issue to consider in maintaining the authenticity of the rich data (Littig & Pöchhacker, 2014; Squires, 2009). Two of the issues that arise are what materials need to be translated and when to translate.

For the pilot study, I tried to translate a short interview transcript, but the process turned out to be very challenging and time-consuming. Although I did my best to ensure the translation was appropriate and accurate, there was still some inevitable loss of original meanings and contexts. This was especially the case when dealing with specific Chinese terms and

metaphors, because I could only translate the explicit meaning while their cultural contexts were not easy to convey accurately (Widiyantari, 2012). Hence, in order to ensure the data's integrity and accuracy, I decided to stay in the source language as long as possible (Van Nes et al., 2010) and translate only the quotations to be used in English (Bourgeault et al., 2010). However, when I produced the codes and themes, all of them were labelled in both Chinese and English because the interviews were conducted in two languages and using both could improve my understanding of the data and help to facilitate the final themes.

As a Chinese-English bilingual, I chose to do all the translation myself. One major challenge was to maintain translation equivalence (Mandal, 2018). Given the fact that any language has its own characteristics and is bound to the specific culture, it is impossible to achieve absolute equivalence (M. Baker, 2011; Mandal, 2018). Instead of seeking lexical equivalence, researchers now tend to prefer conceptual equivalence, which emphasises that the target language should reflect the concepts or ideas of the source language (Chen & Boore, 2009; Squires, 2009). To ensure that the translated words I used retained the original meaning, I also included the original Chinese texts after the translation of important terminology, as well as Chinese sayings and phrases, and provided some background information.

After these initial translations, back-translation was carried out. This means to translate texts from the target language back to the source language, to ensure the credibility and confirmability of translation (Esposito, 2001; Chen & Boore, 2009; Mandal, 2018). I selected some important parts of my translation and asked two fellow Chinese-English bilingual researchers (also PhD students in the School of Education) to undertake the back-translation. Then, the comparison of the original texts and translated texts led to further revision of some words and expressions in English. Finally, the translated texts presented for this thesis were reviewed and refined by my supervisor and a professional proofreader who are both native English speakers.

4.6.4 Data analysis software: Nvivo

Throughout the process of data analysis, another key concern is the choice of computer software. There are a wide range of computer programmes used for qualitative data analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Flick, 2018). All these programmes provide similar functions, so

the decision on which programme to use typically depends on its availability and the recommendations of other researchers in the faculty (Flick, 2018). The University of Sheffield provides the latest version of Nvivo and also organises a series of workshops and courses to train researchers to use Nvivo. The majority of researchers in my faculty reported positive experiences of using Nvivo and considered it an effective and efficient tool to manage qualitative data. Due to these considerations, I chose Nvivo to help me organise and analyse data. Nvivo facilitated my data analysis in the following ways:

- Systematic storage and organisation of data and files. Nvivo supports different languages and forms of data and allows researchers to ascribe them to specific files and indexes (Cohen et al., 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

- Retrieval and review of codes and the coded data. With Nvivo, it is easy to see what code is assigned to what text and check whether the code can convey the meaning of the coded data segment (Cohen et al., 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018), so I could easily compare the codes and themes, as well as the similarities and differences of the content under one code or theme.

- Display relations between codes. The data analysis steps set out above describe how to form data into codes and then combine the codes into broader themes. The hierarchical organisation of codes makes clearer the relationships between the codes and how themes develop from these codes (Cohen et al., 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Nvivo has powerful functionality but it must be borne in mind that the software merely processes information; it is still the researcher who analyses and makes sense of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Cohen et al., 2018; Flick, 2018). Throughout the research process, I stayed close to the data and used other tools to facilitate analysis and interpretation, including notes on Microsoft Excel and Word as well as paper materials.

4.7 Research quality and generalisability

In any research, it is vital for researchers to ensure that the findings are as sound as possible. In other words, data must be collected and analysed in a reliable and valid manner (Cohen et al., 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Franklin & Ballan, 2001). This section summarises the

strategies I used to improve the quality of research data.

Driven by the basic assumption that people make sense of phenomena in multiple ways, for this study I collected qualitative data through personal interactions with participants. However, one issue arising is the difficulty of claiming that participants present their authentic voices or experiences in front of the researcher (Wellington, 2015). One common strategy to address this challenge is to spend an extended period of time in the field and with participants (Creswell, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Franklin & Ballan, 2001) because 'the more experience that a researcher has with participants in their settings, the more accurate or valid will be the findings' (Creswell, 2014, p.352). Table 4.2 (p.98) outlines the timeline of research. At each school, I did my best to invest time building rapport with participants and I continued to collect data until either there was no more new information or no further data could be accessed due to practical constraints (see section 4.5.3). Another strategy I used to ensure that I had accurately grasped participants' views and experiences was to send them (with their agreement) an electronic copy of interview transcripts and summaries for 'member checking' (Creswell, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Also, I kept in touch with some participants during the analysis and writing-up process and consulted them if anything vague emerged in the data, and double checked my understanding of their meanings.

Triangulation, which relies on the convergence of different types of data from different research methods, was also adopted to help produce more comprehensive conclusions (Cohen et al., 2018; Flick, 2018; Franklin & Ballan, 2001). In this study, information gathered through interviews and focus groups was confirmed and complemented by the data obtained from observations and documents. Also, the involvement of different kindergartens and individuals further served to cross-check findings and provide a fuller understanding of the topic. Triangulation was also applied to the data analysis (Cohen et al., 2018; Flick, 2018). In this research, the main aim is to explore how preschool English LEPP is played out at the meso and micro levels, so the analysis focuses not only on each level or entity, but also on how different groups and different schools interacted with each other and how these interactions correlated with the other levels. Thus, a multi-perspective and multi-level picture of preschool English education is produced.

Last but not least, data quality concerns more than the process of data collection and analysis, it also involves the provision of rich and detailed information about sites and participants

when presenting data (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Franklin & Ballan, 2001). In line with 'thick description' principles, all relevant contextual issues have been elaborated, including the Chinese language environment, education administration system, and the background of English language education and preschool education in China. These information, together with details of the samples, helps other researchers to understand the unique context of the studied phenomenon and how the research findings are derived, so that they can assess the extent to which the findings are transferrable to their own research settings (Creswell, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Franklin & Ballan, 2001). These matters relate to the principle of generalisation. Unlike quantitative research which aims to generalise the findings in one study to other relevant settings and populations, the value of qualitative research lies in the understanding of behaviour, values and beliefs in the specific context under study (Bryman, 2012; Creswell, 2014). However, some researchers point out that qualitative research findings may also be generalised to some extent by including multiple sites and studying their particularities (Cohen et al., 2018; Creswell, 2014). In my own research, I hope that the inclusion of multiple research sites and participants will yield findings that shed light on similar situations in different societies, but I do not intend to generalise research findings to other contexts. In fact, whether and how the findings can be transferred into other contexts is not my decision but depends on the degree of similarities between the two contexts (Franklin & Ballan, 2001).

4.8 Ethical considerations

Ethics play an important part in research. They address a set of moral principles and procedures that protect those who are involved in the study and are concerned with every stage and step, from searching for a topic to reporting the data and publishing the study (Cohen et al., 2018; Matthews & Ross, 2010; Wellington, 2015). The section below highlights some ethical considerations that I have taken into account when conducting this research.

Abiding by ethical rules and guidance set by the University of Sheffield, this study was approved by the university and undertaken on the basis of informed consent, which means that all participants are capable and free to make decisions on whether to take part in the research and are given full information about the research and understand what they consent to (Cohen et al., 2018; Flick, 2018). The process for gaining access and consent from schools

and individuals has been described in detail in section 4.5.3. When contacting participants, I explained to them what rights they had during the research and gave them ample time to make decisions (Bryman, 2012; Cohen et al., 2018; Robson & McCartan, 2016). Given the young age of the children, I gained consent from their parents as well as the children themselves. No data was collected before obtaining participants' informed consent. It is worth noting that gaining consent is not a one-time event, but an ongoing process which needs to be renegotiated with participants at each stage of the research. Participants were free to withdraw from the research at any time and refuse to answer certain interview questions or provide certain information (Bryman, 2012; Cohen et al., 2018; Flick, 2018).

This research seeks to explore preschool English education by investigating kindergartens' English practices as described and explained by the different actors involved. In the course of the research, it was found that some kindergartens still provide English classes in spite of the government ban on preschool English teaching in these settings. With banned practices being the overall focus of the study, there was a risk that participants might be reluctant to take part, to express their candid opinions or to tell the whole truth about what was going on in the kindergartens (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Cohen et al., 2018; Zhang et al., 2019). There was also a risk that the research enquiries could make the participants feel uncomfortable for these reasons (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Cohen et al., 2018; Zhang et al., 2019). To manage these issues in a careful manner, researchers need to know the local culture very well (Cohen et al., 2018; Zhou & Nunes, 2013). In this respect, my identity as a Hefei 'local' gave me many advantages (see section 4.3; see also Braun & Clarke, 2013; Zhao, 2017). The Chinese culture has a strong relation-oriented dimension, which means personal networks ('guanxi', 关系) play an important role in building relationships of mutual trust (Cui, 2015; Zhou & Nunes, 2013). In research conducted in China, recruitment strategies commonly rely at least partly on personal connections (Cui, 2015; Zhou & Nunes, 2013). For my study, I approached education officials and certain kindergarten headteachers through my family and friends (see section 4.4.1). These links helped participants engage with the process and gain a better understanding of my research, making it easier to establish strong foundations of trust (Cui, 2015; Zhou & Nunes, 2013). To preserve this trusting relationship and obtain valid data, it was also important to conduct the research with integrity (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Before and during data collection, I continued to discuss my research and its procedures with participants, kept lines of communication open, and responded promptly to any queries or concerns they had. These detailed communications helped participants fully

understand the research procedures to be followed and the potential risks and benefits of participation (Bryman, 2012; Cohen et al., 2018). With participants' permission, all research data was collected and recorded in an overt manner, so that each participant could 'decide what they wish to have on the record' (Sanjari et al., 2014, p.4). After completing the research interviews and observations, I sent each participant the relevant field notes and interview transcripts (if they wished to see them) for further checking.

Ethical considerations also include the influence of power imbalance, especially when researching with children (BERA, 2018; Cohen et al., 2018). Obviously, I am much older than the participating children and they may have perceived me as superior. An effective strategy to help minimise the potential adverse effects of the power imbalance is to establish rapport and trust with participants (Cohen et al., 2018). For example, at break time I often played with the children and let them lead the play, such as taking pictures or reading a book. These interactions helped the children become more and more familiar and comfortable with me. Also, instead of individual interviews, I opted for focus group interviews to help empower the children 'to make comments in their own words, while being stimulated by thoughts and comments of others in the group' (Robson & McCartan, 2016, p.299). As the researcher conducting these focus groups, my role was more like a facilitator who was responsible for asking questions and guiding the discussion, but even more importantly I created and facilitated a comfortable environment that enabled participants to make decisions and actively share their views and experiences (Braun & Clark, 2013; Bryman, 2012; Matthews & Ross, 2010). All focus groups were undertaken in the children's own classrooms, and to help them feel relaxed, they could decide where to sit.

Power imbalances can also exist with adult participants, because different groups of participants may view the researcher in different ways (Cohen et al., 2018; Matthews & Ross, 2010). As a doctoral student, I might be regarded as a knowledgeable person in language education, which may give the impression of a higher-status position, especially when working with teachers and parents. However, in terms of work experience and social status, I might be seen as holding an inferior position. Regardless of the position, the typical strategies to address power asymmetries are similar to those applicable to working with children: make the research purposes clear, build a sound relationship, create a welcoming and non-threatening environment (Karnieli-Miller et al., 2009; Råheim et al., 2016), and enable 'participants to have power over decision making in the research' (Cohen et al., 2018,

p.136). Therefore, across the entire process, I maintained a modest demeanour, actively sought participants' suggestions and opinions about how to conduct the research, and reminded them not to hesitate to tell me if any of my words or behaviours affected their work or state of mind. When doing the interviews, I tried my best not to play an overly-leading role or to overload participants with questions (Bryman, 2012; Robson & McCartan, 2016). I worked through the questions as naturally as possible to make participants feel comfortable and free to share their opinions and discuss topics of interest to them. After completing the research, I prepared small gifts for participants and assured them they were free to contact me if there were any queries.

Furthermore, to protect participants' privacy and reduce the potential for harm, ethical guidelines require confidentiality and anonymity (Bryman, 2012; Cohen et al., 2018; Flick, 2018). Throughout the entire research process, I was very careful not to discuss or pass on concrete information that might identify individual participants or schools to others. All the data, which included pictures, observation field notes, interview recordings and transcripts, were stored in my password-protected computer and no other persons were allowed access to these original sources. Also, all faces in the photographs taken during the fieldwork were blurred and all identifying personal information was removed or anonymised.

4.9 Chapter summary

In summary, this study is grounded in qualitative research within the interpretivism paradigm and explores English LPP for preschool education in the current Chinese context. In order to obtain rich, valid and reliable data from multiple settings, five kindergartens in Hefei were recruited and the participants included teachers, headteachers, children and parents. Two Hefei education officials also were involved. The rationale for participant selection was described in detail. Within each school, data was gathered using different research methods and analysed thematically using Nvivo software. The data complemented and verified each other, combining to form a multi-perspective picture of preschool English LEPP across different levels. Throughout the research process, I maintained a reflexive attitude towards my personal influence in the research and endeavoured to create a positive and comfortable environment for participants (Bryman, 2012; Cohen et al., 2018; Robson & McCartan, 2016). I made sure that all stages of the research were conducted with honesty, integrity and minimal potential risk. Findings derived from the collected data are presented and discussed

in the next chapters.

Chapter 5 Findings and analysis at the meso level

In light of the multi-level process of LEPP and the China's education administration system, this research divides preschool English LEPP into three levels: macro (nation), meso (district) and micro (school). At the macro level, 'schoolification' generally has been officially banned since the 1980s through various national policies, on the grounds that it interferes negatively with young children's physical and mental development. However, this ban did not attract much attention until the last decade (see section 2.3). In 2011 and 2018, the MOE issued two notices on the special management of schoolification in kindergartens, which strictly prohibited the teaching of English and other primary-oriented courses. In view of this top-down reform, this chapter aims to give a detailed account of the research findings at the meso level.

Standing between abstract guidelines at the macro level and the very specific, context-dependent factors at the micro level, the meso level plays an important role in understanding the multi-level process of policy transfer (Higgins & Brady, 2016; Johnson, 2013; Evans & Davies, 1999). In this research, the meso level refers to the local education authorities in Hefei. At this level, two education officials, who are specifically in charge of local preschool education, participated in the research interviews. Their interviews were transcribed into texts word by word, and then coded and analysed using Nvivo software. In order to deepen the understanding of the officials' words, relevant documents at different government levels were also reviewed. Drawing on these data, this section describes the overall picture of preschool education in Hefei, the role and scope of local education authorities, and the participating officials' perceptions and management of preschool English language education.

5.1 The development of preschool education in Hefei

Within the broad categorisation of public and private kindergartens, currently there are three types of kindergartens in China: public kindergartens, public-interest private kindergartens and non–public-interest private kindergartens (see section 1.2). The first two types together are known as public-interest kindergartens which are fully or partly funded by the government and charge lower fees than non–public-interest kindergartens. In accordance with the national priority of expanding access to affordable kindergartens, the two officials

explained that their main work focus in recent years has been on developing public-interest kindergartens. In 2015, only 20% of kindergartens were public, but that percentage has now almost doubled. By July 2019, there were 301,000 children studying in 1221 kindergartens in Hefei. Among these, 479 public kindergartens held 116,000 children, and 562 public-interest private kindergartens had 100,000 children (see Table 5.1). The coverage rate[17] of public kindergartens and public-interest kindergartens in 2019 had increased by 13.9% and 11.5% respectively, compared with the 2018 figures (Hefei People's Political Consultative Conference, 2019).

Table 5.1 Number and percentage of different types of kindergartens and students in Hefei in 2019

| | | Public | Private | | Total |
			Public-interest	Non–public-interest	
Kindergartens	Number	479	562	180	1221
	Percentage	39.23	46.03	14.74	100
Students enrolled in kindergartens	Number	116,000	100,000	85,000	301,000
	Percentage	38.54	33.22	28.24	100

Source: Hefei People's Political Consultative Conference (2019)

The rising number of public-interest kindergartens illustrates governments' increasing efforts and financial investment in developing preschool education, and their determination to universalise preschool provision. However, the change in the structure of this provision does not alter the government's long-term strategy since the 1970s of co-developing both public and private kindergartens (CPC Central Committee & State Council, 2018; State Council, 2010a, 2010b; see also section 7.2). In terms of the broad public/private categorisation, private settings still make up the majority of kindergarten numbers and student numbers. By July 2019, private kindergartens accounted for 60.77% of total kindergartens in Hefei (see Table 5.1). All kindergartens, regardless of type, are directly administered by local education authorities (Standing Committee of National People's Congress, 2015; MOE, 1989).

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[17] Coverage rate refers to the proportion of young children enrolled in different types of kindergarten.

5.2 The role of local education authorities

In China's education administration system (see section 1.3), the MOE under the leadership of central government is responsible for setting the national frameworks and goals in the education sector, while the local education authorities are in charge of establishing local plans in accordance with macro-level directions and regional development strategies, and governance and management of local schools (Standing Committee of National People's Congress, 2015; OECD, 2016a). This central-local relationship on the one hand ensures that national policies take effect at the local level, but on the other hand also allows local authorities a degree of autonomy to take into account local factors.

Chiming with Shi's (2016) findings, the two officials in the present research regarded 'the top-down language policymaking as natural and conventional' (p. 124) and saw their role as being supporters and implementers of macro planning and policy. The officials introduced that in the field of preschool education, there are several principal documents guiding the management of kindergartens in all regions: *Regulations on Kindergarten Management* (MOE, 1989), *Guidelines for Kindergarten Education (Trial)* (MOE, 2001d), *Early Learning and Development Guidelines for Children aged 3 to 6 years* (MOE, 2012a), *State Council's Several Opinions on Developing Preschool Education at the Current Stage* (State Council, 2010b). According to these macro-level guidelines, there are two types of approaches to local planning and policy. One approach is to adjust macro policies so that they fit the local situation and can be put into practice effectively. Officer A elaborated an example of policy enactment down the levels within this central-local relationship. In July 2018, a notice was issued at the national level by the MOE to launch an initiative addressing schoolification in kindergartens. In August 2018, the Education Department of Anhui Province issued a notice on the **implementation plan** for the initiative to address schoolification in regional kindergartens, and later that month the Education Bureau of Hefei Municipality issued its own notice of the **implementation plan** for this initiative in Hefei kindergartens. A reading of these documents makes it clear that the macro-level policies set general objectives while the provincial and municipal policies involve more detailed measures for how to implement the higher level's policies to fit local contexts (OECD, 2016a).

Another approach to local planning and policy is to initiate and implement change at the

local level without macro-level direction, but the key principles of these local reforms must be broadly consistent with macro guidelines and regulations. With regard to schoolification, an influential local policy in Hefei and in the wider province is the *Emergent Notice of Banning Kindergartens from Using Textbooks and Other Issues* (hereafter *Emergent Notice*) set by the Education Department of Anhui Province in 2009. This notice stipulated that all types of kindergartens must strictly prevent schoolification in order to protect the natural course of children's physical and mental development. Accordingly, no kindergartens are permitted to have Montessori classes, **foreign language classes**, mathematics classes and so on. This document prompted nationwide discussions (Wang, 2009) and had a huge impact on local preschool education. Many public and private kindergartens stopped English language education at that time (see section 6.2). At the time of writing, this policy is still in effect and has become the principal regulation discussed in the debate on the English ban in Hefei. After local policies arrive at schools, the education authorities keep a close watch on implementation, and if any important issues are found, they are referred to the higher-level authorities.

5.3 Officials' perceptions of preschool English language education

Both officials taking part in this study regard themselves as implementers of macro planning and policy, so it is not surprising to learn that they are clearly supportive of the reforms to prevent schoolification. Their interpretations of schoolifictaion are as follows:

> What is schoolification? It refers to teaching primary-level knowledge in advance and organising activity in a primary-level way. This is wrong. Teachers can ask students to recite poems and sing songs, but pinyin, abstract numbers, writing and **English, especially English, are seen as the typical markers of primary-level education.** Now there are still some kindergartens that try to attract parents' attention by providing Chinese-English bilingual education. With regard to this, we strongly disagree. **All kinds of English teaching and activities are not allowed in kindergartens**. As an administrative department, we do not allow kindergartens' names to include the word 'bilingual'. (Official A)

> The kindergarten curriculum is set for children aged 3-6 years old. **Anything that is taught in primary schools and is advanced in kindergartens, is schoolification**…

We must understand and respect children's unique developmental patterns. At preschool age, we should create an environment full of meaningful play and exploration. We should support children to gain first-hand life experiences and knowledge through their real-life activities, sensory activities and games. If they are treated like primary school children and required to learn primary knowledge in advance, their interest and confidence in learning will be undermined. In the long run, it is unfavourable to their personal growth and future development. (Official B)

The quotes address two key indicators of schoolification: primary-level knowledge and primary-level teaching methods. English, as a primary-level subject, is regarded as a typical symbol of schoolification. The officials repeatedly emphasised in their interviews that to remove schoolification is to respect children's natural developmental patterns and return childhood to them. An early start in acquiring primary-level knowledge and skills will negatively affect children's interest in learning, bring undue mental burden and psychological pressure, and interfere with teaching programmes in primary schools (see also MOE, 2011b, 2018). Further, the officials argued that even without the anti-schoolification regulation, from their own personal perspectives, they preferred English not to be taught in kindergartens for two main reasons. First, there are too few sufficiently qualified English teachers in kindergartens and few opportunities to speak English in daily life (see section 6.8). Second, a later start to learning does not negatively impact on English attainment. To back up their opinions, both participating officials took the examples of their own children or their friends' children who did not start learning English until primary school or even the secondary level, but whose English ability was not worse than their peers. Thus, the officials concluded that work ethic and learning habits are more important than starting age. Guided by this understanding, they are strongly opposed to any type of kindergarten offering any form of English language education.

5.4 The management measures for preschool English language education

With their strong personal and formal position against preschool English education, the officials regarded English provision as an important focus in the investigation of schoolification. With respect to the management and oversight of different types of kindergartens, one issue that this study is specifically concerned with is the degree of kindergarten autonomy and government control. It is generally agreed that private schools

should have more autonomy in recruiting students and teachers, developing kindergarten curricula and managing kindergarten students and assets (Guo, 2015; Qi, 2017; Yue & Song, 2015), but there are no clear boundaries for authority and autonomy as between government and private schools (Liu, 2003; Wang, 2015). On this issue, the participating officials explained that private kindergartens basically operate independently and bear responsibility for their gains and losses, but that all school operations are subject to government policies and supervision by the local education authorities. This opinion was clearly expressed in their interviews:

> All types of kindergartens should follow the government policies and provide good care and education for children… Public and private kindergartens both take an important role in preschool education. (Official A)

> Removing schoolification is a basic principle that all public and private kindergartens should abide by. As the local education authorities, we are responsible for supervising the kindergartens to put policies into practice and providing support for the kindergartens. (Official B)

The above quotes align with the *Measures for the Administration of Private Kindergartens (Trial)* issued by the Education Department of Anhui Province (2006), which stipulates:

> Article 24: Education authorities at different governmental levels should strengthen the leadership and management of private kindergartens and include them under the centralised management of basic education. **Following the principles of unified planning, unified arrangement, unified inspection and unified assessment, private kindergartens should be treated the same as public kindergartens** in terms of regular inspection and assessment, teaching and research activities, professional training, and kindergarten appraisal. **Private kindergartens should actively accept the leadership, management and guidance of education authorities** and actively participate in activities organised by education authorities, such as professional learning, meetings, training and inspection. (Education Department of Anhui Province, 2006, p.5)

In accordance with this principle of unified management, the officials introduced that there are three main strategies for regulating preschool English education and schoolification more

broadly. Among these, the most important strategy is the annual inspection of kindergarten settings. In 2018, the Education Bureau of Hefei Municipality officially added 'schoolification' as an item in the rejection criteria, which means that if any sign of primary-level education is identified at any kindergarten, it will fail the annual inspection. The inspection results are publicly reported. The failed schools are asked to rectify within a certain period and the principal leaders are investigated; simultaneously, these schools cannot participate in any performance appraisal conducted by education authorities. Apart from annual inspections, routine inspections may take place at any kindergarten at any time and if signs of schoolification are detected at any kindergarten, that setting will fail the annual inspection.

The second strategy used by local authorities is to delegate some of their supervision power to key kindergartens which are mainly public kindergartens but also include some public-interest private kindergartens. One key kindergarten is typically responsible for about 10 other kindergartens in the same district. Every month, the key kindergarten inspects each of their supervised kindergartens and gives them reasonable suggestions on how to remove schoolification, as well as other aspects of school management and operation (see section 6.5.1). Also, the key kindergartens are funded by the local education authorities to manage and run professional development training and meetings in the supervised kindergartens.

The third approach is to encourage the public to take part in the oversight of kindergartens. The local education authorities at different levels have opened specific telephone hotlines and email addresses for the public to report any issues of concern regarding schoolification in kindergartens (Education Bureau of Hefei Municipality, 2018). After receiving such a tip-off, the education authorities will send officers to check the situation and if the reported problem does exist, an appropriate penalty will be applied.

5.5 Challenges in managing kindergartens

With the concerted strategies and efforts to tackle schoolification, the officials reflected in their interviews that the situation in public kindergartens has improved and is now better than ever before, but in the private sector the strategies do not work as well. At the micro level, private kindergartens have responded with careful countermeasures to deal with the official strategies (see section 6.5.2). And at the meso level, there are also some management

challenges.

In the context of managing the onerous number of kindergartens, Official A said that the most effective regulatory measure is financial allocation, because financial aid to a kindergarten can be reduced or ceased upon violation of the rules. Due to this deterrent, the majority of public-interest kindergartens, especially public kindergartens, rigorously follow government regulations and determinedly prevent schoolification. However, in the case of private kindergartens which are majorly independent of government finance, the local education authorities have less control even though these settings are also required to adhere to government policies in the same way as public kindergartens. Moreover, at the local authority level, personnel shortages and resource constraints exacerbate the difficulties in overseeing private kindergartens and compelling compliance (Wang, 2015; Zhu, 2013). The officials introduced that on average, in each district of Hefei, two to three education officials are in charge of over one hundred kindergartens. This ratio means that it is not possible for the officials to keep a close eye on every kindergarten all of the time. Even with key kindergartens taking some responsibility for governing and guiding other kindergartens, it is still challenging to keep up with the day-to-day operational management in each kindergarten. Moreover, besides the registered kindergartens, there are other early childhood settings such as day care for children under three years of age, informal schools and unlicensed kindergartens which are also under the purview of education authorities. In these circumstances, if no interested stakeholders (e.g., parents) have reported a breach of the rules prompting an inspection or investigation, it is hard for officials to know what is happening at all times in every kindergarten. What is worse, even if the officials do find breaches and issue rectifying notices to kindergartens who have English classes, this may still not work, because:

> The education authority is to provide educational instruction and supervision, but we do not have enforcement authority, so even if we issue Notification of Rectification to schools, they may ignore it. (Official A)

In a similar vein, Official B also mentioned that the problem of sufficient authority is a hurdle to overcome in the regulation of private kindergartens:

> There are many challenges in supervising private kindergartens… In addition to the

education authority, there are multiple government departments that have responsibility for regulating private kindergartens… When examining private kindergartens, it usually requires different government departments to work together, so we cannot make decisions by ourselves.

The *Measures for the Administration of Private Kindergartens (Trial)* (Education Department of Anhui Province, 2006) and *Regulations on Kindergarten Management* (MOE, 1989) both stipulate that education authorities can require a kindergarten to rectify problems within a time limit, to stop new enrolments, and even cancel the kindergarten's licence to run. However, in practice, without enforcement authority, education departments can only give non-compulsory suggestions and warnings to kindergartens. As a result, the rectification notices may amount to mere scraps of paper. This phenomenon is not unique to Hefei, but a prevalent issue across China. As reported, none of the education authorities in China's 31 provinces have specific law enforcement powers or agency, so it is usually multiple government authorities acting jointly who share the enforcement of educational matters (Miao, 2018). In Zheng's (2013) research, it was found that there are over 10 government authorities that are responsible for regulating private kindergartens, but there is a lack of effective communication and division of responsibility among them. In this complex framework, there is no consensus even on which department actually has the authority to close one private kindergarten (Miao, 2018; Zheng, 2013). With regard to this problem, the MOE (2019c) has urged an expedited pace in building an authoritative and efficient education management structure which clearly sets out the rights and responsibilities of different government bodies at different levels. This MOE notice also stated that local education authorities are the main bodies responsible for law enforcement administration in the education sector, and local people's government should take the leading role in the sharing of responsibility with other authorities for educational work (MOE, 2019c).

Overall, constrained by insufficient personnel, funding and authority, there has not been a sound and effective mechanism for supervising preschool education and enforcing regulations (Hong & Hua, 2015; Wang, 2015; Zhu, 2013). More importantly, the officials are also concerned that forcing private kindergartens which are in breach of schoolification rules to shut down or be transformed into public-interest kindergartens will increase the government's financial burden and make it more difficult to achieve the aim of

universalising preschool education. As a result, even though education officials are aware that some kindergartens still offer English lessons, on many occasions they choose to 'turn a blind eye' to the situation.

5.6 Future plans

Looking to the future, the officials said that the first priority for preschool education will still be developing public-interest kindergartens. As broad coverage and the minimum level of provision becomes firmly established for the preschool sector, local education authorities will consider focusing attention on encouraging kindergartens, especially private kindergartens, to develop in more diversified ways to meet diverse educational needs, but currently there are no such formal plans and it is hard to estimate how diversified the sector will develop. In the near future, the officials' supervision of kindergartens on schoolification matters will continue to be strengthened. In the interviews, the two officials expressed the following views:

> There is no doubt that we will further strengthen our supervision and inspection in relation to schoolification. We will provide more support for kindergartens and guide them to remove schoolification from kindergartens. (Official A)

> We will not relax the supervision of schoolification… With more and more public-interest kindergartens established, a general structure of the sector will be formed which is public kindergarten-led, public interest kindergarten-dominated but also includes non–public-interest private kindergartens. The government influence on kindergartens will further increase. (Official B)

In addition to more efforts made on the preschool level, the official oversight at primary education level will also be strengthened to help tackle schoolification. Due to the long-standing tradition of teaching primary-level material in kindergartens (see section 2.3.1), it is common to see that primary school teachers do not teach from the beginning of the curriculum, starting with the foundations of a subject (J. Zhang, 2014). Some primary schools even hold entrance tests to select students or placement tests to decide which class a student should initially enter (Luo, 2013). To address these issues, the officials in their future work will investigate whether 'zero-start teaching' is implemented in the first grade of

primary schools according to the national curriculum standard. They will also look out for prohibited practices including whether primary schools compress class time, provide advanced teaching inappropriately, organise knowledge ability tests for enrolment, and whether competition results and certificates affect enrolment. If any of these practices are observed, the headteachers or relevant teachers shall be investigated for legal responsibility (Education Bureau of Hefei Municipality, 2018; MOE, 2018).

More efforts will also be made on educating families about schoolification. As a child's primary social group, the family has great influence on the child's learning and socialisation (Cohen & Anders, 2020). The participating education officials expressed the view that without family support and compliance, efforts to stop schoolification are hamstrung because even if official can regulate all kindergartens to stop English language education or other kinds of primary-school level education, parents can still require their children to have a number of extracurricular classes. In a survey on Shanghai early education (0 to 6 years), it was found that on average every child attended two extracurricular classes for around two hours a week; the average annual family spending on extracurricular learning was 17,832 yuan (£2,055) (Guo & Zhao, 2017). In Hefei, there is no equivalent survey on this phenomenon, but the research participants (as well as parents I know personally) all reported that it is very common to send children to attend extracurricular classes. Among these, English lessons are very popular. In shopping and residential districts, various early childhood English training centres have been booming in recent years. In the eyes of the participating officials, this phenomenon originates from parents' high expectations for children's academic achievement and has negative influence on children's' long-term development. Therefore, with the goal of contributing to a sound and happy social environment for children, the officials plan to further encourage kindergartens, primary schools and communities to organise more online and off-line lectures and trainings for parents to help them understand the different education targets for children at different ages and stages, and to understand the adverse effects of schoolification. Meanwhile, inspections of early childhood training centres will also be tightened and more trainings will be offered to kindergarten headteachers and teachers.

Through these combined efforts and initiatives, it is expected that family education, kindergarten education, primary school education, and social education will be more aligned and cooperative, and that schoolification practices including preschool English language

education will be effectively curbed and prevented.

5.7 Chapter summary

To sum up, local education authorities play a principal role in the development of preschool education, by taking direct responsibility for making local policies and having oversight of the operation of all kindergartens (Standing Committee of National People's Congress, 2015; OECD, 2016a). As local policy makers, they set boundaries on what is considered educationally normal or feasible (Johnson, 2013). In general, the attitudes of local officials towards English education and schoolification are aligned with the macro policies, asserting that it is too early to provide children with English classes in kindergarten. In order to curb this phenomenon, multiple measures have been or will be taken and the leading role of government has been consolidated. However, constrained by some practical and administrative factors, there has not been an effective system within the local education authorities to regulate English language education in all kindergartens. To some extent, private schools, particularly non–public-interest private schools, are outside the control of local education authorities (Zheng, 2013; Zhu, 2013; Wang, 2015). Putting all these strands together, a major finding at the meso level is the disparity between what is supposed to happen and what is actually happening on the ground. Behind the seemingly strict regulation on English language education, there is still some underlying implementation room. This state of affairs highlights the fact that LEPP, as a multi-level process, is greatly influenced by contextual factors at the local level (Chua & Baldauf, 2011; Johnson, 2013; Liddicoat & Taylor-Leech, 2014). It also underscores the necessity to examine both policy statements and policy practices at the same time (Johnson, 2013; Schiffman, 1996). The next chapter will explore how the local policy context identified in this chapter affects different kindergartens' responses to the ban on English language education.

Chapter 6 Findings and analysis at the micro level

At the micro level, five kindergartens took part in the research. To gain the richest possible data, a range of methods was adopted: document review, one-to-one interviews, focus groups, and observations. For easy categorisation and access, all data collected in one school was stored in an individual file on a secure computer. All the interview recordings were transcribed word by word and then uploaded to Nvivo together with observation notes. Using Nvivo, I first coded raw data line by line, and then through a process of comparisons and contrasts, the similar codes were selected and grouped into main themes (see section 4.6). Based on the collected data, this section mainly aims to answer: 1) how public and private kindergartens respond to the policy on removing English language education from kindergartens; 2) how they handle the relationship with education authorities; 3) how kindergarten actors perceive and engage in preschool English language education; and 4) how preschool English language education will develop and what challenges have been met.

6.1 Profiles of the participant kindergartens

Of the five participant kindergartens, two are public and three are private. All of them are located in the urban districts of Hefei.

Kindergarten A and Kindergarten B are both public kindergartens. Kindergarten A was established in the 1970s and now is one of the most prestigious public kindergartens in Hefei. It has about 20 classes across three age-grades, with about 30 students in each class. Compared with Kindergarten A, Kindergarten B is a relatively small and young school, set up in the 2010s and with over 200 students in nine classes. Despite its recent establishment, it has developed rapidly and is in the first rank of kindergartens in Hefei.

Kindergartens C, D and E are private kindergartens, among which Kindergarten C has the longest history, with over ten years. It is a public-interest private kindergarten that has six classes with about 20-30 students per class. Kindergarten D is a non–public-interest private school. As the newest kindergarten of all the participating settings, it also has the fewest students, with no more than 100 students in five classes. Kindergarten E, like Kindergarten D, is a non–public-interest private school, established in the early 2010s and is promoted as a Chinese-English bilingual education setting. It is a chain school with its head office in

Beijing and dozens of other school sites throughout China. The class size and student numbers are similar to Kindergarten C.

Table 6.1 Profiles of the five participant kindergartens

	Type	Rank	Total number of classes in school	Establishment date
Kindergarten A	Public	Provincial first-rank	20	1970s
Kindergarten B	Public	Municipal first-rank	9	2010s
Kindergarten C	Public-interest private	Municipal first-rank	6	2000s
Kindergarten D	Non–public-interest private	None	5	2010s
Kindergarten E	Non–public-interest private	None	6	2010s

6.2 History of English language provision in the participant kindergartens

In China there has never been a statutory English curriculum in preschool education, but English provision has a long history and gathered momentum in the 2000s when the starting age of learning English was lowered to primary school stage, against the larger backdrop of China's increasing interconnection with the rest of the world (see section 2.2.3). For better understanding of how changing policy context affects kindergartens' English language education practices, this section gives a brief review of the history of English provision in the five participant kindergartens.

Kindergarten A used to have English classes taught by both local school teachers and foreign teachers, but since around 2009 when the Education Department of Anhui Province issued the *Emergent Notice* calling for kindergartens to stop offering English classes, all English lessons have been cancelled. Kindergarten B, since its establishment less than 10 years ago, has never provided English classes.

In a similar trajectory to Kindergarten A, Kindergarten C also cancelled English classes around 2009 and for the same reason, but the cessation lasted only a few years. Now English has been reintroduced to the school. Compared with the previous English language programmes, the frequency of English teaching has been reduced from daily to once a week

and the staff resource dedicated to English teaching has changed from one local Chinese teacher per class to only one foreign teacher for the entire school. These changes, the headteacher explained, came along with the shifting of the school's values from prioritising English language education to a bigger emphasis on students' physical development. English is still a part of the school's curriculum, but not as important as before.

Kindergarten D, as the newest kindergarten of the five schools, has not experienced many changes in English language provision since its establishment. However, one issue worth noting is the high turnover of English teachers. During my one-month visit, English teachers changed once, due to personal circumstances. These two teachers both took part in my research.

Similar to Kindergarten D, English language education in Kindergarten E has always been a part of the kindergarten's curriculum since its establishment, but in recent years there has been a change from foreign English teachers to local teachers. As Headteacher E explained, in 2017-2018, all English lessons across all classes and grades were delivered by a foreign English teacher who was deployed by the head office. In addition to the daily English teaching in each regular class, this foreign teacher offered a reading class which interested students could join if they liked. However, this teacher went back to her home country in 2018. Although the kindergarten tried hard to recruit a replacement full-time foreign English teacher directly rather than via the head office, the Administration of Foreign Experts Affairs in Hefei refused to issue working visas for such foreign teachers in kindergartens, in compliance with the ban on preschool English education. Now all English teaching duties in Kindergarten D are undertaken by local Chinese teachers.

In all, the history of English language education in the five kindergartens illustrates the influence of government planning and policy on the language practices in micro settings (Chua & Baldauf, 2011; Jones, 2012; Seals & Peyton, 2017). In Hefei, the year 2009 was a watershed year for preschool English language education. Influenced by the *Emergent Notice* released by the Education Department of Anhui Province (2009a), Kindergarten A and Kindergarten C both ceased English lessons. This policy was repeatedly mentioned during interviews by education officials and headteachers who explained that in the years after the policy was issued, almost all private and public kindergartens stopped teaching English. Since this policy, the top-down reform of curbing schoolification continues to mean

that English teaching is essentially banned. However, in recent years, some kindergartens, like Kindergarten C, have (re)introduced English classes. Regarding this phenomenon, headteachers reflected that in spite of the formal constraints on preschool English provision, the government inspections were not as strict as in earlier years. The two education officials did not explain this change directly in their interviews but they did address the administrative difficulties in regulating private kindergartens and how in recent years the main priority has been universalising preschool education (see section 5.1). These matters implicitly contribute to the different ways that kindergartens responded to the preschool English ban.

6.3 Current provision of English language education

To better understand the features of English language education in the participant kindergartens and the differences between them, this section groups the settings under the broad sub-headings of public kindergartens and private kindergartens.

6.3.1 Public kindergartens

As stated earlier, in the two public kindergartens English classes are no longer offered, but it is interesting to note that children can still be exposed to English in different ways. During the class observations at each public kindergarten, there was a reading zone with various books including several English and Chinese-English bilingual books (see p.129 Figure 6.1). Class teachers reported that these books were mainly brought in by the students themselves. Some children were often seen reading these English books during their free time (see Figure 6.1). Sometimes in class or in the break times, teachers would also play English songs that children like, such as Little Star and Jingle Bells.

Figure 6.1 Reading zone in two public kindergartens

In addition to the English language materials, English is used for some special occasions. For example, when singing the Happy Birthday song, children usually use Mandarin in the first round and English in the second round. The class teacher introduced that this has become like a custom for the children. In other more routine activities, teachers and students use Mandarin to communicate in the vast majority of the time, but English occasionally crops up in their conversations. In Kindergarten A, there was one teacher who liked to say some simple English words in the outdoor time. For instance, if students did not follow her instructions, she often shouted 'Oh my God'; and when students were required to stand in a line, both children and teachers would habitually say 'one, two, three' together. This teacher explained to me that these very common English words and phrases were known by many children from a young age, and she used the words for fun and for drawing children's attention to her instructions.

Likewise, in Kindergarten B, teachers and students sometimes use English as well. One afternoon, students were playing a LEGO game, and after they finished the construction, the teacher asked them to describe what patterns they had made. Several children made the letters shown in Figure 6.2 (p. 130) and when the teacher asked them what these letters were, students read them in English pronunciation and then the teacher did the same in response. In this process, no one in the class said the names of the letters in pinyin pronunciation (see footnote 13, p.29). Another occasion at Kindergarten B that hugely impressed me involved a story activity. Every day before lunch time, the teacher would ask one child to tell a short

story in front of the whole class. Children were very eager to take part in this activity and would prepare the story in advance at home. One day, a child took her turn and to everyone's surprise, she told a story in English and then to help others understand it, she translated it into Chinese. After she finished the story, every teacher and student applauded loudly and gave the child high praise for her performance. The teacher jokingly said she was very curious about who would be the next one to tell a story in English.

Figure 6.2 LEGO letters students made in class

Therefore, having no formal English classes does not necessarily mean having an English-free environment. English words and phrases still occasionally appear in class activities and environments. For one thing, this reflects the effect of the spread of English into our daily life (Gil & Adamson, 2011; Zou & Zhang, 2011), and for another, it illustrates schools' welcoming attitudes towards the English language (see section 6.4.1).

6.3.2 Private kindergartens

Unlike the public kindergartens, English classes are common in the private kindergartens (Wang & Mi, 2014; Wei, 2015). All three private kindergartens that participated in this research offer English classes, but they are not provided in the same way.

6.3.2.1 English teachers

The review of English LEPP in East Asia in section 3.2.3 reveals a trend across different regions and education levels for hiring foreign English teachers rather than local ones. This

preference is also apparent in this research. It is commonly agreed by headteachers, parents and local English teachers that English is better taught by foreign teachers, even if they are not native English speakers. This is because compared with Chinese teachers, they have more opportunities to speak English with others and some of them also take EMI courses in the universities, so they usually have better English fluency and accuracy. Secondly, it is because foreign English speakers, with their different faces and cultural backgrounds, are thought to be better at sparking children's interest in English, and they typically are more animated, easy-going and approachable than the local teachers (see also Ding & Wang, 2019; Fang et al., 2010; Hsieh, 2006). Lastly, the preference for foreign English teachers is also due to the increasing number of foreigners in Hefei. According to an annual poll launched by the State Administration of Foreign Experts Affairs in 2018, Hefei alongside Shanghai and Beijing have been ranked as the three most attractive cities for foreigners to live in China (Ma & Lu, 2019). In 2018, about 5000 foreigners were living in Hefei, an increase of 6% on the previous year (Hefei Evening News, 2019). This change has been felt keenly by the foreign English teachers in this study, as one of them said:

> When I first arrived in Hefei in 2012, I knew almost every foreigner. At that time, there were maybe 250 to 300 foreigners. Everyone knew everyone, but now, there are too many…. In these years, you can see schools want foreign teachers who are really educated, who have certain teaching experiences. (English teacher D1)

In this context, Kindergarten C and Kindergarten D currently hire part-time foreign teachers to teach English. In total, three foreign English teachers, one in Kindergarten C and two in Kindergarten D took part in this research. Teacher C comes from Australia and was a PhD student while the two teachers in Kindergarten D come from Portugal and the USA respectively and were both masters students. None of these English teachers majored in English in college, but two of them have TEFL (teaching English as a foreign language) qualifications and all of them have more than one year's experience of teaching English (see p.132 Table 6.2).

In Kindergarten E, all English classes are taught by full-time local Chinese teachers who have other teaching duties in Chinese as well as the English lessons. The teacher who joined in this research majored in English in college and has a secondary school teaching certificate granted by the MOE. Before taking her job in Kindergarten E, she worked as a full-time

English teacher in an English training centre. By the time I did the fieldwork, she had been with Kindergarten E for about eight years. The profiles of the four English teachers are summarised in Table 6.2.

Table 6.2 Profiles of the English teachers

	Nationality	Status	Teaching classes	Educational background	Years of teaching English	English teaching certificate
Teacher C	Australian	Part-time	All classes	A PhD student in management	> two years	TEFL
Teacher D1	Portuguese	Part-time	All classes	A master's student in management	> one year	None
Teacher D2	American	Part-time	All classes	A master's student in medicine	Four years	TEFL
Teacher E	Chinese	Full-time	A higher class	A college degree in English language	> ten years	Teaching certificate for secondary school

Note: The symbol > means more than

6.3.2.2 English teaching hours and classes

In all participating kindergartens, children taking higher classes usually arrive at kindergartens at 8:00a.m. and leave for home at about 4:30p.m., and some children also attend after-school classes. English classes are usually carried out in the normal curricular time.

In Kindergarten C and Kindergarten D, English across all classes is taught by one foreign teacher. These foreign teachers only come to kindergartens when they have classes. The major difference between these two schools is that Kindergarten C has only one English lesson per class per week while there are two lessons per week in Kindergarten D. On the designated English teaching days in both kindergartens, English teachers usually start with lessons for the higher classes, then the middle classes and lastly to the lower classes. Lesson duration is about 25-30 minutes in the higher and middle classes and 15-20 minutes in the low-level classes. Similar to Kindergarten C and Kindergarten D, English teaching in Kindergarten E covers all classes at different age levels, but it is taught by local teachers every day. In the class that I observed, the English lesson lasted about 20-30 minutes before lunch time. Even so, the total amount of English lesson time still accounts for a very small proportion of the children's daily life in kindergarten. The headteachers explained that,

unlike international kindergartens where English is the main language for daily communication, the rationale for English teaching in the participant kindergartens is to help children understand the diversity of languages and cultures in the world, and to explore their interest in learning English (see also Wang, 2014; Yang, 2017). So, there is no perceived need to allocate too much time to English classes and this perception is also widely held by English teachers and parents. The main curriculum of each participant school is designed fundamentally in accordance with the *Guidelines for Kindergarten Education (Trial)* issued by the MOE (2001d).

6.3.2.3 English teaching materials, contents and methods

With the general aim of supporting children's English learning, various teaching materials are used in English classes but provision of these resources differs between settings.

In Kindergarten C, all teaching materials, which included cards, videos and songs, were prepared by the teacher himself (see p.134 Figure 6.3). Regarding this arrangement, Headteacher C explained that they used to have English textbooks, but considering the rich teaching experience of this particular teacher, they decided to give him more autonomy in the class. Before every semester starts, the school gives the teacher a teaching plan, but he is free to make some modifications according to his and the students' needs (see section 6.6.2).

Figure 6.3 English class in Kindergarten C

Compared with Kindergarten C where no set resources are provided, English education in Kindergarten D is more structured. It uses Hongen English[18], one of the most famous brands for children's English learning in China. In the first teacher's class, nearly all the teaching and learning was based on Hongen DVDs, from playing songs to learning new words and doing exercises. However, Teacher D2 used only his own prepared materials. He said that this was because he had joined the school quite suddenly and the school did not have time to prescribe any English materials, but then in his second week at school, he continued to use his own resources and no objections were raised by kindergarten staff. In the subsequent interview with Headteacher D, she explained this as follows:

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[18] As introduced on Hongen's official website (http://english.hongen.com/html/about_us/gongsigaikuang/), Hongen Education and Technology Co., Ltd mainly supplies English-learning products for children aged 0-8 years old and now its educational products account for a 50%-70% share of the China market. More than 20,000 kindergartens, over 300 training schools and 5 million children in China are using their products.

Considering Hongen's popularity with young English learners, now we use their products. However, no matter what books we use, the basic contents are similar, which are some simple words, phrases, conversations and songs. Thus, we do not oppose the English teacher using their own materials so long as students like his teaching and have an interest in learning English.

Hence, Headteachers C and D were both of the view that it does not matter whether schools provide teaching resources to teachers. Having no regulatory requirements on the use of teaching resources allows teachers the flexibility to tailor the lessons and instruction to the different learning styles and capacities within their own classrooms. The teachers' perspectives on this matter differed significantly. English Teacher D2 thought it was not a big deal to prepare teaching materials himself but English Teacher C took a stricter view, asserting that the provision of teaching materials is an important criterion of quality in a school's teaching:

In some good schools you don't need to bring your things, they will give you their own course which is designed by some American, British, and also Australian. They will design that course according to the age of students. They have videos, they have songs, they have cards, they have everything. Easy for me and easy for students, because with all of these things, they can understand easily. (English Teacher C)

Applying this criterion, Kindergarten E fares much better. In classes, there are sets of English songs, pictures, cards and objects provided by the school (see p.136 Figure 6.4). For example, in a lesson about learning body parts, the teacher first played the 'body song' on the TV and then taught students to sing the song and do the corresponding movements. After that, the teacher used body part pictures to teach students how to say the words. In addition to these physical resources in each class, the English teacher mentioned that Kindergarten C's head office also uploaded teaching materials online. Teachers can choose either to download these resources or make their own materials according to their own teaching needs.

Figure 6.4 English teaching materials in Kindergarten E

Although the provision of teaching materials differed in different kindergartens, the English language teaching methods and content do not vary substantially. During my stay in three kindergartens, the main taught content included short songs in English, the words for body parts, items of food, types of animals, festivals and colours, and some basic short sentences such as 'I like XX' and 'I have XX'. This teaching content is broadly aligned with Yang's (2017) research, but slightly different from the findings of Hu & Baumann (2014), Lin (2013), and Wei (2015) where the English alphabet and phonics were emphasised by some teachers. In the present research, English teachers did not pay much attention to children's pronunciation, as they all think it is more important to encourage children to speak English words rather than pressure them to pronounce words correctly. In each class, to make English lessons more active and engaging, teachers lead a wide range of activities and use a variety of resources such as videos, songs and cards (see also Lin, 2013; Yang, 2017). This teaching approach is thought to be play-based and appropriate for kindergarten children and gets wide support from headteachers and parents (see section 6.4.2.1).

6.3.2.4 Instructional language in the class

Instructional language refers to the language employed by teachers in the class. In this research, the choice of instructional language is closely tied to teachers' Mandarin level and their personal teaching style.

Foreign Teacher D1, who has lived in China for about ten years, speaks Mandarin fluently. Our interview was mainly conducted in Mandarin. In his and local English Teacher E's classes, much more Mandarin was spoken than in the other two foreign English teachers' classes. Set out below are transcripts of two interactions recorded in the observation notes for classes led by Teachers D1 & E.

Class observation episode in Kindergarten D

(After teaching the words yummy, yucky, sweet, sour, salty, spicy, English Teacher D1 began to ask the questions one by one. Each question was accompanied by a corresponding picture on the TV).

Teacher D1: How is the cake?

Student 1 shakes head

Teacher D1: How is the cake? 蛋糕怎么样？ How is the coffee?

Student 1 did not answer.

Teacher D1: The coffee is yucky. 蛋糕很好吃 [The cake is very yummy]，Yummy, coffee is yucky. 咖啡苦. 苦，yucky.

Student 1: Yummy

Teacher D1: Let us read these words. 读这些词

Class observation episode in Kindergarten E

Teacher E: Good Morning, boys and girls.

Teacher E began to put animal pictures on the floor.

Teacher E: What can you see in a farm? 在农场你会看到什么动物?

Student 1: I can see a horse

(Other students can only say the single English words, such as cow, duck, pig, etc.)

Teacher E: These are farm animals. 这些是农场动物. Now let's listen to a song.

Note: In the above two class observation episodes, words in ( ) are my observation notes. Words in [ ] are my translations. If I do not provide a translation after the Mandarin, it means these Mandarin words are the teacher's translation of the previous or following English word or sentence.

From the above class conversations, it can be seen that Teachers D1 and E generally used English to communicate with the class, but when they felt that students could not follow their instructions, they would translate the utterance into Mandarin immediately. The teachers reported that this is an effective way to help children understand what is said and to

improve their English confidence and interest. By contrast, the other two foreign English teachers barely used Mandarin in class. This is partly because of their poor command of Mandarin, but they also explained that avoiding Mandarin creates an environment more like English immersion for students.

In the field of second/foreign language education, the question of whether or not to use students' native language has always been a controversial issue. Some researchers think the use of the students' native language helps to scaffold input and make it more comprehensible and promotes students' understanding in the language being studied (Paker & Karaağaç, 2015; Shabir, 2017). Others assert that avoiding students' mother languages will enhance students' language competence and give them maximum exposure to the target language[19] (Turnbull , 2001; Turnbull & Arnett, 2002). Although the question of which instructional language is better for students' English learning is not the focus of this research, the discussion at section 6.7 will explore from the children's perspective how teachers' instruction language affects children's interest and attitudes to learning English.

6.3.2.5 English learning environment

Section 6.3.1 has described the English environment in the participant public kindergartens. Before I started the fieldwork, it was predicted that English would be used more frequently in kindergartens that have English classes. However, the results were surprising.

Outside scheduled teaching time for English, among the three private schools, Kindergarten C has the fewest opportunities for English exposure, even fewer than in the public kindergartens. On the children's book shelf in the classroom, there was only one English book which I noticed no student read in their free time. During my stay in Kindergarten C, I did not see any English or bilingual signs nor did I hear any teacher or student saying an English word outside designated English classes.

In comparison with Kindergarten C, there are more English inputs in Kindergarten D where the situation is very similar to the public kindergartens. There are some English books on the classroom shelves and teachers occasionally speak English words and play English songs. Additionally, one Chinese teacher in the class I observed would sometimes play English

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[19] The target language refers to the language that students are learning.

videos in order to help children review the words that they had learnt. However, this is the teacher's own strategy, not the school's requirement, so whether other Chinese teachers did this is unknown.

In Kindergarten E, the physical English environment distinguishes it from other participant kindergartens. Every sign, post and decoration in the classroom and other public areas, such as stairs, hallways and bulletin boards, is English-Chinese bilingual (see Figure 6.5). In the reading areas, at least half of the books are English books bought by the school. However, like other participating kindergartens, outside the designated English class times, students and teachers barely speak any English.

Figure 6.5 English environment in Kindergarten E

In all, the above account presents the overall picture of English language education in the participant private kindergartens. A major theme underpinning this picture is that although English is taught in these kindergartens, the main aims are to raise children's interest in English and help them establish an initial sense of the language, not to develop children as fluent bilingual speakers (see also Wang, 2014; Wei, 2015; Yang, 2017). Sharing these aims, the three kindergartens have things in common in English language education. They all prefer to hire foreign English teachers; the total time spent on English teaching and speaking is quite short; and play-based teaching methods are encouraged. Beyond these commonalities, there are distinguishing features among the schools, with Kindergarten E being the standout. It has English classes taught every day by local teachers and provides a

more immersion-like environment, in contrast with the other two kindergartens which have only one to two weekly English lessons taught by foreign teachers. Bearing these similarities and differences in mind, the following sections probe the phenomenon further by exploring how different actors perceive English language education.

6.4 Participants' perceptions of preschool English language education

The adult participants in the research from five kindergartens include five headteachers, 15 parents and four English teachers (three foreigners and one Chinese). Apart from two foreign English teachers and a few parents, the participants were all aware of the policy of removing schoolification and understood that the teaching of English, as a primary-level subject, is banned in all types of kindergartens. However, participants engaged in the debates on whether kindergartens should teach English and whether schoolification rules should include English language education.

6.4.1 Public kindergartens

The survey of English education in different types of kindergartens and the interviews with the local officials have suggested that schoolification is more common in private kindergartens than public kindergartens (see section 5.5; see also Zhu, 2012; Wang, 2015). This difference has been observed by participating parents, as one parent in Kindergarten A argued:

> I think there are major differences between public and private kindergartens. Having a better education background, public kindergarten teachers usually know better how to educate children. Unlike private kindergartens which usually start to teach children to read and write even from the lower class. At different development stages, there are different educational focuses. Before going to primary schools, I think the most important thing is to give children a relaxing and beneficial environment. From this point, public kindergartens do very well. (Parent A2)

Parent A2's words reflect a widespread perception held by public kindergarten parents and headteachers. In the interviews, it is found that although some of the participating parents hoped kindergartens would teach a little bit of primary-level knowledge, more broadly they all supported the decisions to curb schoolification and appreciated the more relaxing

atmosphere provided for children in the public kindergartens. The headteachers reported that in order to help children adapt easily to primary school level, there would be more transition courses in the children's final kindergarten semester, including reading and mathematics. However. all these courses are designed and delivered according to the principles of play-based teaching and learning, and recognising the need to integrate learning into daily life. Traditional teaching methods involving cramming are strictly forbidden. These principles and practices reflect the headteachers' compliance with curriculum reforms initiated in recent years (see section 2.3). However, when participants were speaking about preschool English language education, their attitudes revealed more complexity and nuance. The headteachers expressed their deep concerns about the quality of current English language provision, but emphasised that if teaching quality is guaranteed, they do not oppose the learning of English by children from a young age:

> When we say English language education, we should refer to the bilingual environment, rather than teaching English. English is just a communication tool… Children can learn some English through games and in real-life situations. (Headteacher A)

> English is a tool… If providing English in a bilingual environment, I think children can learn some English, because at least it can help them realise that there are other languages in the world. These languages are totally different from Chinese... Now we advocate to develop students as world citizens, so different languages can make them understand the diversity of the world… Last time, we got a chance to visit Soong Ching Ling Kindergarten in Shanghai. In each class, there is a full-time home teacher and a full-time foreign teacher staying with the children all day, so they have integrated English into their school life. However, these days in Hefei, it may be that no kindergarten is able to achieve this high level, but if children's parents have such English ability, they can do this at home. (Headteacher B)

These quotes indicate that in contrast to the local officials' strong position opposing preschool English language education, the public kindergarten headteachers tended to have a more pragmatic view, regarding English as a tool for communication and understanding the outside world, as well as recognising its benefits for children's development. This view was also actively supported by the majority of participating parents. A parent from Kindergarten B argued:

I think kindergartens can provide English classes by foreign teachers, from the lower classes. It is better if they come every day and stay here at least half a day, but it is OK if they cannot stay here for such a long time, because at least these English classes still have some effects on children's later learning. For example, at the beginning, my child only had one or two English classes every week in an English training centre, but they are very useful for promoting her confidence and interest in later English learning. If English class is offered every week, it will gradually become the children's habit to learn English. (Parent B2)

Throughout Parent B2's interview, she frequently mentioned the CPH (Penfield & Roberts, 1959; Lenneberg, 1967; see section 3.2.4.2), declaring 'the earlier the better' for English learning. Her own experience was that early English exposure had helped explore her child's potential and sparked enthusiasm for learning English. Other parents who hold a supportive attitude towards early childhood English education, while perhaps not very certain about the theory, said they think that an early starting age for learning would not have much of a negative impact on children's development. On the contrary, they think it is beneficial for stimulating children's interest in English and helping them get more prepared for their future study and life (see also Jin et al., 2016; Wang, 2014). In light of these considerations, many parents have sent their children to English training centres. In the two classes that I observed in the public kindergartens, class teachers estimated that at least half the students had already learnt English at home or in English training centres, and some teachers' children had also learnt English in these centres. The flourishing out-of-school classes enable parents to fulfil their desire for children to go to kindergartens and to learn English at the same time. However, in the interviews, some parents still expressed their hope that kindergartens would provide English teaching, because:

Certainly, I hope kindergartens will offer English class, so I will not have to send the child to the outside training school. You know, there must be a person who sends her to the training school twice a week. She has other extra classes as well. Therefore, it takes us a lot of time. If kindergartens have English classes, she will not have to learn outside, which will save some time for us. Moreover, it will also help us save a lot of money. Now we have to spend over 10,000 yuan (£1150) on English classes for one year. (Parent A1)

Therefore, from the parents' perspective, if kindergartens offer English classes it will not only benefit children's development but also save their time and money. However, such a positive attitude towards English language education is not representative of every parent. There are a few parents in the research who said there is no need for children to learn English right now, giving the reasons that there is no English learning environment and the parents themselves do not have English skills to teach children English (see also Liang, 2013). Another worry is that an early starting age for learning English makes children feel confused between pinyin and English. Pinyin is the official Romanised phonological coding system for Mandarin which has the letters of the English alphabet except for 'v', but in terms of pronunciation and spelling, there are many differences. For example, the English sound /r/ and /ʃ/ are pronounced very differently from pinyin's /r/ and /sh/, and in pinyin there are no vowels sounds /æ/ and /eə/ or consonants sounds /ð/ and /θ/ (Zhang & Yin, 2009). Due to concerns that young children cannot distinguish these differences, some parents are in favour of their children learning English after officially learning pinyin in the first grade in primary schools.

6.4.2 Private kindergartens

In the private kindergartens, some participants expressed concerns about English language education which chimed with the public kindergarten participants' perceptions, but overall had more welcoming and supportive attitudes towards English language education and further arguments about schoolification.

6.4.2.1 English learning in kindergarten involves play-based activity

Like the participants from public kindergartens, those from private settings agreed that the traditional primary-level way of teaching should be strictly forbidden at the preschool stage. However, they expressed a more supportive attitude towards the idea of children learning primary-level knowledge in advance:

> I know the policy of removing schoolification… In my view, I do not agree that children should learn as much as they will learn in primary schools, but it is important for children to learn some things, so that they will be more easily adapt to primary schools. (Parent E2)

I hope my child can learn more primary-level knowledge in the higher classes. In the current social context, parents still hope children can win at the beginning line… As far as I know, some primary schools still group students based on their scores in entrance exams. If a child knows nothing, both children and parents will face great pressure and difficulties. (Parent C3)

There should be more flexibilities when applying the policy of removing schoolification… Even if this kindergarten teaches nothing, other kindergartens still do. Teachers cannot require children to learn too much, but in the current context, it is unrealistic to entirely ban all primary-level knowledge in kindergartens. (Parent D1)

The above quotes show that the tradition of schoolification still greatly influences parents' attitudes towards preschool education. From their perspectives, the acquisition of some primary-level knowledge in advance would help children transition smoothly to primary school and develop good learning habits (see also Peng, 2017; Yan & Gai, 2014). Further, participating headteachers added that some so-called primary knowledge, such as pinyin, Chinese characters, and English, is everywhere in daily life. Even if children are not exposed to teaching and resources in kindergartens, they will still be surrounded by material in their life outside of school. Therefore, rather than simply advocating the removal of primary subject knowledge from the kindergarten curriculum, it is more important to consider how to create a child-friendly environment to help children naturally develop knowledge and skills:

… the point is that we cannot teach children in a primary-oriented and rote learning way. Obviously, it is wrong to ask children to write Chinese characters every day. Preschool education should be based on games, but it does not mean that children cannot recognise Chinese characters or learn English, which is absolutely impossible. What we need to do is to integrate the knowledge into games, into our life. For example, when teaching math, we can ask simple questions like 'how many birds are on the tree?' or 'how many birds are left on the tree?', but we cannot directly ask them to calculate three plus one, five minus two. (Headteacher C)

The above position is widely shared by participants and they expressed that as long as knowledge is transmitted in an interesting, easy and play-based way, it will not bring too

much pressure on kindergarten students (see also Liu & Liao, 2012). These debates reflect a key question for schoolification: if primary-level knowledge is shared in a child-appropriate way, should it be regarded as schoolification? (Liu & Liao, 2012; Yan & Gai, 2014). The participants in this research, especially staff and parents from private kindergartens, tended to answer this question in the negative. In addition, some participants also pointed out that current English language education is more like a form of playing rather than teaching:

> Children have a lot of fun in the English classes. There are many activities. It is different from traditional teaching. (Parent E1)

> It is not actually a type of English teaching. It is full of attractive activities. How can you say we actually teach English? We are not teaching them grammar. We are not teaching them something else... we play some songs, do some activities in class. It is all about activity. (English teacher C)

The class observations in three private kindergartens confirmed what Teacher C said above. Instead of the traditional 'cramming' method of teaching and learning, every English teacher delivered English classes through joyful and engaging activities provided in an encouraging and relaxing environment (see section 6.3.2.3). These features, in participants' eyes, distinguish preschool English education from primary school English education, and are effective in raising kindergarten children's interest and curiosity in learning English (see also Wang, 2014; Yang, 2017).

6.4.2.2. English is just a language

Another widespread opinion shared by private and public kindergarten participants, is that English should be viewed as 'just a language' and a communication tool:

> Unlike math, I feel English is just a language… There is no need to teach children to read and write now, but it is fine to teach some easy daily conversations, so at least children can know that they can use English to communicate with others. (Parent E2)

> English is a language for communication… It does not promote children's language development, but also can promote other abilities, such as logical thinking… The last

time we went to Vietnam, my child spoke happily with a girl in English. Although the English they spoke was very easy, they really had fun. (Parent E3)

The role of English language for global communication was emphasised by many participants in their interviews. Their perspectives echo Wang's (2014), Wei's (2015) and Yang's (2017) findings that children are exposed to a wider world and more diversity of experience through the English language. As well as highlighting the variety of English songs, books and movies available, many participants also mentioned the importance of English for travelling or studying overseas. Official figures are of interest here. The number of Chinese tourists going overseas in 2018 reached 150 million, an increase of 14.7% from the previous year (Xinhua, 2019). Meanwhile, 662,100 Chinese students went abroad in 2018 to study, up by 9% year-on-year and 90% of them were self-funded students (MOE, 2019d). As going overseas becomes the norm for an increasing number of Chinese families, some children I met in kindergartens have already been abroad or plan to take a trip. Of course, not all destinations are English-speaking countries and regions, but the participants felt that English is an essential skill to enhance the travel experience and communicate with others. Moreover, when talking about English language learning, more participants in the private kindergartens actively mentioned the CPH and asserted the importance of a critical age for learning (see also section 6.4.1). There are many examples from the participant interviews:

At 0-6 years old, children are very sensitive to language. If you create a language environment for them during this period, they will have a good sense of language. (Headteacher D)

I majored in English in college… In children's early years, around 2-4 years old, children experience a rapid language development, so it is really necessary to make sure children are exposed to English at this stage. (Parent E3)

... when children are young, especially from 2-6 years old, there is a golden time for their language… My child likes the Japanese version of *My Neighbor Totoro* very much. After watching many times, one day, when he was about one year old, I suddenly found that he had learnt some Japanese words from it… Thus, it is important to give children sufficient language inputs when they are young. (Parent D1)

We naturally learn Mandarin because we are born and live in a Mandarin-speaking environment. It is better to expose children to an English environment as early as possible… I do not expect high levels of achievement at this stage. It is just a start and it is better not to put too much pressure on children. (Parent C2)

In further discussions with these participants, it was found that their strong belief in CPH is closely associated with their fervent desire for their children to move beyond the 'Mute English' that they themselves suffered from in education. As introduced in section 2.2.2, typically Chinese students are still held back by low levels of English communication skills in spite of many years of formal language learning. As people with personal experience of this phenomenon, the parents and headteachers in this study expressed their hopes of making the best use of children's early years to build children's confidence and interest in speaking English and to lay the foundation for future learning (see also Wang, 2014; Wei, 2015). Indeed, some parents argued that when choosing kindergartens, they particularly cared about whether the school had English classes and how English language education was conducted. What is more, apart from kindergarten English classes, some parents also send their children to English training centres or purposely increase the English input in the child's home life by providing English books, songs and cartoons.

Faced with this disparity between government policy and local demand, Headteacher E explained that as educators, it is essential to consider what is best for the children and what society needs, rather than dogmatically following the officials' words. Driven by such motives, schools at the micro level do not simply implement top-level language policies but can and do resist complying with them (Baldauf, 2005a; Higgins & Brady, 2016; Liddicoat & Baldauf, 2008; Menken & García, 2010). The kindergartens' different responses reflect not only their understanding of preschool English language education but also the interplay between the kindergartens and the local education authorities.

6.5 The interplay between kindergartens and the local education authorities

In sections 5.4 and 5.5, it was shown how the local education authorities have sought to manage English language education in kindergartens and what challenges they have met. This section provides more insight into the interplay between different types of kindergartens and the local education authorities, from the perspective of the kindergartens.

6.5.1 Public kindergartens

Public kindergartens, being affiliated to local education authorities or state-owned organs and enterprises, are dependent on the government in many respects. The headteachers are appointed by the local education authorities. The higher the rank the schools can attain, the more funding they can get (Bai et al., 2012). Headteachers in this study explained that there are three levels of kindergartens in Hefei: province-level first rank kindergartens, municipal-level first rank kindergartens and normal kindergartens. The criteria for assessing kindergarten quality at different government levels and in different regions are not same, but one basic criterion common to all assessment protocols is compliance with government policies. Following the macro initiative of removing schoolification, the evaluation index system at the municipal level in Hefei (Education Bureau of Hefei Municipality, 2015) and the provincial level in Anhui (Education Department of Anhui Province, 2009b) have both explicitly listed compliance as an important criterion. More noteworthy, the latter authority has specifically designated foreign languages as a sign of schoolification:

> C3: Implement the *Kindergarten Work Regulation* and the *Guidelines for Kindergarten Education*, respect children's personalities and rights, and follow children's developmental patterns and learning behaviours. No tendency of schoolification (the emphasis on orthographic recognition, pinyin, **foreign language**, having homework, etc.). (Education Department of Anhui Province, 2009b, p.1)

The school rankings are determined by a professional team organised by local education authorities every year. In order to ensure that kindergartens are incentivised to maintain their quality after being rated, the headteachers introduced that the school rating result is not permanent. Kindergartens are re-examined about every three years and if they fail the re-evaluation, their rank will be revoked and re-set. Due to these constraints on schools, Man (2014) asserted that in the management of public schools, the government holds the authority to make decisions, implement decisions and evaluate the implementation; in other words, the government combines the roles of referee, participant and commentator. Within such a relationship, public schools undoubtedly play the role of supporters and implementers of governmental planning and policy, as one private kindergarten headteacher in this research argued:

All teaching activities in public kindergartens must comply with educational policies and education authorities' arrangements. Their funding mainly comes from the government. It is impossible for them to hire foreign language teachers because if they do so, there will be additional cost. Obviously, the government sector will not cover such cost. Moreover, if these prohibited behaviours are identified by education authorities, the consequences will be serious. (Headteacher C)

In a similar vein, two public kindergarten headteachers in this research also expressed such opinions:

As a public kindergarten, we should play the exemplar role and put government policies into practice. (Headteacher A)

We are different from private kindergartens. There are many private kindergartens that offer different types of extra-curricular classes in order to increase their profits. We cannot do that. (Headteacher B)

To give full scope to their role as exemplar schools, public kindergartens are encouraged to develop cooperative operating models and to take more responsibility for supervising and guiding private kindergartens (Cai et al., 2019). During my stay in two public kindergartens, both schools were actively seeking to create new school sites. Headteacher B, in her capacity as leader of a wider teaching community including Kindergarten B, said that she planned to host a teaching assessment for all kindergartens in this community to promote teaching excellence. These initiatives and activities serve to consolidate the exemplar role of public kindergartens and in turn they strengthen the government's leading role in preschool education and ensure that the government policies can be put into practice effectively.

6.5.2 Private kindergartens

Like public kindergartens, private kindergartens are subject to the management of the local education authorities (see section 5.4), but in practice their relationship to these authorities is far more complex.

With limited local authority control over private kindergartens' finances and personnel, the

participating officials explained that annual and routine inspections are the main strategies formally used for regulating private kindergartens. Any kindergarten that shows signs of schoolification will fail the annual inspection and will be forced to rectify its position (see section 5.4). However, in reality, these strategies are not effectively implemented. Headteachers and class teachers implicitly suggested that during the inspection periods, every practice that does not abide by education policies would be halted by staff and visible English materials would be removed. Even if an inspection is at short notice, it seems that headteachers usually have advance warning and so are able to ensure that the teaching and activities observed by inspectors are not in breach of schoolification rules. Here it is illustrative to mention two situations that I experienced during my fieldwork. One day, Kindergarten C invited an English teacher to teach English to Chinese teachers, but not long after the training started, the headteacher stopped it suddenly, as she got the news that an education inspection team would arrive at the school soon. Another example is in Kindergarten E, one day students were having a basketball class with an American teacher in a large first-floor classroom. News came that an inspection team was coming to the school shortly, so the basketball teachers and students were immediately transferred to another classroom on the upper floor. I was later informed by a class teacher that this inspection related only to food security in the kitchen, but school leaders were concerned that it would leave a bad impression if the inspectors noticed that the basketball class was taught by a foreigner. Taken together, these two occasions support the impression that when education officials inspect kindergartens, they will not necessarily see a true picture of what is happening in the settings.

Indeed, the education officials have become aware of this state of affairs and that is partly why they encourage the public to play a role in monitoring kindergartens (see section 5.4). However, this strategy does not work well for English language education because there is high parental demand for preschool English provision (see section 6.4). Even though parents are aware that the government prohibits English teaching in kindergartens, they are extremely unlikely to report a breach to the local education authorities. As a result, in the private sector, many management measures stay on the surface (Wang, 2015; Zhu, 2013). This accords with an old Chinese saying, 'the lower level always has countermeasures to deal with higher level policies' (上有政策，下有对策).

6.6 The role of different actors in preschool English language education

Following the above account of how English language education is provided and perceived and how kindergartens deal with the local education authority, this section turns to the schools' internal structures to see how decisions about English language education are made at the school level and what roles different groups of actors play.

6.6.1 The role of headteachers

According to the *Regulations on Kindergarten Management* (MOE, 1989) and *Kindergarten Work Regulation* (MOE, 2016a), headteachers in all kindergartens shall assume the overall responsibility for the management of kindergartens. In their interviews, participating headteachers described what kindergarten leadership involved:

> The government policies regulate the standards of kindergarten equipment, size, personnel and curriculum. However, how to run a kindergarten, what activities to organise, how to arrange curriculum, are decided by ourselves. These aspects reflect each school's features. (Headteacher A)

> As headteachers, our own backgrounds and visions direct schools to go in different ways. Contingent on market needs, the opinions of the leadership team and our resources, we develop our school features, which mainly relate to curriculum, facilities and meals… We decide what to teach, how to arrange the curriculum, what textbooks to use. Then teachers put our decisions into practice. (Headteacher D)

Within each kindergarten, regardless of type, the headteacher takes the absolute leading role in running and developing the school (Ho et al., 2019; Tian, 2014). Their personal educational philosophy and experiences directly influence the path taken by the kindergarten (L. Liu, 2015; Tian, 2014). As Headteacher B described, the role of headteacher is like a captain of a ship: they need to know the way, go the way, and show the way. For example, if a headteacher has a special interest and skill in science experiments, the school will probably have a focus on science teaching and if a headteacher regards language teaching as important, the school will be more likely to have strength in this field. In a similar vein, headteachers' views on English language education determine whether schools have English classes and how they are conducted.

6.6.2 The role of English teachers

Kindergartens that choose to provide English education will recruit English teachers according to their needs. As the staff members who are directly in charge of planning, preparing and delivering lessons, teachers have great autonomy over their classroom activity (Siuty et al., 2018; Sung & Poole, 2016). In this research, English teachers explained that they could modify the curriculum provided by the school and make various decisions on how to structure and deliver lessons, informed by several factors including students' interests, class contexts, and their own teaching styles and beliefs. For example, as shown above, English teacher D1 preferred to use Mandarin as an instructional language while the other two foreign English teachers preferred to promote an environment more like English-immersion (see section 6.3.2.4).

However, teachers must function within a school's hierarchical structure (Chua & Soo, 2019; Johnson, 2009; Spolsky, 2009; Tian, 2014). In terms of strategic school-level decisions – for example, whether schools provide English classes, how many classes the school will provide and how teachers will be selected – all participating English teachers reported that while they were allowed to put forward reasonable suggestions, they had never been part of the final decision-making:

> They give me just a time schedule, I have to do this. I do not have the chance to discuss this. (English Teacher C)

> In the school, I have to listen to headteachers' instructions. They are the bosses. They tell me when to come to school and give me the teaching resources … Then I decide what to teach and how to teach. (English Teacher D1)

The teachers' low levels of involvement in developing the school curriculum and policies were also indicated by headteachers:

> We would not interfere much in how teachers deliver their classes… We provide teaching plans and resources for teachers. If teachers do not meet our expectations, we will address the issue immediately. (Headteacher D)

Teachers are seldom engaged in making school policies, but they can propose their suggestions – if reasonable, we would take them into account. (Headteacher E)

Hence, with headteachers taking a strong leading role, teachers are typically operating at the lower level to implement school policies (Tian, 2014; Zhang, 2010). Among four participating teachers, three of them regarded this management structure as normal and argued that their main responsibility as teachers is to teach rather than to manage (see also Zhang, 2010) while Teacher C expected greater involvement in designing the English curriculum and optimising the English learning environment. However, the kindergarten did not provide him with such opportunities. Thus, teachers were compelled to fit their classes within the pre-existing school curriculum.

6.6.3 The role of parents

Besides the pivotal responsibilities of headteachers and teachers in preschool education, the role of parents is also significant (Chang, 2008; Chen & Agbenyega, 2012). The data collected in this research highlights the importance of parents in at least two aspects: kindergarten selection and family-kindergarten partnership.

Unlike other educational levels where students are assigned to their neighbourhood school or selected by a school or university on the basis of entrance exams, parents have greater choice about where to send their children to kindergarten. Regulations provide that there should be a kindergarten in every five-minute pedestrian-scale neighbourhood (Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development, 2018), so for most residents in urban areas, there is usually more than one kindergarten nearby to choose from. When choosing kindergartens, parents at all five participant kindergartens agreed that the first priority is geographical proximity. Teaching quality and environment are the next most important criteria for parents, but they 'may differ in their expectations regarding child development and how children should be treated and beliefs about what constitutes an optimal learning environment' (Grogan, 2012, p. 1268).

Parents who choose public kindergartens tend to hold a generally supportive attitude towards the policy of curbing schoolification. Even though some of these parents think an early start in learning English is necessary, they still prefer public kindergartens because they believe

the overall teaching quality and climate in public kindergartens cannot be matched by other types of kindergartens (see section 6.4.1). Moreover, there are English training centres available for extracurricular English tuition needs. Indeed, some of the participating parents in this study had bought flats near their preferred public kindergarten in order to ensure their children could enrol in that school. However, not all the parents favour public kindergartens. In this study, many of those parents who ultimately chose a private kindergarten think that public kindergartens do not have significant advantages other than low tuition fees. In their view, private kindergartens offer more flexible and diversified curricula, a more conducive environment for learning, richer education resources and better school facilities (see also Yue & Song, 2015). It is apparent that different parents make different kindergarten choices, driven by different contextual factors as well as different educational expectations and beliefs (Chen & Wang, 2019; Dahari & Ya, 2011; Grogan, 2012). After their children are enrolled in kindergartens, parents take co-responsibility with the kindergartens to promote children's development. The value and necessity of building a good home-kindergarten partnership has been addressed by a series of government policies, including *Guidelines for Kindergarten Education (Trial)* which states that:

> Family is the most important partner for kindergartens. Following the principles of respect, equality and cooperation, [kindergartens] should strive for parents' understanding, support and active participation, and progressively support and help parents improve their educating ability. (MOE, 2001d, section 3.8.4)

It is expected that a close relationship between family and kindergarten will help parents have sufficient opportunities to better understand their children's development, educators' roles and educational processes in the kindergarten, and to take an active part in developing a conducive environment and appropriate curriculum for children (Chen & Agbenyega, 2012; Zhang & Liu, 2017). Headteachers and teachers in all five participant kindergartens strongly emphasised that to provide a collaborative and positive environment for children's development, it is important to create and maintain good relationships with parents. During my fieldwork in each kindergarten, I observed that parents were frequently invited to engage in many kindergarten activities, such as drawing pictures with children, helping children prepare the school show, describing their careers in class and recording children's performance at home. However, it is noteworthy that while all kindergartens encourage the family-kindergarten partnership, private kindergartens give more consideration to parents'

demands than the public settings do, and generally pay more attention to cultivating the relationship with parents (Tian, 2014; Yue & Song, 2015). During my fieldwork, at pick-up time at school it was common to see private kindergarten headteachers stood at the school gate or in the lobby to say goodbye to children and parents. If parents had any inquiry, they could talk with headteachers directly. Also, when potential parents came to visit the private kindergartens, the headteachers or other administrators would enthusiastically lead a school tour and enquire about parents' expectations. Such scenes barely occurred in the public kindergartens. On this phenomenon, Headteacher E who worked in a public kindergarten for many years before taking her current job in the private school, pointed out that:

> It is widely accepted that public kindergartens provide better education with lower tuition fees, but due to the limited number of public kindergartens, many parents try everything to get a place for their children in public kindergartens, so they do not worry about the enrolment rate. On the contrary, this is one of our biggest challenges. Public kindergartens do care about parents' opinions, but not as seriously as we take them. We need to attract more students by building a good reputation among parents. It is of great importance to have a good relationship with parents, to know what they want, and handle any inquiry in a timely manner.

To further illustrate parents' influence, Headteacher E reported another episode. As described above in section 6.2, Kindergarten E had previously hired a full-time foreign English teacher who left the school for personal reasons. After her departure, the school hired a part-time foreign English teacher, which raised some parents' concerns that the position of part-time teachers was more casual than teachers on full-time contracts, and there was a greater risk he might leave at any time if personal circumstances compelled him, and the school had less influence over that. Under pressure from parents, School E eventually decided to let local teachers deliver the English classes. Other examples given by headteachers about how parents influence school policies included decisions about CCTV in the school, food quality and disease control, and explanations about how schools deal with parents' enquiries and complaints. Nevertheless, parents' influence on a school's policies does not go beyond proposing suggestions, because ultimately the decisions about how the school operates and develops fall to school leaders (Bao, 2019; Tian, 2014). As Headteacher D said:

Even before building a kindergarten, the leadership team has already considered the features of the school and the way school will develop. These will direct us to decorate the school, to recruit teachers and to make advertisements… Each kindergarten has its own characteristics and parents can choose the kindergarten according to their preferences. If parents finally decide to send their children to our school, that's because our school has met their expectations… They cannot decide how we develop.

Similarly, parents themselves also expressed such opinions:

Headteachers and teachers are experts in educating children. We parents are not professionals like them. We only have one child, but they have many. It is impossible to listen to every parent's suggestions and expectations… We should not interfere with school's teaching and arrangements. (Parent C1)

Speaking of parent's role, my understanding is that we work with children to finish school tasks. We would actively engage in different kinds of school activities… We would also pay close attention to schools' practice, especially school security and food hygiene. (Parent C2)

When we choose kindergartens, we care much about the school's curriculum, teachers and environment. But after our children register in this school, I think the role of the parents is to cooperate with kindergartens and support the finishing of the tasks directed by teachers. (Parent E1)

Tian (2014) carried out an in-depth investigation into how headteachers, teachers, parents and children exert their influence on curriculum development in three Chinese kindergartens, and proposed that the most significant power that parents can exert is choosing an appropriate kindergarten for their children. In terms of school policy and curriculum, they actually do not have any real authority (Bao, 2019; Tian, 2014). For example, Kindergarten E responded to parents' concerns and replaced the part-time foreign English teacher with full-time local teachers, but the decisions on how to conduct English language education were still up to the school. Therefore, as shown in the above quotes, home-kindergarten partnerships mainly manifest parents' support and engagement in kindergartens' activities rather than functioning as vehicles for making school policies and curricula (see also Bao,

2019; Chen & Agbenyega, 2012; Tian, 2014). As for the attitudes of parents themselves, they do not intend to impose much change because they perceive themselves as lacking the professional knowledge and experience which headteachers and teachers apply to curriculum design and the organisation of school activities (see also Bao, 2019; Chen & Agbenyega, 2012; Tian, 2014). This deference to the roles of heads and teaching staff in turn consolidates the ultimate authority of school leaders.

6.7 Children's experiences and perceptions of learning English

The previous sections analysed the perceptions and roles of adult stakeholders in preschool English language education, but what still remains to be heard and understood are children's perceptions. Existing research has shown that students can contribute to the formulation of school policy, but they are rarely consulted or actively involved in this process (Clark & Moss, 2011; Smith, 2015); instead, other policy makers act on their behalf (Fenton-Smith & Gurney, 2016; Hsieh, 2006). This finding was borne out in this research as well. To understand the pupils' experiences and perceptions of English learning, class observations and a focus group interview with four to five children were conducted in every participant kindergarten.

6.7.1 Children's understanding about English classes

My strategy in each child focus group was first to ask them to list their favourite kindergarten activities and classes. This served two purposes – to get familiar with the children in each group and to gain some initial understanding before asking them directly whether they liked English classes. The answers that children gave were quite varied but the majority were about making things by hand and outdoor activities:

> **Researcher (R):** What do you like to do you in kindergartens?
> **S1:** I only like painting
> **R:** Only like painting?
> **S1:** I also like to listen to stories.
> **S2:** I like that.
> **S3:** Me too.
> **S4:** I like playing games on the table with other children.
> (Focus Group B)

R: What do you like to do in kindergartens?

S1: Look, I like beads.

S2: Girls like beads.

R: So what do you like?

S2: Painting.

S3: I like skipping ropes.

R: Painting, skipping ropes, what about you?

S4: I like making books.

R: Reading books?

S3: No, making books, like this. The teacher has taught us how to make them.

(Focus Group E)

It is interesting to note that in the focus groups in all three private kindergartens, no child mentioned the English class when they described what activities and classes they liked in kindergartens. When delving into the reasons, children explained that they liked English class but it was not their favourite. Contrary to the adults' perspectives (see section 6.4.2.1), many children argued that English class was teaching not playing. In the children's eyes, although they would engage in many games and activities in English classes, there are many discipline constraints. During my stay in three private kindergartens, it was observed that all the activities were directed by English teachers and apart from this activity time, children were usually required to sit in front of or around the English teachers and were not allowed to walk around (see p. 134 Figure 6.3 & p. 159 Figure 6.6). If any child broke the behaviour rules in the English class, for example by leaving their seat or making sounds, the Chinese teachers would stop them doing this immediately.

These constraints stop children doing what they want and cause them to distinguish English classes from free play. In the literature, play and work/learning are traditionally considered to have totally opposing features. Play is enjoyable, initiated and directed by children, and takes place incidentally (Bennett et al., 1997; Yang, 2013). Learning is more onerous, planned and directed by teachers and intended to achieve certain learning outcomes (Bennett et al., 1997; Yang, 2013). In recent decades, as play-based teaching and learning has become the major guiding principle of preschool education, the boundaries between these two terms have become blurred (Yang, 2013). Studies have found that many teachers in kindergartens

around the world prefer to integrate play with some academic outcomes (Broström, 2017; Pyle & Danniels, 2017; Yang, 2013). Regarding this integration, Rao & Li (2009) introduced the term 'eduplay' meaning 'an activity that is primarily initiated by the teacher rather than children and it has the feature of being funny and playful, but with external imposed expectations and rules' (Yang, 2013, p. 231). Applying this concept, English class can be seen as a kind of eduplay because although the class is full of games and activities, teachers still direct children to learn some basic words and sentences. This way of teaching produces a conceptual difference between adults and children in terms of what is play and what is learning (Guo, 2015; Theobald et al., 2015; Pyle & Alaca, 2016), but it does not mean that children do not like English classes.

Figure 6.6 English classes in the private kindergartens

6.7.2 Children's attitudes towards English classes

Out of the nine children who participated in focus groups in two public kindergartens, only two children had not learnt any English. This points to the popularity of learning English at a young age, but sampling bias cannot be ruled out. In the sampling process, although I had emphasised that any child could take part regardless of whether they had learnt English, it still seemed that children who had English experience had more interest in participation. When these two children were asked why they had not learnt English, one child did not give me an explicit answer and the other explained that he was learning pinyin. This accords with the concerns reported by some parents that learning English too early would make children confused between pinyin and English (see section 6.4).

Most children who had learnt some English, whether in kindergartens or English training centres, held a very positive attitude towards English classes. In each focus group discussion, when the children were talking about English classes, they would vividly describe the games they played in the classes and mimic what teachers said or did:

> **R:** Do you like English classes?
> **S3:** Yes.
> **R**: Why?
> **S3:** Because the class is brilliant. Very funny!
> **S2:** The teacher said my English is very good! He read many story books!
> (Focus Group B)

> **R:** Do you like English classes?
> **S1+S2:** Like.
> **S2:** We played a lot of games today.
> **S3:** First I did not know how to play, but after I learnt, it was very interesting!
> **S2:** We also danced!
> (Focus Group C)

These findings show that even though the children do not see the English class or activity as free playing, they can still have fun (Hsieh, 2006; Ólafsdóttir & Einarsdóttir, 2019). Moreover, the focus group children reflected that they have fun not only because of the ways

that English classes are delivered, but also because they can learn a lot from them even though the process is not always easy:

> **R:** Do you like English?
>
> **S3:** Yes.
>
> **R:** Why?
>
> **S4:** I like English classes in this school.
>
> **S1:** It is interesting.
>
> **R:** Ohh, you all like English classes.
>
> ….
>
> **S3:** Teachers can teach us some English words… If there is somebody saying English, I can know the meanings.
>
> **S2:** I want to know how to write English letters.
>
> **R:** Oh, you want to learn writing.
>
> **S4:** In fact, I also like English classes, but I do not understand.
>
> **R:** If you do not understand, why do you still like it?
>
> **S4:** Because I can learn a lot of knowledge.
>
> (Focus Group D)

Children's desire to gain knowledge through English has deep roots in Chinese learning culture which emphasises that acquiring knowledge is the main purpose of learning and a person must put in a lot of hard work and have tremendous dedication and perseverance to become knowledgeable (Jin et al., 2016; Li & Li, 2002; J. Li, 2010; Ng & Wei, 2020). When asked what kind of knowledge they can gain from English classes, the focus group children usually spontaneously exclaimed some English words, such as 'apple', 'banana', 'blue', 'red', etc. As a researcher, the children's excitement and pride when speaking English words and their desire to say more was palpable. When one child in the group began to speak English words, other students would rush in to offer their words too. Perhaps English learning for them is closely 'linked to becoming a learned person' (Jin et al., 2014, p. 13). The more they say, the more knowledge they demonstrate. Aside from this cultural influence it is clear that peer influence is another factor affecting children's attitudes towards English classes. The following conversation is an example:

> **R**: Why do you like English class?

S2: When I learn English, I and XX are in the same class.

R: Oh, you have friends in English class.

S2: Yes, we have the same dance class, same class in the kindergarten and same English class.

S3: I also have friends in the English class.

R: So you like to be with your friends, don't you?

S2+S3: Yes.

R: If your friend does not go to English class, would you like to go?

S2: (Shakes head).

(Focus Group A)

The above dialogues occurred in the public kindergartens. In the participating private kindergartens where English has become a regular part of their curriculum, no children explicitly said that the reason they liked or did not like English was because of their friends. However, it was noticed in English classes and other activities that the majority of children preferred to play or sit with their close friends. Many studies have confirmed that for children at this age and stage, peers have great influence in shaping their attitudes and practices in many areas including language (Harris, 2009; Spolsky, 2009). In Chinese society, this influence may be amplified by the 'one-child policy'. In the 1980s, to address China's high population growth rate, the state enacted the one-child policy and as a result many Chinese children in urban areas do not have siblings. As an only child cannot share her or his experiences and feelings with siblings, their classmates or other peers from the extended family, kindergartens and community take the major role in the socialisation of the child (Sun & Rao, 2017). In this context, if children can make good friends in English classes or go to these classes with their friends, English classes will become more attractive.

Notwithstanding the positive attitudes of most of the participating children towards English learning, it cannot be ignored that there are some children who are indifferent to English class or feel it is boring and difficult to learn (see also Jin et al., 2016). This issue was mentioned by one parent in Kindergarten B: in her opinion, the child's negative experience is closely linked to the difficulty of the teaching content. This parent reported that her child would proactively tell what she had learnt and experienced in English class if that day's lesson was easy and her child completed many activities, but sometimes the child appeared to be more frustrated and less communicative on the subject of English classes. In the

discussions with the children, the reasons given for not liking English classes included 'he gave me too many stickers', 'it was painful when the teacher gave me a high five' and 'I did not understand what teachers said'. The last reason was the one most frequently mentioned. The children explained that if teachers use too much English in class, it increases the comprehension difficulty and may also make them feel disoriented and powerless (see also Ding & Wang, 2019; Littlewood & Yu, 2011). For this reason, some children prefer to be taught English by local Chinese teachers, because they are able to 'speak Chinese that we understand'. This perception brings us to the consideration of children' preference for foreign or local English teachers.

6.7.3 Children's preference for English teachers

As introduced in section 6.3.2.1, the participating adults in this study regard foreign English teachers as more fluent in English, more interactive with children and more capable of maintaining the children's interest than local English teachers (see also Ding & Wang, 2019; Hsieh, 2006). Turning to the children's own experiences, the following dialogues show that some children share the adults' views and enjoy the perceived advantages of the foreign teachers' classes.

R: Do you like Chinese teachers or foreign teachers?

S1: Foreign teachers.

R: Why?

S1: Because my mom said foreign teachers' pronunciation is more accurate. I used to have Chinese teachers before.

R: So is it because your mom like foreign English teachers, so do you?

S1: Every time we have English classes, he would lead me to read a very small book…We also play games.

(Focus Group A)

R: Do you like Chinese teachers or foreign teachers?

S1: Foreign teachers.

R: Why?

S1: Because he is so funny.

S2: I think he is so cute. He has a beard.

(Focus Group C)

However, not every child prefers foreign language teachers. Apart from the language barrier, some children mentioned that they felt a little scared when they were with foreign teachers and that Chinese teachers made them feel safer and more comfortable. This issue has also been observed by Ding & Wang (2019). In their comparative study of Chinese teachers of English and foreign English teachers in Chinese kindergartens, they found that although foreign English teachers have more authentic accents and are better at promoting a more active classroom atmosphere, their poor Mandarin skills hinder them from building a good rapport with students. Also, a teaching atmosphere that is too free and undisciplined also increases the difficulty of managing the classes (Ding & Wang, 2019). Hence, it is important to seriously consider what best fits children's needs and preferences rather than prioritise adults' perceptions on the questions of what kinds of English teachers to employ and what types of English language programmes to deliver. The focus groups in this research provide evidence that the children should not be seen as the passive recipients of decisions made on their behalf by powerful adults, but should be the active participants in their own development and learning (Smith, 2015). Their voices should be given more weight when setting and developing the school curriculum (Clark & Moss, 2011; Hsieh, 2006; Smith, 2015).

6.8 Challenges and future development for preschool English language education

So far, this chapter has discussed how kindergartens provide English language education, as well as actors' roles and perceptions of English language education. With the strong parental demand for English learning in children's early years, various kinds of English programmes in private kindergartens have been put in place. Yet, this popularity does not necessarily mean high-quality provision. The lack of government support and guidance in matters of preschool English provision is obviously a major challenge for its development and there are also other concerning issues found in this research.

6.8.1 Lack of English learning environment

As indicated in section 2.1.3, a major challenge for Chinese learners of English is that China does not have significant authentic English-speaking environments (Gil, 2008; Liang et al.,

2020; Shi, 2017). At the preschool level, this challenge is more pressing because unlike other education levels where English is a compulsory course and typically delivered in four classes every week (see section 2.2.2), in two of the three participant kindergartens with English provision, there is only one class every week and students do not have opportunities to use English outside class times in kindergartens.

The English teachers in this research reflected that given the very limited English exposure time, children's English skills varied greatly, the overall teaching pace was slow, and sometimes teachers had to repeat the same teaching content again and again. Regarding these challenges, even though the English teachers and some parents would like kindergartens to give more time to English, the headteachers expressed that they have to consider operational costs and governmental constraints. In these circumstances, increasing English exposure time at home would seem to be an effective alternative way to promote children's English learning, but this strategy is also problematic. First, parents' willingness to work with kindergartens appears to vary greatly. In spite of the high demand for English education, not every parent is willing to personally contribute time and energy to it; many parents think it is teachers' responsibility to improve children's English, not their own role (Wei, 2015). Secondly, many parents are troubled by the 'Mute English' that they themselves suffered from and generally lack confidence in speaking English at home. As one parent in this research said:

> There are very limited English output opportunities… We are very afraid of misleading my child, especially in the pronunciation, so we never speak English at home. (Parent B3)

The above quote illustrates a typical situation of children's English learning environment at home. Many parents from both public and private kindergartens do make an effort to promote English at home by purposely playing English songs, videos or buying English books, but the majority of parents speak only Chinese at home except for a few who said they speak simple English words and sentences with their children (see also Liang, 2013; Wei, 2015). Here are more illustrative quotes extracted from the interviews with parents:

> I do not speak English with my child, but I would use English videos that English teachers used in the class and ask my child to listen and speak. If I think he does not

say something correctly, I would ask him to listen again. (Parent D3)

We speak very little English at home. I do not think we can provide an English-speaking environment. (Parent E1)

I may occasionally speak some very easy English words at home – for example, 'good morning', some colours and names of animals – but I do not speak English much. At such young age, children prefer to imitate parents. I cannot guarantee that I pronounce these words correctly. (Parent E2)

In this research, it was found that even some parents who have passed College English Test Band 4 or 6 still worry that their poor English-speaking ability would negatively affect their children. Thus, with only a little exposure time in English inside and outside kindergartens, the potential for children's fluency and proficiency in English is limited (Copland & Garton, 2014; Kaplan et al., 2011).

6.8.2 Lack of qualified teachers in stable employment

Another concerning factor influencing children's English learning is teaching quality. Teachers are at the core of quality education provision. A qualified English teacher in a kindergarten needs to have sound knowledge of linguistics, language acquisition, language teaching, English culture, education, child psychology and cognitive development (Hsieh, 2006; Murphy & Evangelou, 2016; She, 2017; Wei, 2015). However, in this research, it was found that neither the local Chinese teachers of English nor the foreign English teachers are fully equipped with the requisite skills and knowledge to teach English.

For local Chinese teachers of English, the major issue is their English ability (Ding & Wang, 2019). In She's (2017) research involving 138 local English teachers in Dalian kindergartens, it was found that many of the teachers could engage in only simple dialogues with students and found it difficult to understand English content outside textbooks. To overcome this competency problem, some kindergartens prefer to recruit teachers who have majored in English in their studies. In Cai's (2010) and Qi's (2013) research, the majority of local teachers participating in a kindergarten English immersion programme had majored in English. This finding accords with the situation in Kindergarten E, part of a well-known

bilingual preschool education brand in China. Headteacher E explained that the recruitment standards for English teachers in Kindergarten E are higher than the average level. Although the majority of local English teachers in kindergartens do not have bachelor's degrees (Chen, 2017; She, 2017), Kindergarten E only recruits English majors and provides more resources and training for teachers than is typical (see section 6.8.3). In other kindergartens, the teachers' overall education and training background may be inferior. In a study involving 797 early childhood English teachers, it was found that only about half of them had majored in English and over three-quarters never or rarely took part in professional trainings (Chen, 2017).

The concern about teachers' quality is not alleviated when it comes to foreign teachers. Under current regulations, if a foreign English teacher wants to obtain a full-time work permit from the Chinese government, he/she must: (1) be from a native English speaking country; (2) have obtained at least a bachelor's degree; and (3) have two years of teaching experience or hold an English teaching certificate (Dou, 2018; Quinn, 2019). However, in reality, only one-third of the 400,000 foreign teachers in China have been legally granted the long-term working visa, while the remaining two-thirds are mainly foreign students (Cao, 2019). The three foreign English teachers in this research all hold student visas and do part-time work in kindergartens (see section 6.3.2.1). None of them have a professional education background in English or early childhood education. Regarding the issue of insufficient knowledge and skills for teaching English to Chinese children, the participating children's focus groups unveiled some issues such as communication barriers and comprehension difficulties (see sections 6.7.2 & 6.7.3). Another salient issue concerning foreign English teachers is the high turnover. As English Teacher C said:

> This is not a skilled job, actually, you know, we don't have a good candidate. People come here to enjoy China, travel to China, and some of them get working visas and work in some kindergartens... After one year, they go back and do their work.

The turnover problem was evident during my one-month stay in Kindergarten D, during which time I saw the departure of one English teacher. All three foreign teachers participated in this research said that they might quit at any time and would not consider doing the role as a viable full-time job in the future. With a specific focus on this issue, Thorburn (2016) surveyed 278 English teachers and directors working at over 100 private language teaching

schools in 16 cities in China. The results show that the main factors affecting teacher turnover are the career opportunities, enjoyment of the work itself, and personal growth. In the current social context, all three foreign English teachers assumed that there is not an attractive and promising professional climate to support them to develop on this career path. Two of them specifically complained about an unfair criterion for selecting foreign English teachers.

In China, as well as in some other Asian countries such as South Korea (Seo, 2010) and Japan (Yoshii, 2016), there is a widely held misconception that white English teachers are better, as the main English-speaking countries are white-dominant (China Daily, 2014; Quinn, 2019). Driven by this perception, some schools and training centres even prefer to hire white teachers even though they are not from non-English speaking countries. In this research, three foreign English teachers are not white. During the interviews, English teachers D1 and E both showed me some introduction videos of white people from Russia and other non-native English-speaking countries who were applying for English-teaching jobs. The preference for white English teachers had become an unofficial criterion for salary determination. Reports show that in third-tier and fourth-tier cities in China, the monthly salary of native-English teachers can reach about 14,000-20,000 yuan (£1564–2234) and 10,000-14,000 yuan (£1117-1564) for non-native white English teachers, while teachers from India, Pakistan and the Philippines can only earn 8,000-12,000 yuan (£894-1341) per month (Dou, 2018). This has undoubtedly increased the concerns about English teaching quality. In the interview, English Teachers C and D1 said:

> They don't prefer Indians, they don't prefer Pakistanis, but their English is really good and they are very good teachers. I think they should focus on that, bring the people who are really good in the field of education, who have teaching experience. If someone is working in KFC and driving a truck, but he's a white man, he comes here and teaches in the kindergarten. What can we do? (English teacher C)

> Many people and schools judge teachers by how they look, not by how well teachers teach. Do you understand? … If I was white with blue eyes, I would have got higher payment. This is not fair for us. (English teacher D1)

Regarding this phenomenon, the headteachers and parents all argued in their interviews that

teaching ability rather than ethnicity is the factor they care most about, but it is clear from the experience of the English teachers that the impact of racial bias persists. Moreover, the English teachers also complained that within the kindergartens the environment is not very supportive for them.

6.8.3 Poor management within the kindergartens

In this research, it was found that the main way of recruiting and managing English teaching staff is to hire part-time foreign English teachers via education agencies (see also She, 2017). Headteachers explained that working with such agencies is a more attractive and secure option for the kindergartens than directly hiring individual teachers because if the school is not satisfied with the current teacher or the teacher is diverted by some urgency and unable to work, the company will arrange another teacher immediately. Therefore, contractually speaking, these foreign English teachers work for the employment agency not for the kindergarten. Candidate English teachers usually need to pass a demonstration class and have a meeting with kindergarten administrators before the school decides which teacher to recruit. If there are any issues before or after an English teacher accepts the job, in most cases the school liaises with the agency rather than the teachers themselves. As English teacher D2 described:

> This school, they told the education agency what they want, what staff they need, etc.
> Then the agency told me like what to prepare, what to do, what age of kids, what they
> want me to teach.

In Headteacher D's interview, she showed me a Wechat dialogue between her and the education agency, in which they discussed an unexpected situation in an English class (see Figure 6.7).
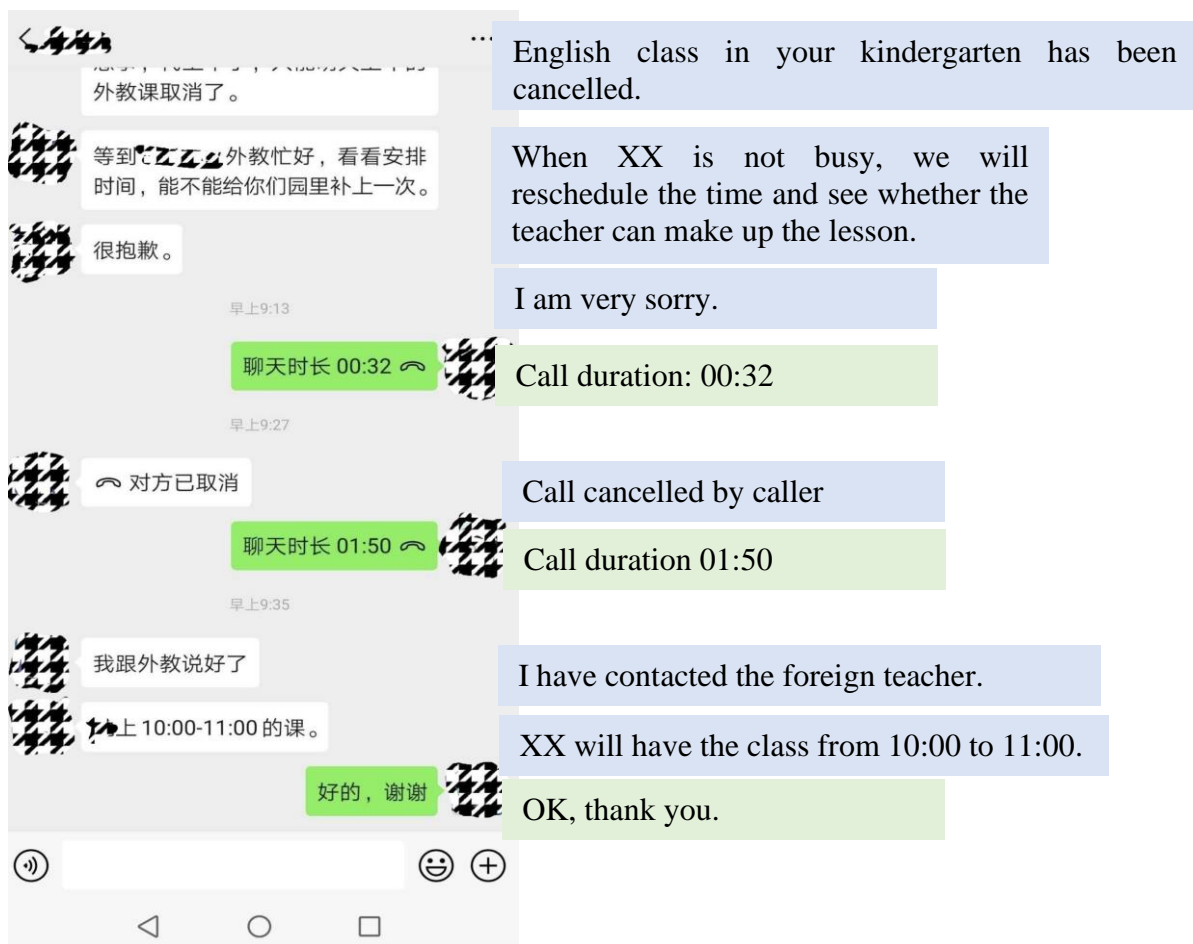
Figure 6.7 A Wechat screenshot between Headteacher D and the employment agency

This dialogue demonstrates that there is not much direct contact between part-time English teachers and the schools (see also Wei, 2015). In the transition period between the first and the second English teachers in Kindergarten D, the headteacher did not actually know which teacher would be chosen but waited for the company's selection and arrangements. Given this relationship, the headteachers were of the view that it should be the agency's responsibility to train and evaluate teachers, not the kindergarten's. Yet, the foreign teachers reflected that they had never received any training from kindergartens or from the agencies, and that the teaching resources provided were limited. As described in section 6.3.2.3, English teachers C and D2 prepared all teaching resources by themselves while Teacher D1 used Hongen English materials provided by the school. However, Teacher D1 did not rate Hongen English highly because of certain flaws such as incorrect explanations of some English words, the small size of pictures, and technical problems playing some video segments. These issues were not recognised by headteachers. In fact, headteachers themselves may not know how to select or design the textbooks that best fit their schools; instead they simply choose what is popular in the market (Ning, 2016; Wei, 2015; see also

section 6.3.2.3).

In contrast to the situation for foreign English teachers, the overall picture in Kindergarten E, where all English teachers are full-time local teachers, seems better. Aligned with findings in other studies (She, 2017; Wang, 2014; Wei, 2015), this kindergarten offered some professional trainings for local teachers of English, as reported by Teacher E. Every week, English teachers would gather together to discuss their teaching progress. Every month, the head of English alone or with one other English teacher would go to Nanjing to attend English trainings organised by the head office. However, the scope of these opportunities is limited and too little time is allocated, so the trainings are not adequate to provide effective support and guidance for teachers to improve their English language proficiency and teaching skills (see also She, 2017; Wang, 2014; Wei, 2015). Moreover, in Kindergarten E, these training events ceased in 2018 because the head office person responsible for English teaching overall had quit the job. Also, no more updates were made to the online teaching materials after this person's departure. These circumstances led to an increase in workload for English teachers and affected their teaching effectiveness. In the interview, Teacher E said:

> If I'm given sufficient time, I can prepare much better, but I really do not have time. The arrangement is very irrational. In addition to English teaching, I am also responsible for children's daily management and other teaching… Children also do not have much flexible time… This arrangement is made by the school, we teachers must follow this arrangement, without any excuses.

On this issue, Headteacher E expressed that she understood teachers' workload and pressure, but no effective solutions have been found. There is no professional team in any of the three kindergartens tasked with providing guidance and evaluation for English teachers. Headteachers themselves do not have much knowledge of English teaching. In their view, the main criterion on which to evaluate a teacher's performance is whether children actively engage in the learning activities (see also Wei, 2015). The English teachers reported that sometimes headteachers or other administrators offered fairly generic suggestions regarding pupil behaviour and class management, such as speaking less Mandarin in class, giving equal attention to all students, and asking the class Chinese teachers to manage noisy students. However, they did not give professional advice on how to improve the teachers' pedagogical

skills or provide any incentives to teachers to make more effort to better their English teaching.

Therefore, although English lessons have been widely provided in kindergartens, it seems that there are few schools capable of providing English language education by well-qualified and supported teachers (Ning, 2016; Wang, 2014). The main challenges found in this research – insufficient qualified teachers and lack of training and evaluation – have also been identified in other studies (She, 2017; Wang, 2014; Wei, 2015). Therefore, without the macro-level support, it is difficult for kindergartens themselves to be self-reliant in developing English education well (Liang et al., 2020). As Headteacher B in this research said:

> If it's only parents who value English language education while the government does not, it will stay the same as now, with good and poor English teaching mixing up together. In fact, the popularity of children learning English does not signify the development of this area. Rather, it is just a strategy that the school uses to take money from parents' pockets. After all, it is only when the government begins to support and make efforts to invest in it that it will get real development.

Faced with so many challenges to the development of English language education, all three private kindergartens in this research are still committed to providing English classes for children into the future, as revealed by the headteachers' plans. Kindergarten C does not want to make any changes to the current English teaching programme which will continue. Kindergarten D is trying gradually to increase children's English-speaking time by improving the English proficiency of the Chinese teachers. Kindergarten E hopes that the Administration of Foreign Experts Affairs will grant work visas for the full-time foreign teachers. In the long run, all headteachers hope that the government will allow for more flexibility within the schoolification rules for preschool English language education and provide more support for it.

6.9 Chapter summary

To summarise, the main aims of this chapter were to compare how English language education is provided in public and private kindergartens, how decisions on this provision

are made and what issues have been met. Drawing on the data presented and analysed above, it was found that LEPP is open to diverse interpretations by different actors at different levels (Chua & Baldauf, 2011; Johnson, 2013; Johnson & Johnson, 2015). In this research, at the macro and meso levels, English is regarded as a primary-level subject and therefore subject to schoolification policy (see sections 2.3.2 & 5.3), but at the micro level in both public and private kindergartens, English tends to be regarded more holistically as a language and a communication tool. In terms of the value for children's all-round development, learning interests and later attainment, the benefits of an early start in English are asserted by parents and staff and there is a strong demand for English teaching and learning from childhood (Chen et al., 2020; Jin et al., 2016; Murphy & Evangelou, 2016; She, 2017; Wang, 2014; Wei, 2015). Alongside the high enthusiasm for learning English in kindergartens, there are heated debates on whether play-based English classes should be seen as schoolification. Nevertheless, public and private kindergartens respond differently to the government ban on English language education, influenced strongly by their different relationships with local education authorities. Within each kindergarten, the headteacher assumes the responsibility for determining how to develop the kindergarten and design the curriculum (MOE, 1989, 2016a; Tian, 2014). Under their leadership, no public kindergartens in this research offer formal English classes while the private kindergartens provide English education in different ways. This finding does not align with studies by Wang (2014) and She (2017) where both public and private kindergartens were found to have English classes. The different results may be due to sampling bias or different local policy contexts, but regardless of the reason, in Hefei it is clear that despite the government ban, English language education still exists in some kindergartens. However, lying behind the popularity of kindergarten English language education, there are many concerns about English teaching quality, professional development for teachers, and the effectiveness for children's learning (She, 2017; Wang, 2014; Wei, 2015). On the basis of these findings, the next chapter delves further into this phenomenon by examining the interplays between different levels, different school contexts and different actors, and explaining how these interplays ultimately shape the current picture of preschool English LEPP in China.

Chapter 7 Discussion

The development of LPP research has involved a shift from regarding LPP as a government-led macro-level activity to recognising its multiple levels and the significance of micro level sites and actors (Johnson, 2013; Liddicoat & Baldauf, 2008; Kaplan & Baldauf, 1997; Zhao, 2011). In light of these theoretical developments as well as the findings analysed in chapters 5 and 6, this chapter starts with a review of the multi-level process of preschool English LEPP in the context of an account of the Chinese education administrative system. The chapter proceeds to discuss how the relationship between government intervention and the market mechanism affects the disparity between government policies and school practices and how the relations between different school actors affect the current provision of preschool English language education. Integrating all these findings and analysis together, the chapter then presents a model of preschool English LEPP in China and discusses the potential inequality issue it brings to the sector.

7.1 The multi-level process of preschool English LEPP

In an ideal linear process, it is expected that the macro planning and policies set at the national level can be effectively cascaded to different government levels and schools, to produce standardised results (Chua & Baldauf, 2011). However, 'no macro-level policy is transmitted directly and unmodified to a local context' (Liddicoat & Baldauf, 2008, p.11) due to a variety of contextual factors and interpretations. In the context of education reforms in China, this section analyses how the education system has influenced the development of preschool English LEPP.

7.1.1 Centralisation versus decentralisation

Since the establishment of PRC in 1949, China has been struggling to balance the forces of centralisation and decentralisation in education, in order to support local initiatives and promote education quality (Hawkins, 2000).

7.1.1.1 Decentralising reforms

In the early years of the PRC, in the wake of a century of foreign wars and civil war, the overall social, economic and political situation was chaotic and beset with challenges. In this

context, the main goal for the government was to centralise and unite rather than to decentralise control (L. Feng, 2020). As Fairbank (1987) noted, 'it must again be a political unit under a central power' (p.22). To increase the country's economic growth and expand the development of heavy industries, the first Five-Year Plan was enacted in 1953 (Zhai, 2016). This scheme, within the planned economic system[20], consolidated the centralised management system (Lin et al., 2003; Zhai, 2016). However, in a country with such a large territory and a population in the hundreds of millions, a highly centralised planned system served not only to bring a huge workload for central government, but also hindered the development and initiatives of local governments and impeded the growth of a vibrant, energetic and creative modern society (Lin et al., 2003; Sun & Yu, 2010). In this context, Chairman Mao gave a famous speech in 1956, *On Ten Important Relationships*, in which he announced:

> …the centralised authority should take care to give scope to the initiative of provinces and municipalities, and the latter in their turn should do the same for the prefectures, counties, districts and townships; in neither case should the lower levels be put in a strait-jacket. (Mao, 1956, cited in Lin et al., 2003, p. 9)

This speech heralded the first wave of decentralisation after the establishment of PRC. However, within the confines of the planned economy, decentralisation referred only to the delegation of some decision-making authority from central government to local government; it did not involve major changes to how enterprises were regulated and governed at different levels (Hu, 2014; Lin et al., 2003). With the problem of budget constraints for local governments and enterprises, this wave of decentralisation soon failed (Hu, 2014; Lin et al., 2003). In the 1970s, with the launch of the 'reforms and opening up' policies, another wave of decentralisation began in many social domains (L. Feng, 2020; Lin et al., 2003). In the field of education, the *CPC Central Committee Decisions on Education Reform* issued in 1985 highlighted a major issue at that time:

> In the authority division on educational management, the government departments take too much control over schools, especially higher education institutions, which severely hinder school vitality. (CPC Central Committee, 1985, para 5)

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[20] Planned economy refers to an economic system in which a central authority makes economic decisions regarding the manufacturing and distribution of products (Gong, 2012).

To solve this problem, the central government decided to delegate power to local education authorities and expanded the autonomy of schools (CPC Central Committee, 1985). Since then, educational decentralisation has been an important element of the national political agenda, with the main principles of education administration being 'local responsibility and multi-level management' (地方负责，分级管理) (Huang et al., 2016; Qi, 2017). Consequent to this reform, local governments and schools share a larger proportion of educational expenditure and have more autonomy in managing human resources, financial resources, and teaching content and processes (D. Feng, 2020; Gao et al., 2011; Kwong, 2016). While this research does not focus on education decentralisation, the study's findings do provide some evidence on this issue. At the meso level, local education authorities are in direct charge of determining local planning and policy, setting inspection standards and watching over kindergarten performance (see section 5.2). However, faced with the same macro planning and policy, different regions seem to interpret policies differently. In Hefei, all types of English education are banned but in the nearby province of Jiangsu, the relevant preschool education ordinance stipulates only that intensive English education is not allowed (Jiangsu People's Congress Standing Committee, 2012), which implies that play-based English teaching is permitted (Tan & Tong, 2018).

At the micro level, the 'headteacher responsibility system' has been adopted in all kindergartens. This school management system was settled in 1989 and gives heads a strong leadership role; prior to that year, kindergartens were directly controlled by central and local governments (Ho et al., 2019). The five kindergartens participating in this study are led by their respective headteachers and each kindergarten is distinguished from the others in terms of curriculum, resources and specialist activity. Two of them have a focus on scientific, one is characterised by its bilingual education provision and Montessori education, one by its combining of Western and Chinese education cultures, and one by its emphasis on physical activities. As for the three kindergartens offering English language education, classes are not conducted in the same way. These different features illustrate the diversified development of kindergartens. In addition to the greater autonomy at the meso and micro levels following the decentralising reforms, it is also apparent that more private schools have been established (see section 7.2) and more bottom-up communication channels have been created. This study found that there is a special telephone hotline for members of the public in Hefei to report any issues of concern regarding kindergartens (see section 5.4). Also, school principals find

it easier to seek prompt support from the local authority via telephone and WeChat, and to make face-to-face meeting appointments. This kind of communication was not easily done ten to twenty years ago (D. Feng, 2020).

These strands of evidence illustrate that education decentralisation has gone quite far in many aspects. Two national policy documents published in recent years, *National Outline for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development (2010-2020)* (State Council, 2010a) and *Opinions on Deepening the Reform of Education System and Mechanism* (CPC Central Committee & State Council, 2017), emphasise the necessity of streamlining administration, expanding schools' autonomy, and building a new relationship between government, schools and society. However, it must be remembered that 'there is no such a thing as a truly decentralized education system' (Hanson, 2006, p. 11). In reality, forces of centralisation and decentralisation are always combined in the running of education systems (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2017; Hanson, 2006). The data collected in this study at the meso and micro levels, focusing on the preschool curriculum, clearly show that these decentralising reforms do not actually represent a substantial change from the vertical management system for education in China (Qi, 2011).

7.1.1.2 'Decentralised centralisation'

In 2001, the MOE issued the *Outline of Basic Education Curriculum Reform (Trial)* to advance Chinese curriculum reforms from preschool to secondary levels. In order to change the position whereby the central state was the only actor involved in designing the national curriculum, a three-level curriculum management system (state-local-school) was introduced (MOE, 2001c). While this reform has given local authorities and schools more autonomy in curriculum development, all local curricula must accord with the framework and principles set at the national level, and the national curriculum must account for 80-84% of the total school hours (Qi, 2011). Hence, as Huang et al. (2016) have concluded, what the curriculum reforms encourage is a shift from 'one-size-fits-all' to 'one-standard-fits-all' (p. 36). The interviews with the two education officials participating in this research revealed their consistent, compliant attitude towards national guidance and regulations, and that they regard themselves as implementers of macro planning and policy (see section 5.2).

In fact, having a system of national control over the school curriculum is not confined to

China. Whitty et al. (1998) examined the school reforms in England and Wales, the USA, Australia, New Zealand and Sweden in the 1980s and 1990s and pointed out that the education restructurings involved increasing schools' autonomy mainly in the areas of finance and administration, while the central government maintained significant control over the curriculum and performance evaluation. Likewise, the OECD (2016b) showed that the school curriculum in many countries 'is usually designed by the state or province' (p. 4). For example, in England, the national curriculum is required to be taught in all schools maintained by local authorities to ensure that children learn the same things (Department for Education (England), 2014). Compared with these cases, what needs more attention in the Chinese context is the state control of private schools. As currently regulated, private schools can independently carry out educational and teaching activities only on the condition of fulfilling the nationally prescribed curriculum (MOE, 2012b). Hence, as Qi (2017) noted, private schools may have more autonomy than public schools in managing finance, staff and students, but they have little control over the curriculum.

In China, curriculum control has been further consolidated by the exam-oriented education system. In the current system, after students finish their nine-year compulsory education, they must undergo public entrance examinations before progressing to the next level (see section 2.1.2). Examination results are the most important metrics of schools' academic performance, so it is common to see both public and private schools teach for examination (Huang et al., 2016; Qi, 2017). At the preschool level, although there is no direct pressure exerted by primary school entrance examination, as kindergartens lie at the beginning of an entire system they cannot escape completely from examination culture (Chu, 2009; Xu & Liu, 2014). Influenced by these factors, the participating officials emphasised in the interviews that all kindergartens, regardless of type, should adopt the national curriculum and other relevant governmental regulations to ensure standardisation (see section 5.4). This explains why English education and schoolification in a broader sense is banned in private kindergartens as well as public ones. Thus, although this research found some decentralised features in the education structures under scrutiny, in terms of curriculum, education decentralisation remains quite superficial. It has been referred to as 'a top-down reform aimed at decentralized centralization' (Huang et al., 2016, p.36). Therefore, in the analysis of LEPP in China, the top-down administrative context cannot be neglected.

7.1.2 The disparity between government policies and kindergarten practices

The advantages of centralised structure are manifested in facilitating unification, balancing the resources across the country, improving administrative efficiency and concentrating efforts to achieve targets (Broadman, 1996; Ning, 2009; Saiti & Eliophotou-Menon, 2009; Sun & Yu, 2010). For example, as noted in this research, a large number of public-interest kindergartens have been built in the last decade, driven by the central government's goal of universal preschool education by 2020 (see sections 1.2, 5.1 & 7.2.2). However, a centralised system may involve significant communication barriers across different tiers and levels (Constantinou & Ainscow, 2020; Saiti & Eliophotou-Menon, 2009; Kaplan et al., 2011). The front-line educators are seldom involved in policy-making (Li, 2017; Liu & Feng, 2005; Yang & Ni, 2018). In the interviews with officials, they explained that in the pre-preparation stage of formulating local policies, they would hold discussions with education officials from the same and other levels; meanwhile, although headteachers and teachers can report any issues they find in practice, they cannot take part directly in formulating policies. As a result, government policies and planning usually lack a deep understanding of the rationales for curriculum reforms and school practices because they represent the perceptions valued at the higher levels rather than the actual needs of communities and learners (Johnson, 2013; Kaplan et al., 2011). In this research, Headteacher E explained:

> There are few education officials who moved up from kindergartens, so they actually do not know how to run a school and what education school should provide… For the real educators it is very difficult to get a high position in the government system. From the perspectives of officials, they may want to decrease the burden on children and are concerned that kindergartens may charge more fees from parents. However, this policy does not seriously take different school contexts and parents' demands into account.

From the government's perspective, to prevent schoolification is to give childhood back to children, to maintain their interest in learning and to promote their healthy development (MOE, 2011b, 2012a, 2018). However, whether this policy fits the current socio-cultural context is questioned (Li, 2018). Internationally, there is a growing trend of learning English from a young age (Rixon, 2013; Murphy & Evangelou, 2016) and teaching more academic content in kindergartens (Broström, 2017; Fleer, 2018; Ofsted, 2017). There are many researchers who agree that learning and playing are not in complete opposition but can be

integrated together to help children reach their full potential and get them ready for more formal learning in primary schools (Fleer, 2018; Ofsted, 2015). This position is also supported by some Chinese scholars (Liu & Liao, 2012; Li, 2018), who have argued that schoolification has now been overcorrected in kindergartens. Many participants in this research, especially those from private kindergartens, tend to agree on this point. Rather than ban all primary-level knowledge from kindergarten settings, it is far more important to consider how best to deliver the content (see section 6.4.2.1).

Moreover, the ban on schoolification goes against the long tradition in China of teaching children examination or higher-level knowledge in advance (see section 2.3.1). In contemporary society, although the government has initiated many reforms to develop students' all-round abilities (see sections 2.2 & 2.3.1), traditional Chinese values on formal academic attainment and early childhood learning have not fundamentally changed (Lin, 2019; Luo et al., 2013) and nor has the exam-oriented education system (see section 2.1.2). At other educational levels, English is a main subject and a core component of entrance examinations (see section 2.2.2). As part of the foundation of the entire education system, the need for learning English naturally extends down to preschool education (Bolton & Graddol, 2012). Many parents and headteachers in the interviews mentioned the importance of English in children's later schooling and hoped that the earlier start could boost children's interest in English and help them be more prepared for primary school (see also Jin et al., 2016; Wei, 2015; Yang, 2017). Further, many participants in this research have suggested that English should be seen in practical terms as a language for communication rather than a primary-level academic subject (see section 6.4). In contemporary society, the inexorable worldwide spread of English has given the language a large platform and huge significance. As proposed by the MOE (2001b, 2011a, 2017b, 2017c), English language education has both instrumental and humanistic values (see section 2.2.2). It is beneficial not only for a person's development in their education and career. It can also help to improve a person's self-esteem and sense of global citizenship, to widen their knowledge and individual networks, and to increase their leisure opportunities and cultural exchange with other countries (Hann et al., 2014; Pan & Block, 2011). These advantages, together with common beliefs and assertions about the CPH (see sections 6.4.1 & 6.4.2.2), stimulate public enthusiasm for learning English from a young age.

Faced with governmental regulations and local demands, different kindergartens make

different decisions. The fieldwork in five kindergartens found an obvious division between public and private kindergartens. The practices of public kindergartens are indicative of a successful top-down policy enactment process. In Hefei currently, as far as I am aware, no public kindergartens still provide English classes but it is still common to see private kindergartens offering them. Within the broad category of private kindergartens, two types of settings joined in the study: one public-interest kindergarten and two non–public-interest kindergartens. All three of these private kindergartens have English classes. The major difference between these two types of private kindergartens is that the public-interest setting provides less English teaching time and environmental exposure to English (see section 6.3.2). Also, as reflected by headteachers and confirmed by initial contact with other potential recruits, it appears that public-interest private kindergartens take a more cautious attitude towards English language education. Many of them do not dare to offer English classes due to concerns about potential withdrawal of government funds and other penalty measures. Early in the recruitment process, I contacted about four public-interest kindergartens: only two of them offered English classes, and ultimately only Kindergarten C joined the research. By contrast, all four non–public-interest kindergartens I approached had English classes. Although any conclusion should carry caution owing to the small numbers of kindergartens, the pattern of responses illustrates a trend: the greater the dependence on government support, the greater the compliance with the government ban on English language education. This finding accords with Hamid and Baldauf's (2014) argument that 'there are two distinct sets of policies operating in the polity: the policy of strict control of languages for the public sector and a relative laissez faire policy for the private sector' (p. 202). In the views of the participating education officials and public headteachers, the public/private division is mainly due to 'historical debt' (历史欠账).

7.2 The market mechanism and government intervention

In parallel with the decentralisation trend which started in the 1980s, another important dimension of education reform is marketisation (Yang & Ni, 2018; Zhou et al., 2017). Historically, Chinese preschool education was for a long time left to the market while the government put little emphasis and investment into the sector (Feng, 2017; Zhou et al., 2017). For many years now, the question of how preschool education should be shaped by the pull and push between the market mechanism and government intervention has been a major topic (Cai et al., 2019; Li et al., 2016). By briefly reviewing the history and development of

preschool education, this section aims to analyse how a three-way relationship has formed between the market, government and kindergartens and how their interactions impact the development of preschool English LEPP in China.

7.2.1 The history of the rise of market influence on preschool education in China

As mentioned earlier in this thesis, the 'reform and opening up' policies initiated from 1978 represented a historic turning point in China (see section 2.1). Prior to that era, the Chinese economy was dominated by state ownership and the private sector was virtually non-existent (Preen, 2019). After that, market-oriented economic reforms began and brought striking changes to society. In 1979, the *Minutes of the National Nursery Work Conference* set out the policy of 'walk on two legs' (两条腿走路), aiming to recover, develop, consolidate and improve early childhood education and care through the collaboration of public and private kindergartens (CPC Central Committee & State Council, 1979). However, in the first few years after this policy was issued, the private economy was still relatively weak and the public had a skeptical, wait-and-see attitude, and the administrative departments did not take progressive steps (Zhu & Zhang, 2004). The majority of kindergartens 'were owned (directly or indirectly) and supported (fully or partly) by the state and its agents at different levels and could be regarded as public early childhood centers in a broader sense' (Li & Wang, 2008, p.45). Thus, at that time, the government still took the dominant responsibility for preschool education (Li et al., 2018).

This model of provision did not change until the 1990s when the Chinese economy transitioned from a planned economy to a market economy. Following this change, the government decided to shift responsibility for funding and managing kindergartens to the private sector (Hong & Pang, 2009; Zhang, 2008). As a result, the policy described as 'the public sector retreats and the private sector advances' (国退民进) was initiated (H. Li & Wang, 2008; H. Li et al., 2016; L. Li et al., 2018). Compared with other education levels, preschool education does not belong to compulsory education and does not have to adhere to entrance exams requirements, so it is easier to set up and develop private kindergartens (Zhu & Zhang, 2004). At that time, although the relevant policies still stressed that the government should take the leading responsibility for preschool education (MOE et al., 2003), the central budget for preschool education only accounted for 1.2-1.3% of the total education budget from the late 1990s to the early 2000s (Hong & Pang, 2009). In the MOE,

there were only two officers responsible for preschool education across the nation while in many local areas, there was no one specifically in charge of preschool education (Hong & Pang, 2009; Li et al., 2016; Zhang & Liu, 2017). With little investment and attention to the sector, a large number of public kindergartens had to be shut down, suspended, merged, transformed or sold (H. Li et al., 2016; L. Li et al., 2018). In an extreme example, all 337 kindergartens in Suqian, Jiangsu province, were privatised in 2002 (Zhang, 2008). Consequently, the private kindergarten sector boomed while the public sector shrank. In 2004, the number of private kindergartens across the nation surpassed the number of public ones (Wang & Pang, 2009). In Hefei, as one official reported, out of over one hundred kindergartens in one district in 2011, there were only two public kindergartens. With this background, the market took on a major role in developing preschool education while the influence of government was reduced (Li et al., 2018; Wang, 2015). Under the market-driven mechanism, the participating headteachers in this study reported that it was common in the 2000s to see both public and private kindergartens offering English classes and other extracurricular lessons to attract parents.

Although the rise of private kindergartens reduced the financial burden on government and satisfied market needs, it has been argued 'that reliance on the for-profit sector in the field of early childhood education and care is problematic' (Penn, 2011, p.159). In China, echoing the findings of researchers elsewhere in the world (see Penn, 2011; Molla & Nolan, 2019; Van Der Werf et al., 2020), the marketisation of preschool education has also brought about serious issues in terms of affordable access to qualified kindergartens (H. Li et al., 2016; L. Li et al., 2018). Against this background, in 2010, the State Council issued the *National Outline for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development (2010-2020)*, which made it explicit that it is the government's responsibility to develop the preschool education sector. This national plan, together with the *Several Opinions on Developing Preschool Education at the Current Stage* published by the State Council later in the same year, mapped out the development of preschool education for the new era (Li et al., 2016).

7.2.2 The new era: Balancing government intervention and the market mechanism

After 2010, government spending on preschool education grew significantly. In 2018, the level of government funding delivered to the preschool sector reached 409.9 billion yuan (£46.3 billion), which accounted for about 8.2% of total national fiscal education expenditure

(MOE, 2020c). As the public funds on preschool education rose, the number of public kindergartens also increased, doubling from 48,000 in 2010 to 100,800 in 2019, with the proportion of total kindergartens rising from 32% to 38.4% (Yang, 2020). In Hefei, the number of public kindergartens has amounted to 39.2% of the city's kindergartens (Hefei People's Political Consultative Conference, 2019). At the same time, public-interest private kindergartens are also thriving in this political climate focused on affordable access. By 2019, 95,000 public-interest private kindergartens were operating across the country, making up 33.8% of all kindergartens in China (MOE, 2020a). In Hefei, this number has reached 46% (Hefei People's Political Consultative Conference, 2019). The rapid development of public-interest kindergartens has altered the market-oriented landscape of previous years and illustrates the more active and important role taken by the government in preschool education (Li et al., 2016).

In this research, it is clear that government influence on all types of kindergartens has been growing. As referred to above, before 2009 many kindergartens, both public and private, offered English classes. Compared with that period, Headteacher D's view on current preschool English language education is that it has experienced a retreat: since the 2009 *Emergent Notice* issued by the Education Department of Anhui Province (see sections 5.2 & 6.2) and then the anti-schoolification movement, there are fewer kindergartens in Hefei that (continue to) offer English classes. Kindergarten A is such an example. In the private sector, those kindergartens which teach English are constrained by government intervention in many ways. First of all, English classes are not conducted overtly. During the educational inspection periods, all English classes and English-related items are halted or removed by the staff (see section 6.5.2). Secondly, English language education is not well integrated into the school curriculum and the children's daily routines. In every setting, the five core learning domains specified by the national preschool curriculum (health, language, social development, science and arts) form the main educational content. The total amount of time dedicated to English teaching in each private kindergarten is very small, no more than two hours per week. The foreign English teachers only come when they have classes and rarely attend other school activities. Therefore, English education is conducted more like an add-on independent activity or an extra-curricular class that has few connections with other kindergarten activities. Moreover, without guidance and support from the governments, there are no adequate systems within and outside the kindergartens to recruit, attract and retain qualified English teachers, evaluate their performance and support their professional

learning, so lying behind the popularity of preschool English language education are wide concerns about teaching quality and future development (see section 6.8; see also Ning, 2016; She, 2017; Wang, 2014; Wei, 2015).

Notwithstanding these constraints, the fact is that some private kindergartens do continue to provide English classes. Turning from government intervention to the other major force on the sector, the market remains a strong influence on preschool education provision. Of the 192,000 private schools across all education levels in China in 2019, more than 90% were preschool settings (MOE, 2020a). Essentially, education in China is run by the state at all levels except kindergartens. The co-development of public and private kindergartens is still a key strategy in preschool education (CPC Central Committee & State Council, 2018; State Council, 2010a, 2010b). Studies on financial investment in Chinese preschool education show that although government spending on this sector has increased rapidly, the total amount is still relatively low (Li et al., 2020; Wei & Wang, 2015). Since 2010, government and family are the two main entities that share preschool education costs in China, with family investment continuing to slightly exceed the level of government input (Wei & Wang, 2015; Wu, 2015). This picture differs significantly from most OECD countries where public funding accounts for an average of 83% of pre-primary education (OECD, 2017b). It is also important to note that in China most of the public budget for preschool education goes to public kindergartens (Fang & Deng, 2014; Hong & Hua, 2015). In this research, participating headteachers reflected that in spite of some preferential tax policies for private kindergartens, the non–public-interest private kindergartens D & E had never received any direct financial support from the government. Meanwhile Kindergarten C, a public-interest private kindergarten, had only received small amounts of financial subsidies. According to the financial subsidy regulation in Hefei, the government allocates 1400 yuan (£156) per student per year to public-interest private kindergartens (Education Bureau of Hefei Municipality & Finance Bureau of Hefei Municipality, 2018). This level of funding, as headteachers said, is far short of the actual operating costs, but as public-interest kindergartens they charge tuition fees basically in line with public kindergartens. As already reported, the fees charged by public and public-interest kindergartens in Hefei are around 2,000-3,000 yuan (£223-335) per semester while the fees of non–public-interest private kindergartens are usually two to three times higher (The Paper, 2019). Hence the predicament of 'low fees, low subsidies and high costs' has become a common phenomenon for public-interest private kindergartens (Liu & Shuang, 2019).

To balance income and expenditure, some public-interest private kindergartens have to seek other ways to maximise their profits (Chen & Li, 2019; Zeng & Liu, 2019). In my fieldwork in three private kindergartens, it was found that apart from the regular tuition fees, each kindergarten also earned income from a variety of extracurricular classes that were available for students who paid extra fees for them. This practice is actually prohibited by government policies (National Development and Reform Commission et al., 2011). However, the perspective of the private kindergartens is that because their main funding comes from student fees paid by parents, they have to consider ways to retain and increase student enrolment. As one private kindergarten headteacher in Wang's (2015) research expressed:

> Bluntly speaking, **the student pool is our life line.** This is not an exaggeration. We must carefully calculate every penny that we get and spend. Our incomes depend on parents, so it will be hard for us if the student pool is unstable. We need to pay the rent and teachers' salaries. Thus, as long as we are not going against education principles, we will do our best to meet parents' demands and make them feel that the education and care which their fees are paying for is worth it. (p. 110)

Echoing the market principle of 'survival of the fittest', the participating headteachers and education officials all frequently mentioned the importance of the *student pool* (生源) for private kindergartens and how much they care about maintaining good relationships with parents (see section 6.6.3). Faced with a strong demand for early years English learning, provision of English classes is apparently one effective strategy to increase a kindergarten's attractiveness and competitiveness. Although officials strongly oppose this provision in principle, they do not take strong measures against it, for at least two key reasons. Firstly, an effective mechanism for supervising preschool education and enforcing regulations has not yet developed (see section 5.5 & 6.5; see also Wang, 2015; Zhu, 2013). Secondly, the large number of private kindergartens eases the financial burden on the government and helps fulfil its aim of universalising preschool education. In effect, this fiscal advantage constrains government control of the private sector. The still strong market mechanism serves to highlight the dual role of parents as both consumers and participants in preschool education (Bao, 2019; Wang, 2015).

7.3 Micro-level actors in kindergartens

To give their children a good start in life, parents are perennially seeking the 'best fit' in education for their children (Chen & Wang, 2019; Kampichler et al., 2018). In the eyes of participating parents in this study, the differences between public and private kindergartens mainly relate to student fees and degrees of compliance with government policies. Mindful of these differences, parents have their own preferences when selecting kindergartens. Parents who choose private kindergartens tend to have a more welcoming and supportive stance towards English language education, while public kindergarten parents ascribe more value to the non-schoolified environment that these kindergartens create (see sections 6.4 & 6.6.3). Different school choices point to the important mediating role of parents' existing beliefs about education in their understanding of schools' practices. Moreover, as explained below, insight into the ways that different actors in school settings exert their agency is also vital to the understanding of school management and practice (Hodges & Prys, 2019; Liddicoat, 2019).

Each school is a complex and dynamic system that consists of various forms of internal and external interrelations (Daly et al., 2020; Langdon et al., 2019; OECD, 2016b). School heads who buy into the headteacher responsibility system are in effect 'the most, not one of the most, important and powerful figure in a school leadership team' (D. Feng, 2020, p. 27) and stand at the critical intersection point for establishing appropriate relationships with external authorities and internal staff (Daly et al., 2020; Lee & Pang, 2011). Outwardly facing, the headteacher's image represents the entire school and she or he carefully navigates the relationship with the government. In public kindergartens, headteachers are not only responsible for ensuring that their kindergartens strictly follow government policies and directives, but they also support the local education authorities to guide and steer other kindergartens to develop in a consistent and regulated way (see section 6.5.1). In private kindergartens, headteachers keep abreast of education authorities' initiatives and try to avoid any direct confrontation with them (see section 6.5.2). All kindergarten headteachers are the final decision-makers on how to increase the attractiveness of the school to parents and pupils, how to maintain effective intra-school systems of communication, how to recruit and train teachers, and all other instructional and managerial matters (see section 6.6.1; see also Tian, 2014; Liu, 2015). If a head ultimately decides to offer English classes, they will recruit English teachers that fit the school's needs and tailor marketing materials to attract parents

who seek English provision for their children.

Under the leadership of headteachers, other actors do not exert the same level of power as the heads, but each interested stakeholder makes overt or covert choices at their own level to influence language practices (Lam, 2007). Teachers are in charge of how to deliver lessons in classes; parents are encouraged to join in informal partnerships with kindergartens and attend many school activities; children are the recipients of the language education but their preferences and opinions about English teachers and classes affect their levels of engagement and enthusiasm for learning (Tian, 2014). With regard to the differential distribution of power and influence in schools, although many researchers have called for greater parental participation in school policy-making (Fidan & Balcı, 2017; Tian, 2014; Wang, 2015), the parents themselves in this research, as well as in others, are generally satisfied with their roles as supporters of the school curriculum due to their perceived lack of expertise for determining curriculum content (Bao, 2019; Chen & Agbenyega, 2012; Tian, 2014). If parents are not satisfied with school decisions, they can put forward suggestions or opinions or choose to exit the school at any time (Zhu, 2010). By contrast, the current status and position of English teachers in kindergartens is of greater concern.

During my stay in each participant school, headteachers organised staff meetings every week for the Chinese teachers to share their experiences, discuss teaching progress, and prepare the work schedule. Also, kindergartens provided them with many training events and friendly teaching contests to improve their teaching skills. However, for teachers of English, management systems are not so supportive. In this research, it was found that all English teachers, whether part-time or full-time, were hampered by insufficient teaching materials, training and evaluation, but headteachers did not actively seek solutions to these problems (see section 6.8.3), most likely for the following reasons. One factor is that heavily influenced by Chinese traditional culture and its emphasis on centralisation, there is a top-down hierarchy in kindergartens. Even if teachers are willing to get more involved in making school policies, it is difficult to counter the headteachers' authority (Tian, 2014; Zhang, 2010). In addition, the relationship between English teachers and kindergarten management has been made more distant by the method of recruitment. As analysed in section 6.8.3, it is common for kindergartens to hire part-time foreign English teachers via education employment agencies. Contractually speaking, these teachers do not qualify as school employees, so from the headteacher's perspective, the responsibility for the teachers'

development lies with the agencies. These agency teachers are therefore compelled to work in an environment that lacks career opportunities, professional development and enjoyment of work, so it is not surprising that they do not have high commitment, ambition and enthusiasm for their jobs (Ho et al., 2019; Thorburn, 2016; Zhang, 2010). The turnover of English teachers in kindergartens is unsurprisingly high (see section 6.8.2).

In terms of stakeholder power, another concern is that the heavy focus on parental expectation means that children's voices have been largely ignored when making school policy (Ofsted, 2011). Due to their young age, children have been excluded from participating in school policy matters (Fenton-Smith & Gurney, 2016; Hsieh, 2006; Tian, 2014). Yet, the focus group discussions with children in this research indicate that they have already developed perceptions of language learning and some language awareness with regard to English (see also Hsieh, 2011). In general, the children's responses are aligned with the adults' perceptions (Cremin & Slatter, 2004) but they can 'reappropriate adult-agendas and re-make the world as theirs' (Hichenberg, 2019, p.55). One major perception which is inconsistent with the adults' views concerns how to define English classes. Many adult participants observe that current English language education is full of games and therefore conclude it is just a form of playing (see section 6.4.2.1), but the children themselves decide whether it is play according to their intrinsic enjoyment, positive affect, the initiative role, and flexibility (Howard et al., 2006; Li & Zhang, 2017; Pyle & Alaca, 2016). The discipline constraints and the directive role of teachers make them feel that English classes are a form of teaching even though it is interesting (see section 6.7.1). Moreover, the participating children do not have consistent and strong preferences for foreign English teachers over local teachers as the adults do; for the children, 'understandable' and 'interesting' are the most important teacher qualities rather than where the teacher comes from (see sections 6.7.2 & 6.7.3).

To tackle the communication obstacles among different actors in schools, researchers have asserted that the headteacher responsibility system is not meant to be *headteacher-determined* but should be *headteacher-led* (Jiang et al., 2016; L. Liu, 2015; Wang, 2000). Nevertheless, what this research found is that although school's decisions about whether to comply with the government ban on English education are closely related to the roles of other actors, the direct engagement of these actors in decision-making process is still very low.

7.4 A model of preschool English LEPP in China

The above section analyses the interactions and tensions between different actors, different levels and different schools in terms of preschool English LEPP. Taking all these discussions together, this section sets out a model to explain the interactions between various elements that constrain and enable the development of preschool English LEPP in China (see Figure 7.1).
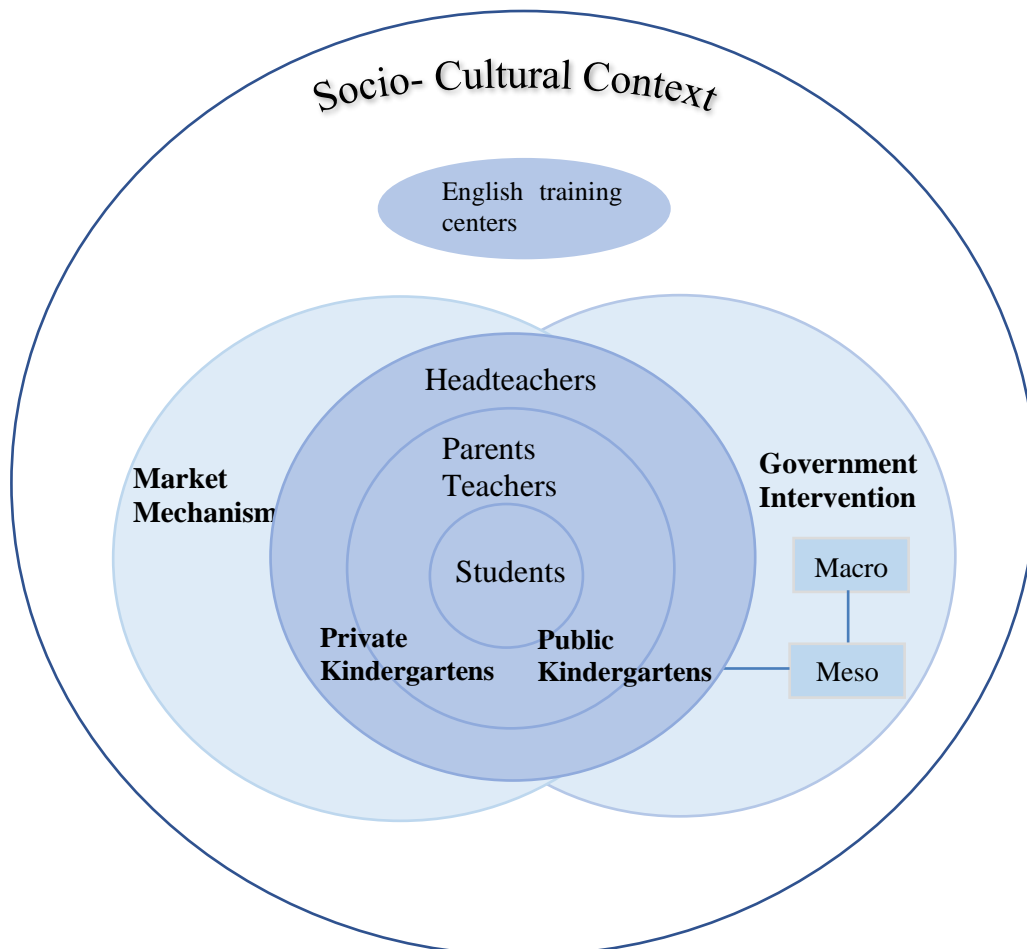
Figure 7.1 A model of preschool English LEPP in China

The model depicts a central three-way relationship between government, the market and kindergartens. In China, since the 1970s, preschool education has been drastically transformed, moving from government-dominated to market-dominated and now to the combination of government-leading and market-complementary mechanism (Cai et al., 2019). This trajectory manifests the pull and push between government interventions and market forces. On the one hand, as analysed in section 7.1.1, the government is responsible for the overall planning, coordination and management oversight of the preschool education

sector, in spite of decentralising trends (Zhou, 2011) and curriculum decisions are still 'centralized, hierarchical and bureaucratic' (Li & Chen, 2017, p. 1480). Under the top-down governance, it would be expected that the local education authorities could effectively regulate both private and public kindergartens to remove English language education. However, although the local education officials involved in this study expressed support for this macro policy, it is not well implemented and enforced in practice. For one thing, the demand at the micro level for early years English learning is very high (see section 6.4). For another, although the government has played a more active and important role in preschool education over time, there are still administrative difficulties in supervising all kindergartens effectively (see section 5.5) and the government cannot bear all preschool education costs. Influenced by the policy of preschool education marketisation in the 1990s and 2000s, the market mechanism still plays a major role in the sector. At present, the majority of kindergartens in China are still private, and their main source of funding is fee-paying parents (see section 7.2.2). These factors contribute to the disparity between government policy and kindergarten practice and to the division between public kindergarten and private kindergartens. Compared with the strict control of public schools, many management measures in the private sector stay on the surface rather than becoming embedded in kindergarten operations (Wang, 2015; Zhu, 2013). In other words, the greater the dependence on government support, the greater the compliance with government policies; conversely, the greater the dependence on student fees, the greater the importance of satisfying parents' demands. That is why in the model of preschool English LEPP (Figure 7.1), the concentric circles representing school sites have public kindergartens on the left (nearer the government) and private kindergartens on the right (nearer the market). Within each kindergarten, headteachers have the highest position in order to deal with external and internal relationships and make the decision on whether to provide English education and how to provide it, while children's voices are largely neglected and the parents and teachers have limited authority to influence the school's decisions (see sections 6.6 & 7.3).

The interplay between government intervention and the market, and between different actors at different levels within the kindergarten, constitute the major features of the model shown in Figure 7.1. These interactions highlight three elements in LEPP: process, actors and context (Johnson, 2013). The diverse practices of different types of kindergartens suggest that how macro LEPP is realised depends on the lower level (Chua & Baldauf, 2011; Lam, 2007; Liddicoat & Baldauf, 2008). Simultaneously, the effectiveness of micro planning and

policy is also closely related to the macro context (Canagarajah, 2006; Chua & Baldauf, 2011; Hamid, 2019). In this research, it is clear that government constrains the overall development of preschool English education (see section 7.2.2). Hence it is necessary to view LEPP as a multi-level, contingent and situated process (Johnson, 2013; Peláez & Usma, 2016). Without cooperation and support at each level, neither top-down nor bottom-up approaches to educational reforms can work very well (Fullan, 1994; Li & Chen, 2016; Chua & Baldauf, 2011). In addition to the spotlight on the different levels, the findings in this study also confirm that to fully understand LEPP, it cannot be isolated from the broad social contexts in which it is located (Chua & Baldauf, 2011; Martin, 2005). In this research, the high demand for preschool English learning, the interplay between the market and government, the division between public and private kindergartens, and the top-down education system all have deep roots in what is/was happening in China socially, culturally, politically and economically. These complex, interwoven contextual factors either constrain or enable actors' agency in responding to government or school policy (Choi, 2019; Bouchard & Glasgow, 2019; Liddicoat & Taylor-Leech, 2020). No person's agency equates to free will (Bouchard & Glasgow, 2019; Liddicoat & Taylor-Leech, 2020). At the school level, it is evident how different actors influence each other. In spite of holding the school's highest level of authority, headteachers also need to consider a range of contextual factors and respond to requirements or suggestions from other actors such as teachers, parents and education departments (Chua & Soo, 2019; Johnson, 2013; Spolsky, 2009). In the public kindergartens, although headteachers do not oppose preschool English teaching and learning, they do not feel at liberty to provide it due to the nature of their schools. Likewise, at the meso level, the agency of education officials is also constrained by other government authorities and local conditions on the ground (see section 5.5).

In all, the negotiations between different levels, actors and schools jointly contribute to the current picture of preschool English LEPP in China. What is more, from a wider perspective, these interplays also affect the entire ecology of early childhood English education (see Figure 7.1). Outside of kindergartens, the early-years English language-learning market, both online and offline, has seen considerable growth in response to strong parental demand for a head-start in English for young children. Recent reports state that this market value reached 26 billion yuan (£3 billion) in 2017 and this figure is estimated to increase to 62.8 billion yuan (£7 billion) in 2021 (Huang & Tian, 2019). The present study found that many parents in both private and public kindergartens would like to send their children to early

childhood English-language training centres, even though they can be pricey. According to a report that surveyed 20 million respondents, parents are willing to pay an average of 2,750 yuan (£307) a year for their kids to learn English and 27% are willing to pay as much as 5,000 yuan (£557) (Cheng, 2019; Jiemian, 2018). These English training centres to some extent relieve parents' concerns about public kindergartens not offering English classes. This scenario points to Wang and Zhang's (2017) argument that the social context has greater influence than national policy on children's language development in Chinese families. If macro planning and policy does not take the social context and local demands into consideration, it is hardly going to achieve its intended goals (Chua & Baldauf, 2011; Liddicoat & Taylor-Leech, 2014). What is worse, it may also cause unintended, undesirable outcomes, to be discussed in the next section.

7.5 A critical look at Chinese preschool English language education

Section 3.2.5 examined two critical issues relating to the English language's global dominance and English language education: English linguistic imperialism and social inequality. Chiming with the research of Pan and Seargeant (2012) and Zhao (2014), participants in this research do not regard English as a threat to Chinese languages and cultures. Although there are participants who worried that an early starting age for learning English would cause children some confusion between pinyin and English (see section 6.4), this is mainly because of their similar alphabetic writing systems. The majority of Chinese participants in this research argued that children's Mandarin skills are the top preschool education priority, but they regarded learning English as an additional desirable skill to help children engage with the world and be better prepared for the future. The pragmatic value of English raises public enthusiasm for learning it in spite of the government ban. However, not every parent can afford the fees for private kindergartens or private tutoring in English.

Similar to the Chinese situation, South Korea also initiated government bans on preschool English language education and had met strong opposition from the grassroots level (see section 3.2.4.1). The dominant cause for concern is that the ban would increase the attainment gap between children from different socioeconomic backgrounds, because typically only the children of families who can afford private English classes will start to learn English from an early age (Ghani, 2018). As one parent in South Korea complained:

We will encounter the unavoidable gap between the haves and the have-nots. It's simple: No money, no opportunity, no education. That's how it will affect the children here in Korea. (Ghani, 2018, para. 25)

In a meta-analysis involving 215,649 students from 78 independent samples in studies in China, the researchers Liu et al. (2020) found that family SES correlates more strongly with scholastic attainment in English and Chinese than scores in mathematics, science and other subject areas. A potential reason is that high-SES parents invest more in providing their children with a sufficient language learning environment and instilling good language learning habits, while school education plays a more important role in promoting students' science and mathematics learning. In studies by Butler and Le (2018) and Chen et al. (2020), it was found that children from high-SES families received more private English classes. The present research, with its focus on exploring participants' perceptions of preschool English language education rather than on the demographic factors potentially influencing those perceptions, has not specifically investigated family SES. However, the influence of family SES on children's English attainment can be observed to some extent by considering the categories of kindergartens.

Compared with private kindergartens, public kindergartens usually charge lower fees (Feng, 2017; Guo, 2015), but that does not always mean that the families of students in public kindergartens have less material advantage. In China, due to the limited number of public kindergartens and the perception that public kindergartens provide better education, many high-ranking public kindergartens mainly serve the children of powerful or economically privileged families (Hu & Li, 2012; Hu et al., 2015; Song, 2019). Even in ordinary public kindergartens, the majority of students come from middle-classes families (Song, 2019). This situation is different from the USA, where public preschool programmes mainly serve children from low-income families (Karch, 2013). In this research, Kindergarten A and Kindergarten B are both first-rank kindergartens in Hefei. Many parents choose these kindergartens not just because of the lower tuition fees, but more importantly because they believe that public kindergartens can give their children a better start (see section 6.6.3). Indeed, demand for places is such that it is not easy to enrol children in these two public kindergartens. Some of the parents taking part in this research had bought flats near their preferred public kindergartens. In contrast, children in public-interest private kindergartens (with fees comparable to public kindergartens) are more likely to be from less-advantaged

families (Song, 2019). Song's (2019) research shows that 45% of low-income families send their children to public-interest private kindergartens while only 15% of high-income families choose this option. In the present study, Kindergarten C is a public-interest private kindergarten whose English teacher also taught English in a non–public-interest private kindergarten. This teacher's view was that students in the purely private kindergarten were developing better English skills:

> If this school [Kindergarten C] thinks that only I can teach them, it is a wrong decision... At the other school I go to, I also teach English once a week, but I think the students are much better. They can speak anything, a lot of English. I witnessed that after my class, Chinese teachers also teach them some English… And you know, parents also contribute. We all want children to learn well. (English Teacher C)

In the fieldwork observations, I also noted some differences between public-interest private kindergartens and other settings in terms of English environment as well as children's enthusiasm for learning English. Compared with the other kindergartens, Kindergarten C provided the fewest environmental opportunities for children to be exposed to English, even fewer than the public kindergartens (see section 6.3.2), and fewer participating parents have sent or planned to send their children to English training centres. Also, the focus group children in Kindergarten C seemed to have less enthusiasm for speaking English with me than their counterparts in other settings. Without further investigation, it would be too hasty to conclude that children's English attainment in public-interest private kindergartens tends not to progress as well as in other types of kindergartens, but this research raises this possibility. The existing body of research has suggested that the more favourable the family socio-economic background, the greater the language competence that children can achieve (Butler, 2014b; Hoff, 2013; Howard et al., 2014; Lamb, 2011). As Tinsley and Comfort (2012) state, 'if there is no national policy for support, ad hoc non-statutory arrangements by the more advantaged social groups will exacerbate social inequality' (p. 78).

For the purpose of minimising the effect of socio-economic gaps on children's English language achievement, Butler (2015) has suggested lowering the official starting age for learning English. However, at other education levels where English is officially part of the curriculum, there are still inequalities (see section 3.2.5.2). Crucially, English language inequalities are not just a linguistic or educational concern, but an important social issue

which involves many non-linguistic factors such as polity and economy (Ferguson, 2012; Lin, 2007; Ricento, 2015). To change this picture, governments should be more accountable for tackling inequality, by putting poverty reduction and equity high on the government agenda, improving financial allocation, increasing overall teaching quality, and enhancing participation of different social groups and individuals (Hayes, 2017; UNESCO, 2009). Apparently, there is still a long way to go in China.

7.6 Chapter summary

This chapter discussed the current picture of preschool English LEPP in China in relation to decentralising education reforms and the marketisation of kindergartens. It analysed English LEPP as a multi-level process involving the agency of different actors as well as factors influencing the disparity between macro-level policy and micro-level practice, and the division between public and private kindergartens. Taking all these findings together, section 7.4 has set out a model in which preschool English LEPP takes place in a complex and interwoven network of levels, contexts and actors. The tensions between different levels have deep roots in the wider social context in which they are located (Chua & Baldauf, 2011; Johnson, 2013). Without satisfying the micro-level demand for English education, macro-level planning and policy not only falls short of achieving its intended goal but may intensify inequalities between students from more and less advantaged backgrounds. Based on these considerations, the next chapter will summarise the main findings in this research and present the implications for further studies.

Chapter 8 Conclusion

This study investigates preschool English language education in China by examining different kindergartens' practices in English language education, the socio-political contexts for these practices, and the roles and perceptions of individual actors. This is the concluding chapter. It begins with a summary of the main findings corresponding to the four research questions set out in chapter one and proceeds to address the implications of this study and its contribution to the field. Finally, the chapter discusses the limitations of the research followed by my personal reflections as a doctoral researcher.

8.1 Summary of findings

With its initial focus on the tensions between government bans of English language education in kindergartens and the trend for English learning to begin at an earlier age, this research approaches preschool English LEPP by examining how it is played out at the meso level (district) and micro level (school). Overall, there are four main research questions.

- **Question 1**: How is preschool English LPP negotiated and interpreted at the meso level?

- **Question 2**: How do different kindergartens respond to the government policies on preschool English language education?

- **Question 3**: How do school-based actors (headteachers, parents, English teachers and children) perceive and engage in preschool English language education?

- **Question 4**: How do the different policy and planning levels interact, impact and influence each other?

To answer these questions, qualitative data was collected from two local education officials at the meso level and from five kindergartens (two public and three private kindergartens) at the micro level. In total, there are seven key findings drawn from the collected data.

Finding 1: Meso level plays an important mediation role.

In the Chinese education administration system, local education authorities are responsible for putting national policies into practice and supervising schools' practices (Shi, 2016; OECD, 2016a). The local education officials in this research clearly conveyed their supportive attitude towards the policy of removing schoolification from kindergartens and expressed the view that English language education should be banned in both public and private kindergartens (see section 5.3). However, there is an obvious disparity between their beliefs and their practices. Constrained by problems of insufficient personnel, funding, and the extent of the education department's authority, a robust and effective mechanism to supervise all types of kindergartens has not emerged (Wang, 2015; Zhu, 2013). Compared with the officials' high degree of control over public kindergartens, they are not able to exert the same influence on private sector kindergartens (see sections 5.5 & 6.5). To some extent, they turn a blind eye on provision of English classes in private settings.

Finding 2: Demand for English learning is high in kindergartens.

In contrast to the education officials' attitudes, the majority of participants in the five participating kindergartens have a generally supportive attitude towards preschool English provision (see section 6.4; see also Jin et al., 2016; Wei, 2015; Yang, 2017). In their opinions, English should be viewed principally as a language for communication rather than a primary-level subject as the officials see it. Additionally, most of the teachers and parents believe that the delivery of play-based English teaching and learning does not go against children's natural development. Instead, it instils and builds children's interests in English language and provides more opportunities for their future development (see sections 6.4 & 7.1.2). These opinions reflect key issues in the debates on the scope and rationale of schoolification and suggest why there is a high demand for giving children an early start in learning English. In line with this demand, parents specifically choose kindergartens offering English classes and/or they send their children to English training centres outside kindergarten hours.

Finding 3: Different types of kindergartens respond differently to the government ban on English language education.

In the context of strong parental demand for English learning, kindergartens in this study show variation in their responses to the government ban on preschool English education. This research found that the public kindergartens do not provide explicit English teaching but the English language is used on occasion (see section 6.3.1). In contrast, English classes are common in the private kindergartens (see section 6.3.2) although current practice and

development of this provision has been constrained in many ways (see section 7.2.2). In the comparison between non–public-interest and public-interest private kindergartens, it was found that the latter have less English teaching time and fewer environments where the English language is present (see sections 6.3.2.2 & 6.3.2.5). The kindergartens' different responses reflect not only their understanding of preschool English language education but also the interplay between the kindergartens and the local education authorities.

Finding 4: English is mainly provided as an independent course.

Huang (2015) found that there were four kinds of English language programmes in Chinese kindergartens: 1) full-immersion programmes; 2) half-immersion programmes; 3) English classes for all students; and 4) 'English interest' classes for those students who desire to enrol in them. The data collected in the present research show that the third type is the most typical form of provision. With the goals of stimulating children's interest in learning English and instilling some basic knowledge of the language, across the three kindergartens offering English classes, the subject is provided for all children in the setting and taught by foreign or home English teachers in a play-based way (see section 6.3.2; see also She, 2017; Yang, 2017). In Kindergarten C and Kindergarten D, English is taught by a part-time foreign English teacher but Kindergarten C has only one class per week while Kindergarten D provides classes twice weekly. In Kindergarten E, the full-time Chinese teachers deliver English classes every day. However, outside the regular English classes, students have very few opportunities in kindergarten to hear, speak or read the English language. The main curriculum of each participant school is designed fundamentally in accordance with the *Guidelines for Kindergarten Education (Trial)* issued by the MOE (2001d). English education is not well integrated into children's daily life in kindergartens.

Finding 5: There is a top-down hierarchy within the kindergartens.

In all participating kindergartens, by adopting the 'headteacher responsibility system', headteachers are the final decision-makers on school matters (see sections 6.6 & 7.3; see also Tian, 2014; Liu, 2015). Under headteachers' leadership, English teachers are in charge of how to deliver lessons to children, and parents are encouraged to join in a partnership with kindergartens (see section 6.6). Teachers and parents can affect school policies to some extent, but their influence does not go beyond giving opinions and proposing suggestions (Tian, 2014). Regarding this top-down management, parents in this research do not expect greater involvement in making school decisions while English teachers generally would like

the kindergartens to provide a more supportive and collaborative environment for them (see sections 6.6 & 6.8). Many of the teachers' opinions and grievances, such as complaints about teaching resources and workload, have not had much attention from school leaders (see section 6.8.3). Similarly, children's opinions are not well heeded.

Finding 6: There are mismatches between adults' and children's perceptions regarding English language education.

While this finding could be regarded as a subsection of Finding 5, it is treated separately in order to give due prominence to children's voices. The majority of participating children who had learnt some English hold a generally positive attitude towards it, but some of their opinions differ from those of the adults. The interviews with adult participants indicate clear preferences for foreign English teachers (see section 6.3.2.1) and a common perception that English classes are more like playing than learning (see section 6.4.2.1). However, the children themselves do not think that English classes are like playing (see section 6.7.1) and some of the children feel more comfortable with teachers who have Chinese faces and can speak Mandarin well (see section 6.7.3). These views show that children should not be excluded from taking part in school policy-making; instead, they are capable of actively making suggestions and expressing their thoughts (Clark & Moss, 2011; Hsieh, 2011; Smith, 2015).

Finding 7: The overall picture of preschool English language education is concerning.

Viewed at a surface level, it is clear that English classes are widely provided in kindergartens, but there are concerning developments if one delves deep into the circumstances of the provision (She, 2017; Wang, 2014; Wei, 2015). Drawing on the data obtained in this research, there are at least three issues that need to be considered.

Quality issue

With no national support and guidance on English language provision, few kindergartens actually know how to provide quality English teaching for children (Ning, 2016; She, 2017; Wei, 2015). First of all, there are very few qualified English teachers who are not only proficient in English but also have sufficient pedagogical knowledge and skills for teaching English to very young children (see section 6.8.2). Secondly, the settings do not provide supportive and well-resourced environments for English teachers (see section 6.8.3). In each of three kindergartens offering English classes, the English teachers are concerned about the

lack of appropriate teaching resources, professional training and evaluations. Moreover, for the foreign English teachers, the social perceptions that white English teachers are superior can also have negative impacts on the non-white teachers' interest and confidence in their work (see section 6.8.2). Overall, given the problem that high-quality teaching is not guaranteed, it is especially concerning that CPH has been used like a commercial slogan or refrain to attract and persuade parents to send their children to learn English in the early years (Chen, 2011).

Management issue

Kindergarten C and Kindergarten D have both hired a part-time foreign English teacher through education agencies. This is a common staffing arrangement for English provision in kindergartens. The triangular relationship of education agencies, kindergartens and English teachers means that these foreign English teachers are actually employed by the agencies not the kindergartens themselves. These teachers only come to the school when they have classes and they do not attend school meetings and activities as do the full-time Chinese teachers. The loose relationship between kindergartens and English teachers heightens the risk of high staff turnover and also raises the question of who is in charge of teachers' professional development (see section 6.8.3). In the views of Headteachers C and D, this professional development is the duty and responsibility of the education agency. Without a fair and robust system to recruit, manage and motivate English teachers, it is perhaps not surprising that they have only weak loyalty to the kindergartens where they work and little motivation to continue doing the job (see sections 6.8.2 & 6.8.3).

Inequality issue

Given that not all kindergartens provide English classes, it follows that not every child has learned some English at the preschool age, and for those children who have been taught English there is also variation in their English skills (see section 7.5). This leads to the potential for deepening inequalities of opportunity and attainment. The results of this study provide some evidence that the SES of parents has a more powerful influence than government policy in determining when children start to learn English and what English level the children can achieve (Butler, 2015). Parents who think English learning is essential and can afford fees for private kindergartens or external English training centres are able to give their children an early start (Butler, 2014a, 2014b; Ghani, 2018). As a result, preschool English language education goes beyond the questions of whether and how kindergartens

should provide English classes. A vital issue is the potential social impact arising from the mismatch between government policies and micro practices.

Relating the above findings to the historical and contemporary social contexts in China, this thesis further explained the disparities between government policies and school practices from the perspectives of centralisation and decentralisation of the Chinese education administration, as well as and the pull-push relationship between government intervention and market (see sections 7.1 & 7.2). In the decentralising education reforms, local governments and schools are supposed to have more autonomy in managing human resources, financial resources, and teaching (D. Feng, 2020; Gao et al., 2011). However, in terms of the curriculum, which is the focus of this research, it was found that the central government still holds the power and control and there is little room for public and private schools to develop their curriculum (Huang et al., 2016; Qi, 2017). Even though many private kindergartens have English classes, they cannot develop these programmes free from government influence (see section 7.2.2). However, unlike other education levels where the private sector accounts for only a very few schools, at the preschool level, private kindergartens are dominant in number (MOE, 2020a). The government continues to need a large number of private kindergartens to share the cost of preschool provision and to realise the goal of universal preschool education. This dependence, in turn, highlights the role of parents' inputs in preschool education. Largely reliant on tuition fees paid by parents, some private kindergartens are obliged to meet parental demands rather than comply with government policies (Wang, 2015). Therefore, a major finding across this thesis is that in spite of the government ban on English education in kindergartens, such education still exists. To explain this, a model has been built which depicts the dynamics and complexity of preschool English LEPP in China (see section 7.4). From the perspective of LEPP, three major conclusions can be drawn from the above findings and discussions:

1) Each level matters. The LEPP is a multi-level process and there is no single and linear relationship between macro and micro LEPP; rather, they are intricately linked with each other (Chimbutane, 2019; Chua & Baldauf, 2011; Liddicoat & Baldauf, 2008; Liddicoat & Taylor-Leech, 2014).

2) The negotiations between different LEPP levels and the actual practice cannot be understood apart from their social context and the history that produced that context

(Hamid & Baldauf, 2014; Cooper, 1989; Higgins & Brady, 2016).

3) Micro-level planning and policy is the work of a series of individuals (Corson, 1999; Johnson, 2013; Liddicoat & Baldauf, 2008). Each actor interacts with others and makes overt or covert choices at their own level to influence language practices, but the influence they exert is not the same (Chimbutane, 2019; Johnson, 2013; Lam, 2007).

Overall, the research has underscored that the actors involved, the contexts, and the multi-level nature of the process are three vital components when examining LEPP (Johnson, 2013).

8.2 Contributions of the research

With the above findings and discussions, this study makes contributions to the fields of LEPP, education administration and early childhood English education in several ways. Firstly, the study contributes to the understanding of the different levels of LEPP in China. Compared with the development of the field around the world, research on LPP in China has emerged relatively late (see section 3.1.1.3). So far, much of the work in China on foreign language education falls into the category of descriptive studies on the practice of foreign language education and on the policy texts, so there is a paucity of research literature exploring the process of foreign LPP (Shen, 2017). The current study, by focusing on how kindergartens implement the government ban on English language education, does not simply investigate whether kindergartens provide English courses, but also facilitates understanding of the Chinese education administration system. The findings indicate that that even in a centralised and rigid education system, there is still room for local reinterpretations and modifications (Cruz-Arcila, 2018; Constantinou & Ainscow, 2020). Therefore, it is important to take a holistic and dynamic perspective on the multi-level process of LEPP.

With the focus on policy transfer across different levels, this study also affords a good opportunity to understand the significance of micro sites and actors by probing the public-private comparison. Hamid and Baldauf (2014) have suggested that the public-private distinction should be regarded as an additional important feature in the field of LEPP, but most of the research on early childhood English language education has focused on the state-maintained schools while the private sector is under-researched (Brining, 2015). The unique

history of preschool education in China shows that public and private kindergartens both have fundamental and important roles in shaping the outcomes of government policies. The various English practices in different kindergartens enrich our understanding that schools are not only the sites that implements macro planning and policy but may also actively resist policy (Baldauf, 2006; Johnson & Johnson, 2015; Liddicoat & Taylor-Leech, 2014).

Finally, this research also deepens our understanding of early childhood English language education through capturing the perspectives and experiences of different actors. As a dominant international language, English has greatly influenced language policy and practice in many regions and countries (Gil & Adamson, 2011; Hamid & Nguyen, 2016; Ferguson, 2006). Other studies have noted that an increasing number of children around the world begin to learn second/foreign languages (most commonly English) at the preschool age (Enever, 2018; Ng & Rao, 2013; Murphy & Evangelou, 2016). The data in this research confirm this trend. As emphasised above, there is strong demand for preschool English education (see sections 6.4 & 7.1.2) and children themselves also have interest in learning English (see sections 6.7). However, it is necessary to keep a critical eye on the quality and equity of current preschool English education in China.

8.3 Implications of the research

In light of the study's findings and contributions set out above, there are several implications for policy-making in education, the conduct of preschool English language education, and doing LEPP research.

8.3.1 Implications for government policy makers

Preschool education is the start of a child's learning journey and the foundation for formal learning. It is an important agenda for governments to promote inclusion and equality of preschool education (OECD, 2017b). In the last decade, preschool education has risen in priority on the government's agenda in China (Li et al., 2016; Tsegay et al., 2017). In this context, universalising preschool education and removing schoolification from kindergartens are two important strategies in the development of preschool education (MOE et al., 2017; State Council, 2010b). The intention is that these strategies will grant children equal access to preschool education and an equal playing field upon entering primary school because they will start from 'zero' in learning English and other primary-level subjects.

However, people at the micro level have different perspectives on schoolification and preschool English education.

The incongruity between government policies and school practices suggests that education officials before making policies should take into account front-line educators' opinions and conduct in-depth investigations to understand how policies are shaped in a complex social context and how these policies can affect the social context in return (Constantinou & Ainscow, 2020; Hong & Hua, 2015; Saiti & Eliophotou-Menon, 2009). Instead of adopting policies with a single standard, there should remain enough flexibility in policies to accommodate diversity (Liu & Liao, 2012; OECD, 2016b). Given the current education governance system and the nature of the preschool sector, an ideal education administration system would involve the building of a stable relationship between government, market and school. Within this relationship, the government is in charge of macro-management and promotes equal access to education, the market maintains effective competition and ensures diversified involvement, and schools have autonomous power to develop their school-based curricula and programmes (Wang et al., 2019; Yang & Ni, 2018).

Additionally, policy makers should actively seek evidence-based answers to controversial questions (Cai et al., 2019; UNESCO, 2013). In this research, there are many different voices on issues such as what schoolification is, whether schoolification should be prohibited in kindergartens, and whether children should learn English from a young age. To better tackle these issues and debates and to provide scientific guidance for kindergartens, governments should increase their research funding and encourage cross-regional and cross-disciplinary studies (Zhang & Cai, 2014). Universities, research institutions and kindergartens should work together to strengthen the relationship between policy, research and practice. In partnership, they should be involved not only in the formulation of policies but should also scrutinise the implementation process and provide reflective recommendations for future policy making and curriculum innovations (Du et al., 2019).

8.3.2 Implications for school management

In this study, all kindergartens, regardless of their type, operate in a top-down manner whereby teachers, parents and children are not involved much in school decisions (see sections 6.6 & 7.3). To tackle the communication barriers between different actors and

improve the quality of school leadership, a more flexible system is needed.

As school leaders, headteachers have the major responsibility for mediating external and internal relationships, developing the school vision, setting school priorities and objectives, and improving teaching and learning (Day & Sammons, 2013). However, they should not be the only decision-makers. Instead, a collaborative and collective approach is recommended (Daly et al., 2020; Day & Sammons, 2013; Fidan & Balcı, 2017). It is essential to listen to teachers' voices and build direct relationships between leaders and teachers (Fidan & Balcı, 2017). Additionally, schools should wholly support teachers' personal and professional development and encourage them to contribute school policy in order to increase their sense of belonging (Daly et al., 2020; Day & Sammons, 2013; Fidan & Balcı, 2017). If schools work with education agencies to recruit teachers, the respective roles and responsibilities of schools and agencies should be set out clearly.

Aside from the headteachers and teachers, a collaborative process of school decision-making should involve other individuals who are potentially impacted by school decisions (Daly et al., 2020; Day & Sammons, 2013; Tian, 2014). This research has highlighted the family-kindergarten partnership as well as the importance of children's voices. It must be recognised that children are the experts in their own lives (Clark & Moss, 2011; Smith, 2015). The children in this study have clearly shown that they are able to express their motivations for learning English, their experiences and feelings about English classes and English teachers. By treating children as agentic actors not passive recipients, and taking the time to understand their perceptions, children will be made to feel they are important and this will help build children's self-esteem and promote stronger bonds and relationships between adults and children (Clark & Moss, 2011). Moreover, heeding children's views will also provide valuable opportunities for educators to reconsider how best to organise school routines and activities and how to improve the quality of teaching (Clark & Moss, 2011; Smith, 2015).

8.3.3 Implications for preschool English language education

For preschool English language education, the first implication of this research is the need to pay more attention to the teaching environment and the quality of teaching. In this study, CPH was repeatedly mentioned by participants as a reason for kindergartens to offer English

classes (see section 6.4). However, it is important to reiterate that so far in the literature there is no definitive answer to the question of whether younger learners have distinct advantages over older learners in the learning context of foreign language instruction (Rixon, 2013; Murphy, 2014). If the learning conditions are not appropriate, introducing English to children at a young age may be problematic (Murphy & Evangelou, 2016; Sun et al., 2016; Rixon, 2013).

With the focus on teaching quality, another important implication is the promotion of a fair, rational, unprejudiced attitude towards English teachers regardless of race or nationality. The interviews with parents and headteachers indicate a clear preference for foreign English teachers (see section 6.3.2.1). However, it is doubtful whether foreign English teachers are superior to local English teachers on objective grounds (Ding & Wang, 2019; Fang et al., 2010). None of the foreign English teachers in this research have professional education or training in preschool English language education (see sections 6.3.2.1 & 6.8.2). What is worse, because these teachers tend to work part-time and without long-term working visas, the turnover is very high, with knock-on effects for consistency of teaching and learning. Another bias that needs to be tackled is the perception that white English teachers have better English-speaking skills (China Daily, 2014; Quinn, 2019). In this research, even though none of the participating foreign teachers are white and the Chinese participants themselves did not express any preference for white English teachers, the foreign teachers reported that this bias still prevails more widely and has caused them deep dissatisfaction (see section 6.8.2). Therefore, it is essential to build a non-discriminatory recruitment and evaluation system to select, motivate and retain qualified English teachers.

Aside from English teachers, other actors can also contribute to the improvement of children's language competence. Understood in a broad sense, English language education is not limited to English classes but can also include English language use in other school activities, as well as tuition by family members (Yang, 2017). In this study, it was noted that the overall English teaching time in the three kindergartens is quite short, ranging from 20 minutes to 100 minutes per week. Other than in the English lessons, there is not much opportunity for children to use English in their daily activities. To boost children's English exposure time, Chinese teachers and parents can use the teaching resources in the English classes to help children review what they have learnt. Additionally, parents themselves are free to select English materials such as books, songs and videos at home to interest their

children and to intentionally increase the opportunities for children to access these materials (Jin et al., 2016; Yang, 2017).

8.3.4 Implications for LEPP researchers

For LEPP researchers, an important implication of this research is the need to take a multi-leveled and context-dependent view in order to understand the actual practices of LEPP (Hornberger & Johnson, 2007; Jones, 2012; Johnson & Ricento, 2013). The interplays and disparities between different levels have deep roots in the social context in which they are situated (Hamid & Baldauf, 2014; Cooper, 1989; Higgins & Brady, 2016). When analysing education policies, it is essential to understand the education administrative mechanisms, to elucidate how the policies are made and implemented and what are the weaknesses and strengths of the mechanisms (UNESCO, 2013). In this research, decentralisation and marketisation are two major factors that influence the current status of preschool English education.

Turning from the vertical process, the comparison of practices across the kindergartens also highlights the fact that individual differences are prominent even among schools located in the same area. Therefore, it is necessary to regard school type (public/private) as a major factor affecting the provision of school-based language programmes (Hamid & Baldauf, 2014; Rahman et al., 2019). Also, in each site, the different agency that actors exert and the language ideology they hold are crucial for gaining insights into how language programmes are delivered, what challenges are met, and how best to deliver the teaching (Chimbutane, 2019; Hodges & Prys, 2019).

8.4 Limitations of the research

As with any piece of research, this study has some limitations. One is the selection bias. In this research, the sample size is small and only qualitative data was collected. All participant kindergartens are located in the urban area of Hefei and in each kindergarten, only one higher class took part in the research. The differences between different areas and levels of kindergarten class are not considered and within the scope of this study, it was not feasible to explore preschool English LEPP at levels higher than municipal education authorities. Although I believe the findings offer valuable implications and contributions to the fields of LEPP and early childhood English language education, the findings are closely bound to

Chinese culture and the local context in Hefei, so they can hardly be generalised or transferred to other research sites (Bryman, 2012; Cohen et al., 2018; Creswell, 2014). What happened outside the scope of this research is unknown. It cannot be concluded across the board that public kindergartens do not have English classes and private kindergartens do have English classes. Other studies have found that some public kindergartens in other areas do offer English teaching (Wang, 2014; She, 2017). The reasons for these differences need further investigations. Moreover, the local governments' laissez-faire attitude towards English education cannot be assumed to apply to all management and oversight of private kindergartens. For example, as reflected by headteachers in this research, there is very strict supervision in place for private kindergartens in the areas of security, health and safety.

As a qualitative researcher, another limitation is my own impact on the research. I am aware that my personal background, bias, role and experiences all affect the process of gathering, analysing and reporting data (Cohen et al., 2018; Gray, 2014). Due to these kinds of personal influences, different researchers might produce different findings even if the research was conducted in the same contexts. To maximise the reliability and credibility of the data, various measures have been put in place, such as triangulation, thick description, and staying in the school sites for as long as feasible (see section 4.7). However, it remains uncertain whether my presence in schools affected what was really going on there and what participants said in the interviews (Anderson, 2010; Flick, 2018; Wellington, 2015).

Moreover, this research is also burdened by translation issues. The fieldwork was conducted in China so the majority of my participants spoke Mandarin, but the thesis is presented in English which unavoidably requires the researcher to make many translation-related decisions. Considering the differences between these two languages, to maintain the authenticity of the original data, I chose to pursue conceptual equivalence rather than lexical equivalence (Chen & Boore, 2009; Squires, 2009). Over the whole process of translation, I tried my utmost to make sure the translated texts were 'acceptably equivalent to the source language' (Chen & Boore, 2009, p. 236) and intelligible to anyone interested in this research (Esposito, 2001). In addition, I used the technique of back-translation to check the accuracy of the translation and employed a native-English teacher to proofread the final translations (see section 4.6.3). However, as the only person who collected data and can access the original data, I have to concede that my decisions on what and how to translate may yield some limitations to the presented data.

8.5 Suggestions for further research

The limitations together with the findings can stimulate further research in the relevant fields on the following aspects.

One aspect which prompts further research is sample selection. With the aim of producing a more holistic picture of preschool English LEPP in China, additional research can consider recruiting samples from different kindergarten class levels and from more economically developed or less developed areas, so that the commonalities and differences among the areas and grade levels can be more easily seen. Moreover, it would also be valuable to study informal language centres (Baldauf et al., 2008; Payne & Almansour, 2014). In China, the high demand for English learning in the early years has stimulated the surge of English training centres (Cheng, 2019; Jiemian, 2018). In the present study, it was found in both public and private kindergartens that some parents send their children to such centres. To some extent, these centres relieve the tension between government policy and parental demand and bring more opportunities for children to be exposed to the English language (see section 7.4). Future studies might make comparisons between English programmes provided by kindergartens and those offered in English training centres, and explore how English training centres affect the effectiveness of LEPP.

In the field of early childhood English education, more attention can be given to children's family backgrounds. A body of existing studies has identified that parents' SES and levels of engagement have greatly influenced their decisions on when their children start to learn English, what kinds of English programmes their children attend and what English level their children can achieve (Butler, 2015; Butler & Le, 2018; Howard et al., 2014; Lamb, 2011). This research addresses the impact of parents on kindergartens' decision-making about English provision and notes the potential influence of parents' SES on children's language competence, but I have not delved deep into this phenomenon. Future studies in China can take into account the family SES background and examine its relationship with children's English skills as well as the influence of family context on attitudes and decisions about language learning.

8.6 Personal reflections

This chapter has summarised the main findings, contributions and limitations of this research. It is expected that this study will contribute to knowledge in the fields of Chinese education governance, LEPP and English language education for children, and provide ideas for further research in the relevant areas. As for myself, having the opportunity to conduct this doctoral research has been one of the most invaluable experiences in my life.

As introduced in section 1.6, my personal motivation for doing this research stems from my personal experiences of learning English and my academic background in language education. Being a Chinese, I am acutely aware how strongly parents feel about education and how much pressure students bear under the current education system. At the time of writing this chapter, my cousin took part in the NCEE and when the news came in that he did not perform very well, the whole family (not just his parents, but also other close relatives) showed signs of anxiety, depression and powerlessness. Earlier this year, the family was also anxiously awaiting another cousin's entrance exam results for masters degree study and went to great lengths to help her prepare for the second interview. My family is typical of many Chinese families, who have strong ambitions for children's academic achievement and expect them to realise social advancement through education (Chen et al., 2020; Li et al., 2016; Ng & Wei, 2020; Zou et al., 2013). The old saying 'the worth of all other pursuits is small, only reading books excels all other careers' (万物皆下品，唯有读书高) is still spreading across society.

However, the competition for good education provision and resources is very fierce in contemporary Chinese society. In 2020, the term 'involution' (内卷化) was trending across the Chinese internet (Yuan, 2020). This term is borrowed from American anthropologist Clifford Geertz's work *Agricultural Involution* and means 'culture patterns that in reaching a definitive form, do not evolve into new patterns, but continue to develop only in the direction of internal complexities' (Hui, 2009, p.19). In the field of education, with limited education resources, it follows that the competition for admission to the 'good' schools has intensified (Yuan, 2020; Zhou, 2020). To get places in some distinguished kindergartens, parents may have to submit enrolment applications as soon as their children are born, but later the children will still have to pass various entrance tests and interviews organised by

the kindergartens (Sohu, 2020). In such a competitive climate, it is not surprising to see the growing anxieties and struggles that educators and parents encounter. The present study illuminates a dilemma: on the one hand, parents and kindergarten staff agree that children should have more play and free time in kindergarten because they will meet significant academic pressure later upon entering primary school; on the other hand, the competitive environment makes parents feel that it is vital to make full strategic use of the time in early childhood. Other than English classes, it is very common to see young children learning pinyin, maths, dance, chess, painting, swimming, piano and so on. This phenomenon, in the opinions of some education officials and headteachers, is irrational – even a little crazy – but from the parents' perspective, if children do not get exposed to these activities, how will they know whether children have talents and interests in these areas? What will they do if their children lag behind other children from the beginning? In the interview, one participant parent said:

> Everyone knows that attending extracurricular is not good, but no parent I know does not send their children to these extracurricular classes. It is not us who do not want to give children more time to play, but in such competitive environment, we do not have a choice. (Parent D2)

Grappling with these demands, kindergartens struggle to find the balance between parental demands and government policies. The kindergartens' resistance to the government ban on English language education once again suggests that without satisfying local needs and contexts, macro policies will not be wholly successful (Chua & Baldauf, 2011; Liddicoat & Taylor-Leech, 2014). Being a researcher myself, I continue to think about how my observations have shaped the research questions and findings, and how best to manage data to help readers understand what is going on in terms of preschool English language education in China.

Like other PhD students, my doctoral journey has been exciting but also arduous. It has led me not only through these particular research fields, but also through numerous spirited debates. From the initial stage of choosing the research topics and making the research plans, to recruiting participants and collecting data, to analysing data and presenting findings, there have been many moments where I felt stuck and nothing seemed to make sense. These low points 'are almost inevitable; not easy to anticipate; and virtually impossible to provide

ready-made solutions for' (Wellington et al., 2005, p.34). To make this thesis as good as possible, I went through many cycles of writing-deleting-writing. At every stage, I had to reassure myself that this was just part of the process of learning and making progress, common to the experience of every researcher. I am very grateful to my supervisor, friends and families for their enormous support and encouragement in this journey. Thanks to their help, I can endure and progress through these tough times and I am very proud to see my growth as a researcher and as a person. The skills and knowledge that I have developed throughout this programme have helped me feel more confident to face the challenges ahead in my future and to know how to take a critical, rigorous and open attitude to research.

This last chapter may mark one of the final stages in my PhD journey, but because of this precious experience, my life has significantly changed. This is the beginning of my journey as a researcher. In the future, I hope I can always sustain this passion and continue to grow as a researcher and educator.

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Appendices

Appendix I: Ethical approval letter

Xuan Li
Registration number: 170125150
School of Education
Programme: Full-time Doctorate Program in the School of Education

Dear Xuan

PROJECT TITLE: An Exploration of English Language Education in Pre-schools in China
APPLICATION: Reference Number 022473

On behalf of the University ethics reviewers who reviewed your project, I am pleased to inform you that on 02/08/2018 the above-named project was **approved** on ethics grounds, on the basis that you will adhere to the following documentation that you submitted for ethics review:

- University research ethics application form 022473 (dated 02/08/2018).
- Participant information sheet 1050266 version 3 (02/08/2018).
- Participant information sheet 1050268 version 2 (02/08/2018).
- Participant information sheet 1050267 version 2 (02/08/2018).
- Participant consent form 1050269 version 2 (01/08/2018).
- Participant consent form 1050296 version 2 (02/08/2018).
- Participant consent form 1050270 version 2 (02/08/2018).

If during the course of the project you need to deviate significantly from the above-approved documentation please inform me since written approval will be required.

Yours sincerely

David Hyatt
Ethics Administrator
School of Education

Appendix II: Information sheet

Information sheet A
for adult participants

(English version)

1.   Research Project Title:

An Exploration of English Language Education in Pre-schools in China

2.   Invitation

I am Xuan Li, a PhD student at the University of Sheffield. You are being invited to take part in my PhD research project. Before you decide whether or not to participate, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. Thank you for reading this.

3.   What is the project's purpose?

In China, English is not officially introduced into curriculum until the primary level, but it is not unusual to see pre-schools teaching English. Thus, the main purpose of my research is to explore why and how this phenomenon happens.

4.   Why have I been chosen?

You have been chosen because you are currently involved in pre-school English language education and your participation will help us have a better and deeper understanding of this.

In this study, there will be about four pre-schools involved. Within each school, administrators, teachers, students and parents will be selected to take part in. A decision on how many people will be involved is to be made on a site-by-site basis. Outside of schools, about two education officials and/or other education experts may also be included.

5.   Do I have to take part?

No. It is entirely up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a consent form.

6.   What will happen to me if I take part? What do I have to do?
This research project consists of several activities, **you may be asked to participate in one or more of the followings**:

Observation: As part of this study, there will be school and classroom observations. The aims of these observations are to observe the school environment, to explore how schools organise students' everyday activities, what language teachers and students use and how teachers teach English etc. No observations will change the normal settings and activities. **Observations will only be conducted with the consent of all parties involved and photos will be taken during the observations.** It is estimated that the entire research time in each

school will be no more than two months, but the class and number of lessons to be observed will be negotiated and agreed upon by all consenting parties - you may withdraw your consent at any time. You will not be expected to incur any expenses, nor undertake work outside your regular work.

Interview: You may be asked to be interviewed to discuss your experiences and views of English language education in pre-schools. This is intended to be a single interview and take no longer than 90 minutes of your time. But if necessary, a follow-up interview may also be required. The interview time and location will be negotiated with you in advance to fit for your schedule. **Your interview will be audio-recorded** and you may request further details of the questions to be asked in advance. You will be expected to answer questions honestly, but you may refrain from answering any or all questions as you see fit. You may also ask the interviewer questions if desired.

7.   What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

It is not expected that there will be any risk of taking part. However, you will have to spend some time taking part in this research. You may be asked to discuss your experiences and views of English language education in pre-schools and may also be asked to be observed in your class. If you feel uncomfortable or concerned about some of the issues raised in the observation or/and interview, you are free to stop, skip any question, or withdraw from the research at any time. You will also have a chance to tell me what your experience of participating in the research was like, and I will take this into consideration for this and future studies.

8.   What are the possible benefits of taking part?

Whilst there are no immediate benefits for people participating in the project, it is hoped that this research will provide a better and deeper understanding of the pre-school English language education in China and will also be useful for its further development.

9.   What will happen if I don't want to carry on with the study?

You can withdraw from this study at any time without giving a reason. There will be no adverse consequences if you choose to withdraw, but the data collected up to your withdrawal will remain part of the study.

10.   Will my taking part in this project be kept confidential?

All the information that I collect during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential and will only be accessible to myself. All faces in the photos will be blurred to ensure privacy. Any names or identifying features will be removed or anonymised. You will not be able to be identified in any reports or publications.

11.   Will I be photographed, and how will the photographs be used?

Photographs will be taken during the observations with your permission. These photographs will be used only for this research project. **All faces in the photographs will be blurred.** No other use will be made of them without your written permission, and no one else will be allowed access to the original photographs. On conclusion of this research study, the original photographs will be destroyed.

12.   Will I be audio or video-recorded, and how will the recorded media be used?

The interviews will be audio-recorded with your permission. Your interview recordings will be used only for my research project. **All contributions will be anonymous**. No other use will be made of them without your written permission, and no one else will be allowed access to the original recordings. On conclusion of this research study, the original audio recordings will be destroyed.

13.   What will happen to the data collected, and the results of the research project?

All data collected will be kept on my password-protected computer or in a locked drawer at my home. All data will only be accessible to myself. The research results will form part of my PhD research project and some of the research findings may be published in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs, but any identifiable information of schools and participants will be removed or anonymised. Personal data will be destroyed at the end of the study but anonymised data will be stored for 10 years after the study is complete.

14.   Who has ethically reviewed the project?

This project has been ethically approved by reviewers at the School of Education, University of Sheffield.

15.   What if something goes wrong and I wish to complain about the research?

If you wish to make a complaint or withdraw your consent for participation in the study you can contact me Miss Xuan Li, xli122@shef.ac.uk, in the first instance.

If you have any further concerns arising, such as your treatment by the researcher or something serious occurring during or following your participation in the project, please see the contact details at the end of this document.

16.   Contact for further information

If there is concern about any aspect of this research project it should be addressed in the first instance to Miss Xuan Li, School of Education, University of Sheffield, xli122@sheffield.ac.uk.

You can also contact my supervisor, Dr Mark Payne, School of Education, University of Sheffield, mark.payne@sheffield.ac.uk.

In addition to these avenues the University also has a complaints procedure, details of which may be found at: https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/ssid/complaints-and-appeals/complaints

After you have read this information document you will be given a copy of the information sheet and invited to complete a **Consent Form** before taking part in any research activities.

<p align="center">********************
Thank you for considering participating in this study.</p>

(Chinese version)

<div align="center">

研究信息表(成人)

</div>

1.   研究题目

中国幼儿园英语教育研究

2.   邀请

我是李璇，谢菲尔德大学在读博士。现诚邀您参加我的博士课题研究。在您觉得是否参加此项研究前，请了解本研究的具体内容。请您仔细阅读此份信息表，若需要，您也可以和他人讨论。如果有任何有疑虑的地方，请向我咨询。希望您仔细考虑是否愿意参加此研究。感谢您的阅读！

3.   这项研究的目的是什么？

在中国，英语直到小学才被正式引入课程中，但是很多幼儿园都开始教英语。本研究的目的就是探讨此现象是如何产生的，为什么会出现此现象。

4.   为什么会选我？

因为您和幼儿园英语教学有关。您的参与会帮助我们更好，更深入地研究此现象。

此研究中大概会有四所学校参加。在每个学校内，园长，老师， 学生和家长会参与到此项研究。具体多少人参与会根据实际情况来定。学校外，大概会有两位教育官员或者专家参加到此项研究中。

5.   我必须要参加吗？

不是的。这完全取决于您是否愿意参加此研究。如果您决定参加此研究，请您保留此份信息表并签署知情同意书。

6.   如果我参加的话，会发生什么？我要做什么？
这项研究包含以下几项内容，**您可能会被邀请参加下面一项或者几项内容：**

观察： 本研究涉及学校和课堂观察。观察的目的是了解学校环境，每日活动，教师和学生用什么语言，英语教学活动如何展开等。所有的观察都不改变日常设施和活动。**观察会在取得所有相关人员同意的前提下展开，观察中会拍照。**在每个学校的观察时间应该不超过两个月，具体的观察事项会和所有相关人员进行协商并取得同意。您可以随时退出此项研究。本研究不会产生任何费用，也不会影响您的正常工作。

采访：您可能会被邀请讨论关于幼儿园英语教学的经验和观点。本次采访预计为单次采访，时间不超过 90 分钟。但如果有需要，可能会有后续采访。具体的采访时间和地点将会与您协商并配合您的行程安排。**您的采访将会被录音，您可以提前询问采访内容。**希望您能如实回答研究问题，但您可以拒绝回答某些或者全部问题。 您也可以向研究者询问。

7.   参加此项研究有哪些潜在的危险？

参加此项研究预计不会有任何危险。但是，参加此项研究将会占用您的一些时间。您可能会被邀请讨论您关于幼儿园英语教学的经验和观点，您的课堂会被观察。若您在研究的过

程中有任何不适，您可以随时停止。您也可以将您参与此项研究的感受告诉我，我会在后续的研究中考虑您的建议。

8.   参加此项研究有哪些潜在的好处？

参加这项研究没有直接的好处，但是希望本项研究会提供一个更加深入和全面的视角，来了解中国的幼儿园英语教育，并对其未来发展提供一定的帮助。

9.   如果我不参与此项研究会发生什么？

您可以随时无理由退出研究。这不会产生任何负面影响。但是在您退出前所收集的数据将会用于此研究。

10.   我的参与是保密的吗？

所有收集的数据都会严格保密并将只有本人可以查看。照片中所有的面部都会做模糊处理。所有的名字或者其他可识别的信息都会被移除或匿名。您个人信息不会在任何报告或者出版物中曝光。

11.   我会被拍照吗？这些照片会被如何使用？

照片会在您许可下拍照。这些照片将仅用于此项研究。**照片中的所有面部特征都会做模糊处理**。在没有您的书面许可下，这些照片不会用于其他地方，其他人不会看到这些原始照片。在本研究结束后，所有照片都会处理掉。

12.   我会被录音或者录像吗？这些信息将如何被使用？

采访会在您许可下录音。您的录音记录仅将用于此研究。**所有的个人信息都会被匿名**。在没有得到您的书面许可下，录音不会用于其他地方。在本研究结束后，原始录音将会被处理掉。

13.   这些收集的数据将如何被保存？研究结果呢？

所有数据都会保存在我个人有密码的电脑中或放置家中带锁的抽屉中。所有的数据仅有本人可以获取到。数据的处理结果将会呈现在本人的博士论文中，一些研究成果可能会发表在出版物，报告，网站或者其他研究输出中。任何学校和参与者的可识别信息都会被移除或被匿名。个人信息会在研究结束后删除但是匿名信息将会在研究结束后保存 10 年。

14.   谁会对此项研究进行道德审查？

本项研究已通过谢菲尔德大学教育学院道德委员会审核。

15.   如果有任何问题，我可以向谁投诉？

如果您有任何不满或者想退出此项研究，请首先联系李璇，xli122@shef.ac.uk.

如果您还有进一步的疑惑，比如说您受到了研究者的不良对待或有其他严重问题，请看下方的联系方式。

16.   联系方式

若您对本项研究有任何疑问，请直接联系李璇， 谢菲尔德大学教育学院，

xli122@sheffield.ac.uk.

您也可以联系我的导师，Mark Payne 博士，谢菲尔德大学教育学院，mark.payne@sheffield.ac.uk.

此外，谢菲尔德大学也有投诉渠道，具体信息可以在此网站查询：https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/ssid/complaints-and-appeals/complaints。

您可以保留此份信息表，若您同意参加此研究，您还需要签署知情同意书。

****
感谢您考虑参与此研究！

Information sheet B
for children

(English version)

Study title

An Exploration of English Language Education in Pre-schools in China

1.   Why is this project being done?

We want to try and find out how and why pre-schools in China teach English.

2. Why me?

Because you are involved in pre-school English language education Your participation will help us have a better understanding of pre-school English education in China.

Approximately 4-6 children aged 4-6 will be selected to take part in a focus group interview with you.

3. What does the project involve?

-   Observation

As part of this study, school and classroom will be observed. But do not worry, no observation will change the normal settings and activities. **Photographs will be taken during the observation.**

-   Focus group

You may also be asked to take part in a focus group interview. During the interview, I may show you some pictures of the main activities arranged in your school and ask you to describe these activities and order these activities in terms of your preference. The results will be photographed. Then, I may also show you some pictures of your English class, ask you to describe them and tell me what you like and dislike about English teaching. It will take no more than half an hour. I hope that you can respect each other and not share information outside this group. **The interview will be audio-recorded with your permission.**

All data will be kept securely and will not be shared with anybody else. These data may be used in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs, but **any identifiable information about you will be removed or anonymised.**

4. Giving permission to take part

Your teachers and parents have already given me permission to ask you whether you are willing to take part in this research. If you would like to do so, I will assume that you are happy for me to use your answers **unless you say no**.

5. Do I have to take part?

No, you do not! It is up to you. We would like you to read this information sheet before you make up your mind. **If you don't want to take part, just say no! You can withdraw from this study at any time without giving a reason.**

6. What are the possible disadvantages and advantages of taking part?

It is not expected that there will be any risk of taking part. If you feel uncomfortable, you are free to stop, skip any question, or withdraw from the research at any time.

Whilst there are no immediate benefits for you, but you may find it interesting to chat with me.

7. Will I be photographed or/and recorded, and how will the photographs or/and recorded-media be used?

Photographs will be taken during the observations, but do not worry, **all faces in the photographs will be blurred.** The interviews will be audio-recorded, but **all your personal information will be removed or anonymised.** All photographs and recordings will only be used for my research project and no one else will be allowed access to these original data.

8. Where can I get more information?

Please ask me any questions you have about the project. Your parents and teachers have also been provided with all the details about my research.

You can keep this information sheet, or ask me for more information.

If you, or your parent/guardian would like to learn more about my project, I can be contacted at xli122@sheffield.ac.uk or you can contact my supervisor Dr Mark Payne at mark.payne@sheffield.ac.uk.

Thank You!

(Chinese version)

研究信息表（儿童）

研究题目
中国幼儿园英语教育研究

1. 为什么做这个研究？
我们希望了解幼儿园如何以及为何教英语。

2. 我为什么要参加这项研究呢？
因为你和幼儿园英语教育有关。你的参加会帮助我们更好地了解中国英语教育。

大概有 4-6 个 4-6 岁小朋友会参加到讨论中。

3. 这项研究有哪些内容？
-观察
本研究涉及学校和课堂观察。但不用担心，观察不会影响日常设施和活动。观察中会被拍照。

-集体讨论
你可能会被邀请参加集体讨论。在讨论中，我可能会让你看一些学校活动的图片，然后请你们将这些照片按照你喜欢的顺序排序。排序的结果将会被拍照。然后，我会给你们看一些英语课的招聘，希望你能向我描述这些照片并告诉你是否喜欢英语课。这大概不会超过 30 分钟。希望在讨论过程中，你们尊重彼此，并且不和讨论组以外的小朋友分享你们讨论的内容。**采访会在你们允许的情况下录音。**

所有的数据都会妥善保存也不会和其他人分享。这些数据可能会出现在出版物，报告和网站等地方中，**但是所有可识别的信息都会被移除或被匿名。**

4. 研究许可
你的老师和家长已经同意我询问你是否愿意参加此研究。如果你愿意参加的话，请告诉我。

5. 我必须要参加吗？
不是的！这完全由你决定！希望在做决定前可以仔细阅读这份信息表。**如果你不想参加，请直接拒绝。你可以随时无理由退出。**

6. 参加这项研究有哪些潜在的坏处和好处？
参加此研究预计不会有任何危险。如果你觉得不舒服，你可以随时停止，拒绝回答问题，或退出研究。

参加此项研究没有直接的好处，但是你可能会发现和我聊天很有有趣。

7. 我会被拍照或者录音吗？这些照片和录音将会被如何使用？
观察时会被拍照。但是不用担心，照片中所有的面部特征都会做模糊处理。采访会被录音，但是所有的个人信息都会被移除或被匿名。所有的照片和录音仅用于此研究，没有任何其他人可以看到原始数据。

8. 我从哪可以获取更多的信息？
你可以向我咨询任何关于此研究的问题。你的父母和老师也会了解此研究的内容。.

你可以保存这份信息表，也可以向我咨询任何问题。

如果你，或者你的父母/看护人希望了解更多此研究的信息，可以发邮件向我咨询，xli122@sheffield.ac.uk，或者联系我的导师 mark.payne@sheffield.ac.uk.

谢谢！

Appendix III: Consent form

Consent form A
For adult and child participants

(English version)

Title of Project: An Exploration of English Language Education in Pre-schools in China

Name of Researcher: Xuan Li

Please tick the appropriate boxes	Yes	No
I have read and understood the project information sheet dated 01/09/2018 or the project has been fully explained to me. (If you will answer No to this question please do not proceed with this consent form until you are fully aware of what your participation in the project will mean.)		
I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the project.		
I agree to take part in the project. I understand that taking part in the project will include being observed and photographed.		
I agree to take part in the project. I understand that taking part in the project will include being interviewed and audio-recorded.		
I understand that my taking part is voluntary and that I can withdraw from the study at any time without giving any reason; there will be no adverse consequences if I choose to withdraw.		
I understand my personal details such as name, phone number, address and email address etc. will not be revealed to people outside the project.		
I understand and agree that data collected from me during the study may be used in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs. I understand that no identifying information will be used in these outputs unless I specifically request this.		

Name of participant: Signature: Date:

Name of Researcher: Xuan Li   Signature: Date:

Project contact details for further information:
If there is concern about any aspect of this research project it should be addressed in the first instance to Miss Xuan Li, School of Education, University of Sheffield, xli122@sheffield.ac.uk.

You can also contact my supervisor, Dr Mark Payne, School of Education, University of Sheffield, mark.payne@sheffield.ac.uk.

(Chinese Version)

知情同意书 A
（成人和儿童参与者）

题目:中国幼儿园英语教育

研究者姓名：李璇

请在合适的方框里打钩	是	否
我己阅读并了解 2018 年 9 月 1 日的信息表，或者研究者己经向我详细解释这项研究。（如果你的答案是否,请在完全了解项目之前不要继续阅读。）		
研究者己给我机会提问。		
我同意参加此项研究，愿意接受观察和拍照。		
我同意参加此项研究，愿意接受采访和录音。		
我自愿参与此研究，我明白我可以随时无理由退出，且不会对我造成任何负面影响。		
我明白项目外的人是不能得到我的个人信息的，如姓名，电话号码，住址，邮箱等。		
我明白并同意研究数据会用在出版，报告，网站或者其他形式的研究汇报中。我明白，除非我特别说明，否则我的任何可识别信息不会出现在任何研究汇报中。		

参与者姓名: 签名：:   日期:

研究者姓名:李璇   签名: 日期:

如需进一步了解情况，请联系:
李璇，英国谢菲尔德大学教育学院 xli122@sheffield.ac.uk.

您也可以联系我的导师，Mark Payne 博士，英国谢菲尔德大学教育学院， mark.payne@sheffield.ac.uk.

Consent form B

For parents

(English version)

Title of Project: An Exploration of English Language Education in Pre-schools in China

Name of Researcher: Xuan Li

Please tick the appropriate boxes	Yes	No
I have read and understood the project information sheet dated 01/09/2018 or the project has been fully explained to me. (If you will answer No to this question please do not proceed with this consent form until you are fully aware of what your child's participation in the project will mean.)		
I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the project.		
I agree my child to take part in the project. I understand that taking part in the project will include being observed and photographed.		
I agree my child to take part in the project. I understand that taking part in the project will include being interviewed and audio-recorded.		
I understand that my child's taking part is voluntary and that he/she can withdraw from the study at any time without giving any reason; there will be no adverse consequences if my child chooses to withdraw.		
I understand my child's personal details such as name, phone number, address and email address etc. will not be revealed to people outside the project.		
I understand and agree that data collected from my child during the study may be used in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs. I understand that no identifying information will be used in these outputs unless I and my child specifically request this.		

Name of participant: Signature: Date:

Name of Parent: Signature: Date:

Name of Researcher: Xuan Li   Signature: Date:

Project contact details for further information:
If there is concern about any aspect of this research project it should be addressed in the first instance to Miss Xuan Li, School of Education, University of Sheffield, xli122@sheffield.ac.uk.

You can also contact my supervisor, Dr Mark Payne, School of Education, University of Sheffield, mark.payne@sheffield.ac.uk.

(Chinese version)

知情同意书 B
（家长）

研究题目：中国幼儿园英语教育

研究者姓名：李璇

请在合适的方框里打钩	是	否
我已阅读并了解 2018 年 9 月 1 日的信息表，或者研究者已经向我详细解释这项研究。（如果你的答案是否，请在完全了解项目之前不要继续阅读。）		
研究者已给我机会提问。		
我同意我的孩子参加此项研究，愿意接受观察和拍照。		
我同意我的孩子参加此项研究，愿意接受采访和录音。		
我明白我的孩子是自愿参与此研究，他/她可以随时无理由退出，且不会对他/她造成任何负面影响。		
我明白此研究项目之外的人是不能得到我孩子的个人信息，如姓名，电话号码，住址，邮箱等。		
我明白并同意研究数据会用在出版，报告，网站或者其他形式的研究汇报中。我明白，除非我和我的孩子特别说明，否则任何可识别的信息不会出现在任何研究汇报中。		

参与者姓名：　　　　　　　签名：　　　　　　　日期：

家长姓名：　　　　　　　　签名：　　　　　　　日期：

研究者姓名: 李璇　　　　　签名：　　　　　　　日期：

Appendix IV: Interview outline

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Interview outline A

for education officials

（教育局官员采访）

</div>

1. Could you please introduce yourself first?

   您可以先介绍以下你自己吗？

2. What is 'schoolification' and what do you think about it?

   什么是'小学化'？请问您怎么看待'小学化'？

3. Have you noticed that there are some kindergartens still teaching English? What do you think about it?

   请问您有没有注意到一些幼儿园仍然在教英语？请问您如何看待幼儿园英语教育？

4. What are the differences between public and private kindergartens?

   公办园和民办园有哪些不同？

5. How does your department formulate and implement policies?

   请问你们如何制定和实施政策？

6. What efforts have you made to remove schoolification from kindergartens?

   请问你们采取哪些措施来预防小学化？

7. What challenges have you met and how do you plan to deal with them?

   请问你们遇到了哪些问题？如何应对呢？

8. Is there anything else you would like to tell me?

   请问您还有什么想和我讨论的吗？

Interview outline B

for kindergarten headteachers

（幼儿园园长采访）

1. Could you please introduce yourself first?

    您可以先介绍一下自己吗？

2. What is 'schoolification' and what do you think about it?

    什么是'小学化'？请问您如何看待'小学化'？

3. Has this kindergarten experienced any change since the release of these policies?

    政府颁布去'小学化'政策后，你们学校有没有做出哪些改变？

4. What are the differences between public and private kindergartens?
    公办园和民办园有哪些区别？

5. Why does this kindergarten teach/not teach English? How is the decision made?

    请问为什么您的幼儿园没有或者仍在教英语？这个决定是如何做出的？

6. How do you teach English?

    请问你们是怎么教英语的？

7. How do you recruit, train and evaluate English teachers?

    请问你们如何聘请，培训和评价英语老师？

8. Do children like English? Why?

    孩子们喜欢英语课吗？为什么呢？

9. Will you offer English classes in the future? Why?

    请问你们打算继续教英语吗？为什么呢？

10. What are the major challenges of preschool English language education? Any suggestions?

    您认为当前幼儿园英语教育的主要挑战是什么？有什么建议吗？

11. Is there anything else you would like to tell me?

    请问您还有什么想和我说的吗？

Interview outline C
for English teachers
(英语老师采访)

1. Could you please introduce yourself first?

   您可以先介绍一下自己和学校吗？

2. Have you heard about the policies on removing schoolification from kindergartens? What do you think about it?

   请问您有没有听说过去'小学化'？您如果看待'小学化'的？

3. What are the differences between public and private kindergartens?

   公办园和民办园有什么区别呢？

4. Why does this kindergarten still teach English? Have you engaged in making this decision?

   为什么这个幼儿园还在教英语呢？您有没有参与做这个决定?

5. How did you get this job?

   请问您是如何获得这份工作的？

6. How do you teach English?

   请问您是如何教英语的？

7. Do children like English? Why？

   孩子们喜欢英语吗？为什么呢？

8. Do you plan to continue to teach English in this kindergarten? Why?

   请问您打算继续教在这所幼儿园教英语吗？为什么？

9. What challenges have you met in your work? Any suggestions?

   您觉得您在工作中遇到了哪些挑战？有什么建议吗？

10. Is there anything else you would like to tell me?

    请问您还有什么想和我说的吗？

Interview outline D

for parents
（家长采访）

1. Could you please introduce yourself first?

    您可以先介绍一下自己吗？

2. Why do you choose this kindergarten?

    您为何选择这个幼儿园？

3. What are the differences between public and private kindergartens?

    公办园和民办园有什么区别呢？

4. Have you heard about the policies on removing schoolification from kindergartens? What do you think about it?

    请问您听说过去'小学化'吗？你是如何看待'小学化'的？

5. Why does this kindergarten teach/not teach English? Have you engaged in making this decision?

    为什么这个幼儿园还在/没有教英语？您参与做这个决定了吗？

6. Do you want your children to learn English in the kindergarten? Why?

    请问您希望孩子在幼儿园学习英语吗？ 为什么？

7. Does your child like English classes?

    请问您的孩子喜欢英语课吗？

8. What languages do you speak at home? Does your child learn English at home or in training centers? Why?

    你们在家说什么语言？您的孩子在家或者辅导机构学习英语吗？为什么？

9. What do you think are the major challenges of preschool English language education? Any suggestion?

    您觉得幼儿园英语教育有哪些挑战？有什么建议吗？

10. Do you have any plan for your child's English learning? If yes, how do you plan?

    请问您对孩子未来的英语学习有什么规划吗？

11. Is there anything else you would like to tell me?

    请问您还有什么想和我说的吗？

Interview outline E
for children
（儿童采访）

1. Could you please introduce yourself first?

   你们可以先介绍一下自己吗？

2. What do you like to do in the kindergarten?

   你们在幼儿园喜欢做什么呢？

3. Have you learnt English? Where do you learn it?

   你们学过英语吗？在哪学的？

4. Do you like English? Why?

   你们喜欢英语吗？为什么？

5. Do you like your English teacher? Why?

   你们喜欢英语老师吗？为什么？

6. Could you speak English?

   你们会说英语吗？

7. Do you speak English at home? If yes, with whom?

   你们在家说英语吗？和谁说？

8. Would you like to learn English in the future? Why?

   你们以后想学英语吗？为什么呢？

9. Is there anything else you would like to tell me?

   你们还有什么想和我说的吗？