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Foreign Language Education Policies and the Disparity between Urban and Rural Compulsory English Language Education in China

--- The Influence of Neoliberalism

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Thesis Submitted for The Doctor of Philosophy Degree in Education

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Abstract

This thesis reports findings from a critical ethnographic study that explored the perpetuating disparity between rural and urban English language education (ELE) under neoliberalised education policies at China’s compulsory education stage. Research on the impact of neoliberalism reveals that the instrumentalisation, commodification, and marketisation of education contribute to inequality, stratification, and marginalisation. While existing studies on ELE and neoliberalism focus on overarching transformations in educational philosophies and policies, limited research explores the day-to-day teaching and learning practices, particularly in the context of China, where few studies have examined the rural-urban disparity in compulsory English language education.

Grounded in neo-Marxist critical theory, the study integrated critical ethnography with critical discourse analysis (CDA) and thematic analysis. The exploration began with a deconstructive interpretation of Chinese compulsory English language education policies through CDA. Subsequently, a six-month critical linguistic ethnography was conducted in both rural and urban schools to investigate daily teaching and learning practices under neoliberalised policies. Ethnographic observations of English language teaching and learning, along with interviews with students, classroom teachers, and head teachers, provided rich data for thematic analysis.

The CDA of policies reveals the pervasive impact of neoliberalism on policy formulation, highlighting how neoliberalism functions as the dominant ideology, constructing distinct subjectivities for stakeholders in their understanding of ELE over time. The thematic analysis of ethnographic data illustrates the process through which rural and urban stakeholders aligned themselves in ELE practices, revealing that neoliberalised ELE contributed to the international development of urban students while perpetuating the enduring marginalisation of their rural counterparts. Teachers were identified as subjectified trainers, reinforcing the stratification of students. The research argued that these disparities were rooted in neoliberal requirements for national development in contemporary China, indicating that neoliberalised policies (re)produce and perpetuate inequalities through the lens of nationalism within ELE policies and practices.
This research not only fills a gap in the study of policies and practices under neoliberalism in rural and urban contexts of China but also uncovers a new manifestation of neoliberalism in relation to nationalism. The implications suggest the need for policy and curriculum adjustments and the potential development of critical pedagogy and intercultural citizenship to foster individual and collective agency, emancipate stakeholders, and resist the stubborn inequality entrenched by neoliberalised structures.

**Keywords:** Neoliberalism, English Language Education in China, Rural and Urban disparity
Lay Summary

This study looks at the disparities in English Language Education (ELE) at the compulsory education stage in rural and urban schools in China. It explores the impact of ‘neoliberalism’ on English education policies. Neoliberalism is a capitalist ideology based on free market economic theory. It promotes the belief in market choices, changing everything into commodities, and competition in all social activities to affect people’s lives. Existing research on neoliberalism and ELE has mostly focused on how education policies are formulated with market ideas and stakeholders’ understanding of policies, thereby overlooking the individuals’ teaching and learning practices.

As critical linguistic ethnographic research, this study first analyses the English education policies for China’s compulsory education stage since the Reform and Opening-up and discusses that these neoliberalised policies affect and manage participants through teaching and learning practices. Then, I spent six months in a province in central China, observing English classrooms in one rural school and one urban school, participating in their school activities, and talking with students and teachers. By participating in classroom teaching and learning in the schools, I carefully observed the daily practices of teachers and students and interviewed specific participants to collect teachers’ and students’ opinions on ELE, relevant policies, the English language, and perceptions of each other.

I found that neoliberal ELE policies have created two images of English learners: one is a well-behaved national citizen who can contribute to the stable development of the nation, and the other is an international intercultural talent who has the ability to contribute to the economic and political development in international competition. Through the ELE practice, urban students, while being shaped into well-behaved citizens, are more aligned to become intercultural talents. However, rural students do not believe that they need or can contribute to the country’s international development and think that it is better for them to stay where they are and also can contribute to the country.

This difference means that ELE stratified urban and rural students. Urban students can get more support and development in ELE following the neoliberal market requirements, while students in rural areas are unconsciously marginalised. The belief in neoliberal ideas makes them believe that they should be responsible for this
marginalisation because they do not have the ability to become talents and cannot compete with their urban counterparts within the marketised education system. Teachers have also become the implementers and trainers of neoliberal policies in practice. They are also managed and controlled by the policies, thus playing a role in maintaining or even enhancing urban-rural disparities.

In this research, I explored the specific differences between rural and urban schools and the neoliberal management of individuals, investigated reasons for disparities and inequalities in ELE, and discussed whether individuals can and how to resist neoliberalism's influence. I believe that these disparities are rooted in contemporary China’s neoliberal requirements for national development. On the one hand, the state emphasises development and competition, and on the other, it uses nationalism to rationalise the importance of these developments and competitions, achieving the management and control of individuals.

This study not only talks about how neoliberal policies work in urban and rural schools in China but also shows how neoliberalism is combined with nationalism ideas. I hope this study can help the adaptation of policies and curricula. I believe that ELE should help develop critical thinking and intercultural citizenship that can give power to individuals and communities, make things better for everyone involved, and resist the inequality that comes with the current neoliberal way policies and practices are set up.
Acknowledgements

More than a decade has passed since I first dreamed of pursuing a doctoral degree in my early twenties, leading to the completion of this thesis today. I would like to express my gratitude to everyone who has supported and helped me along this journey.

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Furthermore, I am deeply thankful to my participants for welcoming me into their schools, treating me as a part of them, trusting me, and providing me with rich and interesting data that sparked many inspirations.

As a girl from a small town in China who never imagined herself on a university campus in the UK when she was young, I am most grateful to my parents. I appreciate my father saying, ‘It’s okay if we live a little harder; I want my daughter to see a bigger world.’ I am thankful to my mother for always telling me that a strong and independent woman can always be a team for herself. I am grateful to my parents for their love and support, financially and emotionally; wherever I go, they are always my strongest support.

I want to thank my friends and PhD colleagues who have always accompanied me, whether nearby or across continents; their friendship has helped me through every moment of joy and sorrow. And to my beloved Raccoon, with you, I have become a better me. Without your love and support, I would not be as happy and positive on this journey.
After getting my first master’s degree in China, I worked as an English language teacher for years, then came to the UK and returned to the campus. These years of research life have had their ups and downs, but my passion for academic research and teaching has remained steadfast. I understand that completing this thesis is just the beginning of my academic career, and I hope to continue persevering and doing what I love and believe to be right in the future.
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<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BNUPH</td>
<td>Beijing Normal University Publishing House</td>
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<tr>
<td>CDA</td>
<td>Critical Discourse Analysis</td>
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<tr>
<td>CPC</td>
<td>Communist Party of China</td>
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<tr>
<td>ELE</td>
<td>English Language Education</td>
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<tr>
<td>FNA</td>
<td>Functional-Notional Approach</td>
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<tr>
<td>GTM</td>
<td>Grammar Translation Method</td>
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<tr>
<td>ICC</td>
<td>Intercultural Communication Competence</td>
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<tr>
<td>MOE</td>
<td>Ministry of Education of China</td>
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<tr>
<td>NCE</td>
<td>Nine-year Compulsory Education</td>
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<tr>
<td>NM</td>
<td>New Managerialism</td>
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<tr>
<td>SDT</td>
<td>Self-determination Theory</td>
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<tr>
<td>SSSEE</td>
<td>Senior Secondary School Entrance Examination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NCEE</td>
<td>National College Entrance Examination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PEP</td>
<td>People’s Education Press</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SEL</td>
<td>Social and Emotional Learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S&amp;Z</td>
<td>Sixiang and Zhengzhi</td>
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<tr>
<td>TA</td>
<td>Thematic Analysis</td>
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<td>Text as A Critical Object</td>
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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background
This research investigates disparities in English Language Education (ELE) at the compulsory education stage in the People’s Republic of China (PRC), specifically the contrast between rural and urban settings. A critical analysis of ELE policies across various time frames is conducted, with a subsequent focus on how these policies, which are influenced by neoliberalism, impact the daily activities of teachers and students in rural and urban school contexts. The study’s primary objective is to explore how these disparities are perpetuated throughout the teaching and learning process, contributing to discussion on the interplay between individual agency and neoliberalised education policies in ELE. The research will stimulate reflection among English language teachers and students regarding their experiences under the influence of neoliberal policies, motivating them to develop their own agency within everyday classroom routines. The research proposes a transition from an instrumentalised, examination-driven approach towards a more critical perspective of ELE. The following sections present the motivations that drove my engagement in this research in three categories: personal interest drawn from my experiences as a student and teacher in rural and urban schools in China; motivation derived from the impact of neoliberalism on language education and the insights offered by neo-Marxist critical theory; and the lack of empirical studies focusing on individuals’ daily practices, their interactions with each other and with policies in the context of ELE under neoliberalism.

1.1.1 Personal Interest
I was born in a nationally designated impoverished county in a central province of China, and I completed six years of primary school education there. In the second year of junior secondary school, I moved to the provincial capital to complete my junior and senior secondary school studies. Throughout my educational journey, I received

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1 The People’s Republic of China (PRC) is the official name for China. Throughout the rest of this thesis, any mention of China refers specifically to the PRC.
English lessons in rural and urban settings. The transition from rural to urban education allowed me experience at first hand the disparities in ELE between the two regions. In the rural school, I ranked among the top students in English, but in the urban school, my performance was considered average. I also noticed a significant disparity in spoken communication and listening proficiencies between my urban and rural peers. My educational journey also made me aware of disparities in teaching quality and resources between the two regions.

In the urban junior secondary school I attended two decades ago, professionally trained English teachers provided daily English lessons. As well as following the national curriculum, the school provided teachers and students with extra teaching materials such as textbooks and videos. The school also employed native English speakers to provide extra content in two weekly classes, adhering to the prevailing myth that native speakers are the best teachers of English for foreign or second language learners. In contrast, my rural school had few supplementary educational resources, with audio tapes accompanying the national curriculum textbooks being the only available materials. Even today, rural schools still face an enduring shortage of professional teachers and a lack of resources for ELE.

I studied ELE as my undergraduate degree and earned my first master’s degree in English language and literature in China. With cumulative experience, my subsequent career as an English language teacher encompassed various contexts. I taught English to second-year university students for one year, worked for the international department of a senior secondary school for two years and as a part-time academic English teacher in private education institutions during the school holidays. Before I came to the UK for my second master’s degree, I volunteered as an English language teacher at a rural elementary school in a disadvantaged Chinese town. This gave me a comprehensive exposure to nearly all stages of the Chinese education system in rural and urban areas, from primary school to university, spanning public institutions and private enterprises. Observations from these experiences made me aware of the disparities in the efficacy and quality of education between rural and urban areas in China, particularly in ELE. As Hao (2015) states, urban schools consistently yield better average scores in every subject than their rural counterparts, particularly in English language.
In my second master’s thesis, I explored rural-urban differences in ELE in Chinese compulsory education by examining the changing professional identities of English language teachers in rural schools. My research showed that rural teachers aspired to attain higher status and better salaries, like their urban counterparts. Many trained teachers and parents of rural students opted to relocate to larger cities to take advantage of better economic opportunities and superior education, which they believed would lead to better employment prospects for their children. I realised that China’s rural-urban disparity in ELE stems from more than just a shortage of professional teachers or their professional issues. Instead, it relates to China’s evolving economic and social landscape, which deeply influences the beliefs and attitudes of students, parents, teachers and other stakeholders in English teaching and learning. While researching China’s education policies, I found that the government has attempted to balance gaps in educational efficiency. So why does the problem still exist, and why has there been no significant improvement?

I began to wonder whether there were misunderstandings about the purpose and significance of education, especially in ELE. Teachers, parents and students seem to view education as a way of escaping from disadvantaged areas and securing remunerative employment. My exploration of related literature showed a connection between this and the influence of neoliberalism (Ball et al., 2007; Fanelli & Evans, 2015; Gray & Wallace., 2018; Hill et al., 2012). Neoliberalism seems to have transformed education and language into commodities for transaction under the assumption that the market can allocate these commodities and other educational resources profitably. My experiences in education inspired me to investigate the interplay between individual behaviour and neoliberalism to address the inequality between rural and urban stakeholders in education and ELE in China.

1.1.2 Neoliberalism, Neo-Marxism and Critical Theory

Neoliberalism has affected various areas of life, prompting intensive research. Harvey (2005) defines neoliberalism as a capitalist theory that emphasises free markets, private property and free trade. This theory transcended economics to influence social areas such as healthcare and education, aiming to permeate society with market-driven principles. Neoliberalism advocates ‘the partial and/or total deregulation of financial markets, leading to capitalism without borders’ (Block, 2018a, p. 6), indicating
the widespread acceptance of a global neoliberalised market (Fairclough, 1995). Scholars also acknowledge neoliberalism’s connection with education and language (Alsagoff et al., 2012; Ball, 2003; Block, 2018a, 2018b; Codo, 2018; Guo, 2012; Holborow, 2015a; Pan, 2011; Wee, 2003). Fairclough (1995) sees the market-driven changes in education as shaping individuals into ‘human capital’. Holborow (2015b) describes the ways in which public and private educational institutions sell knowledge, enabling individuals with knowledge to be traded as human capital in the job market.

As a factor of human capital, language is not exempt from market influences. Applied linguistics and sociolinguistics highlight the commodification of language (Codó & Pérez-Milans, 2014; Pujolar, 2018; Simpson & O’Regan, 2018; Tollefson, 2015; Tupas, 2004). Specific language skills, accents and dialects enhance competitiveness in the labour market, reflecting the commodification of languages and speakers, including the myth of native speakers. Linguistic and cultural attributes can be transformed into tangible and intangible commodities, such as books and education programs. Individuals, institutions and states gain and use these commodities to improve competitiveness and increase profits through market-driven legitimacies, and language training and education become integrated into the neoliberalist market, ultimately turning language acquisition into a market-driven pursuit.

Many social scientists who frame neoliberalism as a political-economic theory identify a concurrent upsurge in inequality (Brenner et al., 2010; Monaghan et al., 2018). Block (2018b) contends that neoliberal market-driven policies have led to a rapid escalation of inequality in language education. In many countries, English education has become an elite provision in higher social classes associated with family income. Block (2018a) and Terasawa (2017) call this situation the ‘English divide’, resulting in significant economic, political and social consequences and stratification among citizens. Block (2017) stresses the need to explore neoliberalism as an ideology and a socioeconomic reality that contributes to and accelerates the pace of inequality. To study the role of neoliberalism in ELE disparities in China, it is therefore necessary to explore whether neoliberalism works as an ideology and a reality in the daily rural and urban educational practices.

Ideology, first introduced in The German Ideology (1938), is closely associated with economic theories. This work was written by Marx and Engels around 1846 but was first published in 1932 by the Soviet Union’s Marx-Engels-Lenin Institute. The first
English version was translated, edited and published in 1938. Triece (2018) suggests that ideology is widely associated with Marxism in academic disciplines such as sociology, anthropology and economics. In the Chinese context, Marxism is considered to play an essential role in constructing a socialist country with Chinese characteristics. As a social inquiry into ideologies and realities in China, I began this study by exploring Marxist ideas on ideology and inequality. I soon noticed that the version of Marxism promoted by the Communist Party of China (CPC)\(^2\) is complex and diverges from the original form of Marxism described by Marx and Engels.

Chan (2003) and Munro (1998) explain Chinese Marxism as a mixture of elements of Confucianism, German Marxism, Soviet Leninism and China’s own ideas from Mao Zedong to Xi Jinping. Wang (2015) suggests that the CPC integrates the basic tenets of Marxism with China’s realities, including its national conditions, global trends and contemporary developments. This integration has led to the development of ideas such as 1978 Deng Xiaoping’s ‘Socialism with Chinese characteristics’ to guide economic, cultural and political practices. Since Deng’s time this concept has incorporated market-oriented economic policies within the framework of a one-party state, and the idea is regarded as a major achievement of Chinese Marxism (Wang, 2015).

However, Ware (2013) argues that Marxism serves specific economic and political purposes in China. Ware portrays Chinese Marxism as a framework tailored to align with whatever the government is currently promoting. The government’s priorities include developing the country’s economy using capitalist strategies, making necessary changes for globalisation and the pluralism of cultures in the modern world, integrating individual rights with collective interests and addressing the labour theory of value and the market. Harvey (2005, p. 120) highlights the way the CPC’s adoption of market-oriented ideas for economic development aligns with neoliberalism, labelling China’s economic evolution as ‘neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics’, underscoring the resulting increase in economic and social inequality and disparities between rural and urban China since 1978. The interplay between neoliberalism, Marxism and socialism with Chinese characteristics and its impact on China’s economic, social and political landscape underlines the complexity of the ideological

\(^2\) In most international media, the Communist Party of China (CPC) is referred to as the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). But the official name of it is CPC (http://cpc.people.com.cn)
forces that are in action. To explore whether and how neoliberal ideology manifests in the daily practice of ELE in rural and urban school contexts, it is essential to return to the exploration of ideology rooted in original Marxism.

According to Marx and Engels (1938), the two fundamental components of society are the base and the superstructure. The base refers to the economic conditions of production, while the superstructure encompasses non-economic aspects, including legal, political, religious or philosophical aspects. Marx (1859/1999) argues that the economic base drives the transformation of the entire superstructure. The ruling class, advanced in economic/material conditions, can shape ideologies to sustain its interests and power, while the underclass, lacking those conditions, is disempowered and controlled by ruling class ideologies, thus reinforcing the disadvantaged powerlessness of the underclass within society. Marx and Engels (1938) regard ideology as a false consciousness, or a distortion in perception to achieve oppression. This understanding of ideology is most widely associated with classical Marxism (Triece, 2018).

Gramsci’s (1971/1999) hegemony theory argues that the ruling class uses political power to legitimise its beliefs through day-to-day practices, concealing dominant ideologies as cultural norms. From a neo-Marxist perspective, Gramsci highlights ideology’s role in social and cultural practices, transcending the economic determinism of classical Marxism (Haralambos & Holborn, 2013). Althusser (1984, p. 50) refines Gramsci’s understanding by asserting that ideology hails individuals as ‘always-ready subjects’ through their engagement with ‘repressive state apparatuses’ (governmental institutions) and ‘ideological state apparatuses’ (sociocultural institutions) in daily life. As parts of the superstructure, these state apparatuses, including schools, have relative autonomy, allowing them to project neutrality while upholding hegemony. Althusser includes the political sphere in state apparatuses, expanding the discussion of base and superstructure relationships. Au and Apple (2009) argue that neo-Marxism allows for the recognition that social, political, and cultural concerns are not only governed by economic production but can intertwine with superstructure to (re)produce hegemonic ideology in daily practice.

Inspired by neo-Marxism, I began to consider whether and how the superstructure (re)produces neoliberalism in daily practice, influencing social, political, and cultural matters including the focus of this study, namely ELE issues. Critical theory provides
neo-Marxism with a specific interpretation for understanding and critiquing the ways in which power, ideology and social structures shape human society and culture (Bohman, 2019). Neo-Marxist critical theory, often called Frankfurt School critical theory to distinguish it from wider critical perspectives, aims to provide the intellectual framework for human emancipation by favouring a minority over the majority (Murphy et al., 2022). From the ontological and epistemological standpoint, critical theory asserts the existence of multiple realities, which are all constructed in specific conditions based on the times and spaces rooted in political, social and cultural contexts. One of these realities is deemed privilege, and this must be changed to promote justice (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Peile & Mccouat, 1997). According to Horkheimer (1972/2002), critical theorists recognise human actions as a constitutive aspect of individuals and communities as they relate to social, economic, cultural, political and educational state apparatuses. Critical theory looks to uncover hidden assumptions, question established norms and challenge oppressive systemic inequalities to promote social justice and advance the cause of individual or collective freedom. Current literature on education and ELE suggests that neoliberalism imposes market theory on educational activities, shapes individuals’ thoughts and practices and leads to inequalities in education. Critical theory therefore provides a theoretical and methodological basis for examining the construction of neoliberalism as an ideology within diverse social, political, economic and cultural settings across time and space, which acts as the grounds for this study.

To examine whether neoliberalism works as an ideology from a neo-Marxist perspective, its economic, social and political aspects need to be explored to examine its interaction with the superstructure. Based on critical theory the social, political and economic factors of neoliberalism in state educational apparatuses must be analysed to understand the impact of neoliberalism on education and its stakeholders. However, critical theory sometimes neglects individual agency and personal practices in favour of systemic and structural factors, undermining the importance of personal actions and choices in shaping social realities. Apple (2008) explores the tensions within neo-Marxist critical theory, revealing that while neo-Marxism emphasises ideology and structural oppression, it neglects the dynamic analysis of the way social, cultural and political elements influence structures through individual practice, concluding that it
overlooks the interplay and conflict between individual agency and structural forces in practical application.

Besides analysing the ELE system under neoliberal ideology in China, this thesis also investigates disparities between urban and rural students in educational practice. To understand and analyse the underlying reasons for these disparities, we must scrutinise how individual agency is expressed and restricted within the educational system and discern whether and in what ways individuals resist the educational structure. Therefore, other theories, such as Bourdieu’s (1986, 1991, 1998) theory of capital, Foucault’s (1978/2007, 1979/2008, 1986, 1988) concepts of governmentality and subjectivity, and Giddens’ (1984) structuration theory will be consulted to explore the ways in which individuals are controlled by neoliberalism through transforming different forms of capital, governed and neoliberalised subjectivities, and how their agencies relate to neoliberalist structures. The foundation for these analyses remains grounded in critical theory’s questioning of dominant ideology, how it is negotiated and how social structure reinforces ideology.

It is also essential to acknowledge that Marxism, neo-Marxism and neoliberalism all trace their roots back to Western European origins. Theories rooted in the Western tradition may encounter limitations when seeking to explain social inquiry in China. However, the use of the Marxist perspective originates from reflections on Marxism within the context of China. Mazrui (1978) posits that critical theory possesses the potential to facilitate indigenisation, thereby mitigating the foreignness of imported ideas, concepts, theories and methodologies. This approach can therefore address various facets of the phenomena under investigation effectively, including economic, interpersonal and socio-political dimensions. As Omo-Abu (2007) suggests, the critical theory approach as a methodology emphasises the knowledge of contexts and advocates explicit discussion of context and its role in social (re)production. Critical theory can therefore enhance our comprehension and broaden our knowledge of the contexts within education and other social issues by mitigating foreignness. This thesis is therefore inspired by Marxist discussions on ideology and grounded in neo-Marxist critical theory and other related theoretical and methodological domains to address the ways in which neoliberalism intertwines with China’s superstructure to influence day-to-day educational practice in rural and urban contexts.
1.1.3 Current Research on ELE under Neoliberalism

In China’s rapidly developing economy, improving access to global markets to reap economic gains has become integral to its outlook (Congressional Research Service, 2019). As Ricento (2015) noted, English in China has emerged as the premier foreign language, and is studied because of its facilitation of social and economic upward mobility. However, the pronounced divergence in educational efficacy and outcomes, particularly in ELE, between China’s rural and urban schools underlines inequalities in the country’s social and economic progress (Wang & Li, 2009). Chinese scholars have undertaken quantitative and qualitative studies in elementary and secondary schools in various provinces to measure the efficiency of ELE across these different areas (Hao, 2015; Liu, 2018). Outcomes show disparities in average scores between rural and urban institutions, with the broadest gap being in English language proficiency. According to Wang (2018), these discrepancies and the correlations between them may be partly attributed to market-driven educational policies.

Ball (2017) explains that neoliberalism has a substantial influence on educational policy formulation, with states preferring policies that support economic gains from educational systems. As Ball (1990) discovered, policies embody operational expressions of values to project idealised educational paradigms underpinned by prevailing sociocultural values. To explore the impact of neoliberalism on ELE practices, a comprehensive examination of those language education policies that transfer neoliberal values into practice therefore becomes necessary at the start of the research. Some studies focus on identifying neoliberal systems in education, presenting such systems in different contexts worldwide (Levin et al., 2016; Peters, 2015). Unlike the simple presentation of neoliberal educational policies and strategies, researchers such as Deem and Brehony (2005) and Lynch (2012, 2014, 2015) discuss how these neoliberal policies control education through rankings and other numerical evaluation criteria. Other studies focus on how neoliberal ideology works to frame individuals in the educational process (Goldstein & Beutel, 2009; Press et al., 2018; Saunders, 2010).

These studies focus on the practical implementation of neoliberal education policies and emphasise that neoliberal hegemony in education results in inequalities that govern all participants in education with marketised educational policies, providing good examples of how neoliberalism can be examined in different educational
contexts. However, most studies focus on analysing policies and how they influence educational participants’ understanding of such policies. Meanwhile, the educational practice of teachers and students and the interaction between educational participants are absent or are only discussed according to discursive data from teachers’ or students’ perspectives. There is insufficient qualitative data from teachers’ and students’ perspectives about teaching and learning practices and how stakeholders interact to examine the interplay between policies and practices.

Literature on Chinese education policies shows the development of language education and related policies. Lam (2005) provided a comprehensive overview of language education policies in China spanning various historical periods since 1949, while Beckett and Postiglione (2011) examined language education policies concerning minority literacy in China. Li and Yuan (2013) conducted a comparative analysis of language education policies, drawing distinctions between mainland China and Hong Kong. Those studies concentrate on language education policies in general or on one aspect of language education policies in different areas. Meanwhile, studies on ELE and related policies in China can be categorised into two main groups, the first of which explores pedagogies and curricula, such as Cheng (2019), Han and Huang (2018), and Xie and Chen (2017). These studies focus on teaching methods and language acquisition. The second group examines ideologies and policies of English in education, including Gao (2016, 2018), Pan (2011, 2015), Pérez-Milans, (2013, 2011), and Zhang and Bray (2017). However, few studies address rural-urban disparities or address the nuanced impact of neoliberalism on individuals.

This means that there is only limited research concerning ELE and stakeholders’ day-to-day practices and interactions within the context of compulsory education in China’s rural and urban regions. To address this research gap, this thesis will explore the influence of neoliberalism on language education policies at the compulsory English education stage. This investigation aims to highlight how these policies shape daily educational practices and impact individual development. Through the critical analysis of policies and the observation of stakeholders’ educational practices, the study assesses the emergence and manifestation of neoliberalism in ELE in China. By involving teachers and students from rural and urban schools as interview participants, the research addresses potential reasons for disparities in ELE and contributes to addressing greater educational inequities by resisting neoliberalised market-driven
education. Every stage of this study was informed by critical theory, and the research was designed using critical linguistic ethnographic methods. Ten policy documents were reviewed, and three teachers and twenty students from two schools were interviewed. The key findings of the research originated from the critical discourse analysis of the documents and the thematic analysis of ethnographic observations and interviews.

1.2 Thesis Structure

Following this introductory chapter, Chapter 2 presents the theoretical framework of this study. Based on neo-Marxist critical theory, this chapter discusses the theoretical literature related to neoliberalism, exploring its development from an economic theory to an ideology that governs every sphere of life. This discussion also illustrates the study’s main concept – neoliberalism, its dominance over education and ELE and intertwined concepts of accountability and performativity. This framework also illustrates the interaction between the neoliberal education system and educational participants through a discussion of teachers’ motivation and language learners’ investment. This provides an opening for the analysis of how neoliberalism, as a dominant ideology in the educational process, constitutes and moulds individuals’ identity to pander to its requirements. This section, in general, follows neo-Marxist critical theory’s focus on ideology to present a theoretical framework containing a discussion of how neoliberalism transforms into hegemonic ideology, how it influences education, language education and related policies, and how it controls and manages individuals in education, particularly in ELE.

Chapter 3 reviews empirical studies and introduces the research context. The chapter contains three sections. The first reviews empirical studies on neoliberalism, education and education policies as well as research on language education and ELE in various contexts to explore the global effects of neoliberalism on language education and ELE. The second introduces the context of this research, including the structure of China’s educational system, disparities between rural and urban education and a historical overview of ELE and related policies in China. This section also summarises empirical studies on education, language education and ELE under neoliberalism in China. The
reviewing context identifies the gaps this research will fill and brings in the third section, which looks at the research setting and poses the research questions.

Chapter 4 introduces the methodology, mapping the research design and related considerations based on the paradigm of critical theory and the use of critical linguistic ethnography. It introduces the research design by examining critical theory, critical ethnography, linguistic ethnography and critical discourse analysis (CDA). It then explains the choice of research methods including sampling, related ethical issues, data gathering and analysis and other considerations relating to research quality, such as reliability, validity, trustworthiness and reflexivity.

Chapter 5 reports and discusses the CDA of ten English language education policies. The three sections in this chapter organise ten central ELE policies for compulsory education in different historical periods in China since 1978 into three groups. Policy analysis is divided into two parts – a general descriptive and representative interpretation of the policies and a social and deconstructive interpretation – by discussing the interactions between policies and the changing social and political contexts of different periods in China. The analysis firstly shows how neoliberalism influences the formulation and implementation of ELE policies for compulsory education in China. Secondly it reveals the contradiction between national development in the neoliberal global market and the political requirements that constitute nationalism. I argue that neoliberalism and nationalism develop subjectivities for individuals in ELE in order to reduce their agency and govern them as subjects.

Chapters 6 and 7 examine the findings and discuss the interviews and observational data with teachers and students. Chapter 6 presents the findings of the interviews with rural and urban English language teachers. ELE policies are included in the analysis of the teachers’ interviews to evaluate how policies impact teachers’ ideas. Where relevant, classroom observations are presented alongside the interviews to examine the relationship between teachers’ ideas and their practice. This chapter has four themes: firstly, new managerialism in ELE; secondly, the autonomous and controlled motivations for being an English language teacher; thirdly, teachers’ perspectives on English curriculum standards; and fourthly teachers’ ideal and actual classrooms.
Chapter 7 presents and discusses the findings from the thematic analysis of students’ interviews. The analysis of ELE policies is also drawn upon to illustrate their impact on participating students. There are four sections in this chapter: firstly, students’ investment in English language learning; secondly, students’ perspectives on their English language teachers and their teaching practices;thirdly, students’ perspectives on the 2011 English curriculum standards and their textbooks; and fourthly rural and urban students as stratified neoliberal subjects. Where relevant, the discussion here also involves issues that have emerged from the analysis of observational and teacher interview data to contextualise the presentation and discussion of the students’ interviews and explore the interaction and mutual influence between ELE participants in practice.

Chapter 8 concludes the thesis with a discussion of the findings to answer my research questions. Through the comparative analysis of daily practices in ELE under neoliberalist policies, the chapter highlights distinctions in perspectives and practices between rural teachers and students and their urban counterparts. These distinctions show how the neoliberalised education system shapes individuals through ELE in diverse contexts. The first section discusses connections and conflicts among policies, individuals and ELE practices in rural and urban China, addressing the research questions. Answers reveal the influence of neoliberalist policies on constructing individual neoliberal subjectivities, the constraints on individual resistance within the neoliberalised ELE system and the reasons for the ongoing disparities in ELE and education at large. The chapter also discusses the implications of the research, advocating for a critical ethnographic perspective in ELE policymaking and a shift to a more critical intercultural curriculum. Practical implications for teachers, students and schools are presented through the lens of critical pedagogy and intercultural citizenship. As the concluding part of the thesis, this chapter discusses its theoretical and methodological contributions, acknowledges the limitations of the study and provides suggestions for further research.

Figure 1.1 shows the process of this research and how each stage informs and was informed by the preceding and following stages.
Figure 1.1: Thesis Design Frame

Identification of the problem

- The disparity between rural and urban students’ performance in English language education at compulsory basic education stage in China under neoliberalism

Related theories and empirical Studies

- Four ‘faces’ of neoliberalism
  - Education, language education, and related policies under neoliberalism
  - Neoliberalism and educational participants’ identity, motivation, and investment
  - Related empirical studies on education, language education, and English language education under neoliberalism
  - Research context and English language education studies in China

Clarification of the problem

- Neoliberalism impacts the formulation of English language education policies in China
- Neoliberal policies influence teachers and students in rural and urban schools
- The disparity in English language education in rural and urban schools

Sampling

- Ethnographic Sampling
- Research sites sampling --- rural and urban school
- Participants sampling --- three teachers and twenty students

Data collection and analysis

- Document gathering → National curriculums for English language education since 1978 → Critical discourse analysis
- Participant observation, interviews, and field notes transcribing and translating → Member checking
- Thematic analysis (Coding, Generating themes, Reviewing themes, Defining and naming themes, Writing up)

Discussion and conclusion

- Discussion and answers to the research questions
- Implication
- Contribution, limitation, and further instruction
Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework — Neoliberalism and Its Impact on Education, English Language Education, Educational Participants

2.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the theoretical frameworks that inform this study to illustrate the main concept of neoliberalism and its intertwined theories from the Neo-Marxist critical theory perspective. The framework also maps the way neoliberalism affects education, language education, ELE and educational policies. The final section shows the interaction between neoliberal education systems and educational participants, encompassing teachers’ motivation and students’ investment.

Section 2.2 provides the ground for subsequent discussion on neoliberalism, focusing on analysing social structures, power dynamics, and identity formations from a critical perspective. It presents the development of critical theory from its origins in Marx’s understanding of history through the first generation of critical theorists associated with the Frankfurt school to the second generation represented by Habermas. It discusses key concepts such as immanent critique, intersubjectivity, and communicative action, as well as the incorporation of poststructuralist, postmodern, feminist, critical race, and postcolonial perspectives by contemporary critical theorists.

Section 2.3 examines theoretical literature on neoliberalism, tracing its evolution from an economic theory to an ideology governing all aspects of life. Drawing inspiration from Mudge’s (2008) identification of neoliberalism’s three ‘faces’ — intellectual, bureaucratic and political — that align market ideology with political manifestations, I extend this concept into four ‘faces’ by analysing neoliberalism through neo-Marxist critical theory and informed by Foucault (1978/2007). While Mudge’s three faces are rooted in the political-economic perspective, my adaptation aims to provide a more nuanced framework, incorporating economic, political, ideological and governance dimensions. This section examines the four faces of neoliberalism: as an economic theory, a political-economic regime, an ideology and a form of governmentality. The section concludes by showing how neoliberal ideology operates through subjectivity and exploring the possibilities of resistance through individual agency.

Section 2.4 discusses the impact of neoliberalism on education and education policies.
through Bourdieu’s (1986, 1977, 1991, 1998) theory on forms of capital, Lynch’s (2012) exposition of new managerialism in education and Ball’s (2012a) analysis of accountability and performativity within neoliberalised education policies. Bourdieu emphasises the (re)production of different capital forms, suggesting neoliberalism as a driving force encouraging individuals to acquire market-preferred capital. New managerialism introduces quantifiable market-driven outcomes that influence individual practice in education, while quantifiable outcomes are manifested as accountability and performativity in education policies.

Section 2.5 discusses neoliberalism’s impact on language education, language education policies and ELE, emphasising the transformation of language into a commodity. Based on Bourdieu, applied linguists analyse the neoliberalist commodification of language by turning it into linguistic capital in learning and teaching processes (Block et al., 2012; Pan, 2011; Simpson & O’Regan, 2018). Language education is seen as (re)producing linguistic capital, mobilised to meet market and consumer demands. The influence of neoliberalism on ELE and its policies is also explored, aligning with Phillipson’s (1992) concept of linguistic imperialism and positioning ELE as a global industry in the neoliberal market.

Section 2.6 addresses neoliberalism’s impact on educational participants’ identities by examining teachers’ motivation and learners’ investment. Roth’s (2014) self-determination theory is reviewed to understand changes in teachers’ motivation and identity under neoliberalism. Norton’s (2015) investment model for language learners provides a framework upon which to explore the intricate interaction between students’ identity, ideology and capital in language education within the neoliberal context across various temporal and spatial dimensions. This section provides a lens for analysing how dominant ideologies such as neoliberalism shape and construct our identities to align with neoliberal requirements. The concluding section offers a concise summary of the points raised.

### 2.2 Critical Theory

Thompson (2017) believes that the ability to see the inherent relationship between thought and action is crucial to critical theory. Schroyer (1973) points out that true critical thought should anticipate the emancipatory reflection and transformation of
social praxis. Antonio (1981) argues that immanent critique – which understands the defects and potentialities in a system with its own principles and concepts – constitutes the core of critical theory. According to Adorno (1973), immanent critique assesses social institutions and concepts based on their internal regulations or objectives to reveal how the object of critique might be a pretence it denies or chooses to overlook. Critical theory encourages investigations into the relationships and forces that dominate members of society, unravels the contradictions and gives emancipatory insight into given social structures or systems. Marx’s understanding of history based on class struggle is considered the origin of critical theory because it views the process of historical change as mechanistic and systemic, as something that can be discovered and predicted, and therefore changed (Thompson, 2017). However, Thompson (2017) also points out that this view of history lacks a nuanced theory of society and human action, which sets the foundations for an alternative view of the subject and society and its relationship to opposition to administrated society and instrumental reason. According to Morrow and Brown (1994), an approach to methodology in social science is needed that understands society as a historical totality rather than an aggregate of mechanical determinants. Compared with Marx’s assumption that consciousness could only be understood in relation to economic and social structures rooted in social beings, this approach requires a more self-reflexive conception of method, a more subtle theory of culture, and a social analysis of class consciousness. Korsch (1970) claims that subjectivity is necessary for reflecting and critically comprehending a system one is part of. Individuals’ understanding of themselves as objects of power relations in social political systems and as subjects for historical development and practice should be a part of historical totality. In other words, an approach to investigate social change within the consciousness of the agents of social transformation is needed, rather than focusing on the external mechanistic operation of agents within society. Thompson (2017) believes that Korsch, Lukács, Gramsci, and Reich are key thinkers who developed the idea of emphasising subjective dimensions of individuals and paying attention to the cultural and institutional lifeworld that shapes consciousness. These ideas set the basic framework for critical theory in the early twentieth century. Frankfurt School philosophers such as Adorno, Horkheimer and Marcuse are seen as the first generation of critical theorists (Bohman, 2019; Peukertruth, 1993). For Horkheimer (1972/2002), a critical theory of society seeks the explanation and
normative evaluation of what made the object of investigation problematic and identifies the agents responsible for its transformation. Thompson (2017) suggests that Horkheimer’s notion of critical theory establishes a compelling framework for social research, which can be dialectically transformed by the evaluative categories of moral judgment with an eye on the practical–transformative activity necessary for its resolution. Bohman (2019) argues that critical theorists from the Frankfurt School seek to distinguish their aims, methods, theories and forms of explanation from standard understandings in the natural and social sciences by arguing that it is essential to integrate rather than separate the realms of philosophy and the social sciences when approaching social inquiry from a critical theory perspective to fulfil explanatory, practical, and normative criteria. Critical inquiry should elucidate the defects of social reality and identify agents that are capable of effecting change, establish explicit standards for critique and set attainable objectives for social transformation.

Modern critical theorists focus on the critique of capitalist society, mass culture and instrumental rationality. Peukertruth (1993) argues that Horkheimer and Adorno attempt to reconstruct the history of reason, which signifies the ability to free oneself from and to be differentiated from one’s bond with nature. Adorno and Horkheimer (1944/2016) also believe that the capacity of distancing contains the possibility of transforming nature into an object of domination, thereby turning the whole of nature – including human beings as a part of nature – into raw material for society under the domination of those in power. The pursuit of emancipation and freeing oneself to avoid domination by others may inadvertently become a tool for individuals to dominate others, nature or transformative mechanisms; ‘Reason thus degenerates into an instrument of domination’ (Peukertruth, 1993, p. 161). Horkheimer (1972/2002) argues that critical social inquiry should focus on how society’s authoritarian structures are transformed into intrapsychic mechanisms by which even suffering could contribute to stabilisation. Little (1986) sees intrapsychic mechanisms as a problem of ideology, which grasps individuals’ inner processes and produces false consciousness about the world to rationalise dominance. Thompson (2017) argues that instrumental rationality leads to the subject’s collapse under intrapsychic mechanisms to become a critical theory problem. Adorno (1998) asks for the subject to resist reificatory forms of rationalisation that now pervade modern society.

As the representative of the second generation of critical theorists, Habermas (1987) suggests that Horkheimer and Adorno collapsed reason with instrumental rationality,
arguing that reason should be reconceptualised from an intersubjective paradigm instead of subject-centred reasoning and the philosophy of consciousness to realise emancipatory and critical aims. Habermas (1984) sees communication between social subjects as a new form of social action, arguing that the structure of language and communication generates a rational form of solidarity through mutual consensus. Bohman (2019) believes that language and communication produce a critical public sphere that can engender justificatory and multi-perspectival intersubjective relationships to provide more democratic actions and practices. Bohman also considers that communication and language are treated as analytical and normative bases for criticising social-political actions. Thompson (2017) explains that intersubjective and communicative practice within groups provides a framework for renewing critical theory. According to Wodak (2006), Habermas has broadened the critical theory framework by incorporating linguistic and communicative aspects, and critical theory has expanded beyond the Frankfurt school. Butler, Freire, Fraser and other scholars extend critical theory by incorporating poststructuralist and postmodern perspectives (Bohman, 2019). Emphasising the deconstruction of power, discourse and identity, feminist theory, critical race theory, postcolonial theory and other approaches draw from critical theory to explore social class, social mobility, achievement, education and the intersections between subjects and their positions (Fitzpatrick & May, 2022; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

In the next section, I explore the evolution of neoliberalism from a mere economic theory to a form of governmentality and a pervasive ideology based on the preceding discussion of critical theory, which encourages revealing the mechanisms of social structures, power dynamics, and inequalities. By discussing neoliberalism within the framework of critical theory, I further discuss its profound influences on education, ELE, and individual agency in the subsequent sections.

2.3 The Four Faces of Neoliberalism

*Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade.* (Harvey, 2005, p. 2)

Harvey’s (2005) perspective on neoliberalism shows that it was originally conceived
as an economic theory centred on free markets and free trade and was later adapted to build political and institutional frameworks to implement free market theories. Mudge (2008) echoes that neoliberalism’s fundamental idea is the free market, protecting individualised capital, and illustrates manifestations of neoliberalism in political contexts through three faces: the intellectual face of institutions, the bureaucratic face of state policies, and the political face of official authorities.

Inspired by neo-Marxism, I adopt Mudge’s conceptualisation of ‘faces’ but replace the three faces with economic theory, political-economic regimes and ideology to align with the evolutionary trajectory of neoliberalism argued in the literature. Influenced by Foucault (1978/2007), a growing body of literature sees neoliberalism as a form of governmentality, a specific regime governing through the free market economy. I introduce a form of governmentality as neoliberalism’s fourth face for a more comprehensive understanding of its dimensions. The discussion over whether neoliberalism is an ideology or a form of governmentality is addressed after presenting these four faces to explore individual governance by neoliberalism and potential resistance.

While Mudge’s ‘faces’ provide the initial conceptualisation, this thesis goes beyond by exploring how neoliberalism grows from a mere economic theory to a regime, a form of governmentality, and an ideology. These four dimensions are not stand-alone; rather, they are intricately intertwined, depicting the governance of individuals under neoliberalism. By discussing these dimensions with the concept of ‘faces’, this thesis contributes a nuanced understanding of neoliberalism’s ascent and complexity, suggesting that these four faces are integrated into a robust mechanism that collectively influences individual agency. Through this analysis, the four ‘faces’ serve as a springboard for examining neoliberalism’s influence on education and language education, as well as the governance of individuals and their resistance under neoliberalism.

2.3.1 Neoliberalism as Economic Theory
majority of capital in society. According to Olssen et al. (2004), classical liberal economists reject government intervention in economic development and call for a free market to encourage economic development. Smith’s free market (1776/2007) and Mill’s laissez-faire market (1859/2012) envision an automatic process operating economic activities in society where all economic activities benefit the accumulation of wealth and safeguarded self-interest. According to Smith (1776/2007), when accumulated as self-interest, large amounts of private capital automatically benefit society, leading to economic development.

As owners of most of society’s capital, private owners in the free market take the dominant position in society, making it a ‘society under capitalism’ (von Mises, 1927/2005, p. xxv), resulting in the formation of a bourgeoisie. Gaspard (2003) and Crouch (2011) claim that the liberal free market economic system brings unprecedented success in economic development to states that adopted capitalism across Europe and North America. However, states lost domination over capital and goods as individual capital increased. Consequently, during the economic depression in the 1930s, governments struggled to explain it or find solutions within their free-market economic system (Crouch, 2011; Peck, 2008, 2013).

Duménil and Lévy (2004) suggest that neoliberalism was a modification of classic liberalism to overcome the 1930s depression. Crouch (2011) claims that neoliberalism supports belief in the free market but advocates that governments create favourable conditions to protect the free market and guarantee private capital growth. While classical liberalism rejects government intervention, neoliberalism asks for the endorsement of the free market at institutional level. In The Road to Serfdom (1944/1976), Hayek analyses the government’s potential role in neoliberalism. Governments should fully understand the structure of the free market and how it functions to create conditions for its growth. At this stage, neoliberalism took the form of economic theory based on a classic liberalist free-market economic system, but it calls for its development by involving governments to protect the free market. This face of neoliberalism reveals the concept’s core value – a free-market economic system – and lays the foundation for the development of neoliberalism. It provides possible conditions for generating the second face of neoliberalism as a political-economic regime, based on the idea that governments need political-economic strategies to endorse, support and safeguard a free market.
2.3.2 Neoliberalism as Political-Economic Regime

Przeworski and Limongi (1993) define political-economic regimes as using political rules, policies or laws to implement state economic theories in private economic agents. Schmidt (2011) believes that state decisions influence the choices of private economic agents by establishing rules in capitalist activities; and this is achieved by defining property rights and laws or engaging in demand management through fiscal authorities and central banks. To escape from the 1930s economic depression, a political-economic regime based on Keynesian theory was built in European and North America before neoliberalism was used to formulate economic policies and laws. Keynes (1963/2018) supported economic theories promoting the intervention of government policies to coordinate consumption, investment and government input to accumulate more capital for society. However, according to Bockman (2013), Keynes’ regime proved inadequate in addressing significant budget deficits arising from increased government buying. In response, capitalist countries shifted towards neoliberal policies to re-establish the free market and protect private capital during economic crises. The formulation and implementation of neoliberal policies and laws subsequently established neoliberalism as the dominant political-economic regime in capitalist countries.

According to Klein (2007), neoliberalism promotes a political-economic regime that supports the privatisation of capital assets. It aims to consolidate free market control over allocating capital resources through political projects and policies. Mann (2013) contends that within neoliberal political-economic regimes, capital plays an important role in economic activities and achieves its political objectives through capital allocation. Christophers (2016) concludes that neoliberal political-economic regimes protect the accumulation of capital through governmental politics under the free-market theory to promote private possession of capital and develop the economy. Based on this, the rejection of government intervention in classical liberalism results in powerless governments during economic depressions, while government policy intervention under the Keynesian regime also fails to resolve depressions because of government deficits. Neoliberal political-economic regimes represent a reconciliation between a completely free market system and a regime of full government intervention. They distribute capital and advocate for private interests via neoliberal free-market policies so that the responsibility for economic development in society is distributed to
private economic agents who strive to accumulate capital.

Crouch (2011) asserts that neoliberalism was serving as a political-economic regime in many Western capitalist countries by the late 1970s. Meanwhile, international economic institutions like the World Bank, began to encourage neoliberal government projects worldwide using economic and political support. Harvey (2005) observes that Deng Xiaoping’s 1978 Reform and Opening-up policy in China also reflects neoliberal characteristics since Deng advocates using individual and local initiatives to increase productivity to ignite economic growth. As a political-economic regime, neoliberalism links free-market economic theory with policies to manage national and international economic development. This face of neoliberalism reveals its political management of economies and underscores its potential to integrate economic theory with government actions to influence and manage other social spheres.

2.3.3 Neoliberalism as Ideology

Crouch (2011) investigates the application of neoliberal economic theory to various government actions, public services and individual choices. McGimpsey (2017) and Murray and Overton (2011) also suggest that neoliberalism demonstrates the capacity of an ideology to combine with other political approaches and strong tendencies to become a monopoly of wisdom. This combination is achieved by inserting neoliberal ideas into social repertoires through policies in every field of human life.

To discuss neoliberalism as an ideology, it is first essential to define ideology. Drucker (1972) claims that Marx and Engels, in *The German Ideology* (1938), first introduced the concept of ideology to explore the interplay between what people think and how societies operate (Drucker, 1972). According to Marx and Engels (1938), ideas transform into ideologies as they intertwine with the material activity of people’s lives. Freeden (2003) posits that in Marx and Engels’ framework of society, ideology serves as a way of embellishing material life with specific ideas, presenting itself in various guises such as religions and customs.

Marx and Engels’ depiction of ideology provides a foundation for subsequent discussions emphasising the relationship between individual ideas and our material activities. They contend that class, being objective, is where social mechanisms originate. Social mechanisms foster distortions, errors and blind spots in the
underclass’s consciousness as they follow the ruling class’s preferences to perpetuate its dominance. Little (1986) notes that in capitalism, institutions generate false consciousness that evolves into ideology by shaping individual thoughts and frameworks to mask the exploitation of class-based social relationships. Scott and Marshall (2015) argue that false consciousness serves to confirm human servitude rather than its emancipation. Marx and Engels suggest that ideology is inherently false, leading the underclass to willingly endorse the ideas of the ruling class, rendering them powerless in servitude.

From the Marxist tradition, Gramsci (1971/1999) theorised that ideology is the ‘solidity of popular beliefs’ in material life (p. 707). Gramsci (1971/1999) believes that this solidity is formed through constant individual practice of popular beliefs in life, and that the ruling classes exercises their political power over individuals so that people practise the ruling class’s beliefs, transforming them into popular beliefs. The ruling class’s beliefs are thus infused with the solidity of popular belief through individual practices. Gramsci (1971/1999; 1988) uses the term ‘hegemony’ to depict the way of transforming certain beliefs into widely accepted popular beliefs through the practices of political power in social contexts. Gunder (2010) asserts that Gramsci’s hegemony elucidates how dominant ideology arrives, engages with the wider society, and embeds popular ideas among citizens. The beliefs of the ruling class are thereby legitimised as the dominant ideology through political power and are then practised at individual level in society. Ramos (1982) points out that hegemony is closely associated with political power, showing how the legitimisation of dominant ideology relies on the political power of the ruling class, by which their beliefs are imposed as official knowledge through political projects and policies. They become dominant ideologies and achieve their hegemony through individuals’ practices in political institutions such as schools. Joseph (2002) sees such legitimisation processes as being enforced, but often in a subtle manner. He explains that the hegemony of dominant ideology can be disguised as a normalised culture promoted by economic, political and cultural practices and institutions essentially run by the ruling class, such as education, economic activities and national institutions. Individuals therefore see the dominant ideology as their culture, while the political power of the ruling class that drives cultural hegemony could take on a cloak of invisibility.

Schmidt (2011) explains that neoliberalism has existed as a hegemony since the
1980s, when nations began to formulate and implement neoliberal policies based on free-market theory to organise individuals’ activities in cultural, political and economic spheres. This indicates that neoliberal dominant ideologies of free-market theory have been accepted as a normalised culture at individual levels. Murray and Overton (2011) concur that neoliberalism has become a hegemony that sustains free-market capitalism politically in every area of people’s lives. Based on Gramsci’s interpretation of dominant ideology and hegemony, the third face of neoliberalism is revealed. The face of neoliberalism as an ideology explains how it has changed from a political-economic regime to a hegemony that dominates individual practices through political power. From this perspective, individuals are passive in the legitimation process of dominant ideology and accepting the hegemony. The fourth face shifts its attention to individuals in understanding neoliberalism.

### 2.3.4 Neoliberalism as a Form of Governmentality

Foucault (1979/2008) believes that neoliberalism contains a complete set of coherent ideas and principles, making it look like an ideology. But, he argues that neoliberalism is a new programming of liberal governmentality. Foucault (1986) points out that the ideas and principles of ideology are obscure and general, while concrete policies, orders and institutions can be easily analysed. He believes that it is better to explain neoliberalism as a form of governmentality rather than an ideology, as ideology always stands in a second position behind policies and practices.

Foucault (1978/2007) conceptualises governmentality as a way of government to achieve governance at a particular level – the economy. Dean (2010) argues that governmentality organises every sphere of individuals’ lives with policies based on particular economic theories. To explain how economic theories relate to government and other types of power in achieving governmentality, Foucault (1978/2007) underscores ‘tendency’. ‘Tendency’ refers to persuading individuals that a particular economic theory works over all other types of power, especially the power of government, in their lives. Different types of power in society, such as schools and education, can be aligned with the economic theory to organise individuals. For example, certain school curricula could be designed according to a particular
economic theory for individuals to learn, meaning that this theory would regulate students' knowledge acquisition. Rose and Miller (2010) contend that governments use political power within state apparatuses to integrate economic theory with other forms of power and exert governance over individuals. Still drawing on the example of the school as a state educational apparatus, governments can use their political power to decide which economic theory should be adopted by school curricula.

Descriptions of governmentality appear similar to hegemony because individuals under both systems can be controlled by the ruling class without realising that political power is being imposed through other forms of power. When individuals follow policies based on a particular economic theory in different spheres of life, they risk being governed without realising the existence of it. However, Foucault’s emphasis on tendency shows the difference between governmentality and hegemony. Tendency indicates that individuals under governmentality believe that they actively choose to follow or adapt to policies in their social lives, and that they can make decisions within the limits of governmentality. Miller and Rose (2008) argue that tendency in governmentality allows individuals ruled by policies to make their own decisions and control their own lives by emphasising their autonomisation and concealing the role of the state. Cooper (2014) argues that under this form of governmentality individuals become enterprises that can be managed via economic theories and reproduce these theories in society.

Foucault (1979/2008) believes that neoliberalism should be considered a form of governmentality because neoliberal governmentality plays other types of power well, leading to ignorance of the existence of neoliberal free-market economic theories. Gane’s (2008) analysis of Foucault’s lecture on neoliberalism concludes that neoliberalism is a form of governmentality because it helps governments use the market as the ‘formative truth and power of society’ to disguise their domination of people (p. 358). Cotoi (2015) lists other forms of power that are associated with neoliberal governments such as education, public health and social apparatuses. He argues that neoliberalism adopts knowledge, technologies and experts from state and public institutions as the forms of power, which can rationalise market theory to exert influence on people in fields where neoliberalism seeks to operate. The free market is therefore the particular economic theory of neoliberalism and is used to organise social activities.
Miller and Rose (2008) suggest that neoliberalism as a form of governmentality redefines the state's role in individuals’ social lives through policies. According to Cooper (2014) and Miller and Rose (2008), replacing the one-way dominance of hegemony, the construction of individuals as enterprises and the neoliberal governmentality of the state are mutually related. Therefore, the fourth face of neoliberalism indicates that neoliberal governmentality constructs individuals in different spheres of social life as enterprises under free-market theory. In turn, entrepreneurial individuals instinctively adhere to the operation of economic theory, thus contributing to neoliberal governmentality. Given that the governmentality face and the ideology face are similar yet different, the following section will address a more detailed comparison.

2.3.5 Ideology or Governmentality?
As discussed above, governmentality invites individuals into the dialogue of neoliberalism. According to De Dios Oyarzun (2018), Foucault introduces governmentality as a concept that connects the notion of government to mentality, thus highlighting how individuals’ understanding of a government’s specific theory is constructed to subsequently contribute to the realisation of governance. Seeing neoliberalism as a form of governmentality means creating a connection between individuals’ ideas and neoliberal free-market economic theory by creating active, enterprising and self-improving citizens. According to Foucault (1988), this creative process can be seen as a way of generating and formulating subjects who experience, respond to and internalise power relations in a neoliberal economic society and are then self-configured with certain types of subjectivity (Ball & Olmedo, 2013). Foucault (1988) claims that neoliberalism realises the governance of individuals by producing subjectivities aligned with market logic, including traits such as responsibility, accountability, performativity and consumption. When individuals adopt these subjectivities-based neoliberal regulations, they undergo a process of being constituted as neoliberal subjects. Therefore, as a form of governmentality, neoliberalism represents a process of transforming individuals into subjects.

Growing discussions on ideology have turned to exploring the relationship between individuals and ideologies. Althusser (1984) claims that ideology hails individuals as ‘always-ready subjects’ through their interactions with ‘repressive state apparatuses’
(governmental institutions) and ‘ideological state apparatuses’ (sociocultural institutions) (p. 50). Vighi and Feldner (2007) assert that from Althusser’s perspective, individuals are invited into the unconscious categories in which ideology is represented and interpreted by material circumstances, which further develops Gramsci’s understanding of individuals under hegemony. Althusser (1984) posits that individuals’ interaction with repressive and ideological state apparatuses shapes them into subjects, mirroring Foucault’s interpretation of constituting neoliberal subjects. Foucault’s interpretation of neoliberalism as a form of governmentality aligns with Althusser’s understanding of ideology. However, Althusser and Foucault overlook the possibility that individuals may refuse to be constructed. Hall’s (1986) discussion on the relationship between ideology and individuals challenges the ideas of Althusser and Foucault.

In an interview with Grossberg, Hall (1986) introduced the concept of ‘articulation’ to explain the active role individuals play in constructing subjects under ideology. Drawing inspiration from the concept of the articulated lorry, Hall describes articulation as a connection that can bring together two different things under specific conditions, highlighting that it is a linkage that is not necessary, determined, absolute and essential for all time. According to Hall, individuals connect ideology with different social forces, such as cultural institutions, through the process of articulation, constructing themselves as subjects. Each new articulation has the potential to construct new groups of social, cultural or political subjects. This perspective challenges Althusser’s notion that individuals are mere subjects governed by ideology. Instead, individuals possess the agency to participate in shaping and challenging ideologies and can construct or challenge ideologies by articulating themselves with dominant or marginalised thoughts. New groups of subjects can be constructed by articulating marginalised thoughts, while existing groups can strengthen themselves by constructing subjects with dominant ideas. This process also allows for marginalised thoughts to evolve into new dominant ideologies as they can articulate with more individuals to construct articulated individuals into new subjects (Morley & Chen, 2005).

Hall (1988) uses neoliberalism as an example to illustrate how ideologies develop. He suggests that individuals begin by articulating themselves with neoliberal ideas, policies and economic regimes. Subsequently, neoliberalism gradually gains acceptance and becomes articulated with every sphere of social activities to eventually
solidify its status as the dominant ideology. Hall’s interpretation underscores the agency of individuals in producing, reproducing and transforming dominant ideologies. According to Hall (1988), the spread of neoliberal discourses may not be a grassroots movement in the traditional sense, but a complex process influenced by various factors, including power structures. Therefore, although Morley and Chen (2005) argue that marginalised groups can challenge hegemony through articulation with new or marginalised ideologies, it is essential to note that change cannot be achieved solely by relying on articulation to reach more people. Complex power relations within social structures are always involved in the process of change.

Discussing the relationship between ideology and subjects, Apple (2015) posits that Hall’s interpretation aligns with Giddens’ theory of structuration, which reflects the relationship between structure and agency. Giddens (1984) conceives structure and agency as a duality in a dialectical relationship. He defines agency as individual capacity to be independent and make choices in activities and practices, while structure refers to the systems of social practices, such as religion, gender and ethnicity, which either determine or limit agents and their choices. Based on Giddens, Barker (2000) argues that agents have the capacity to (re)produce and perpetuate social structures through their own actions, either aligning with established structures or creating conditions that challenge them. Bennett (2012, p.24) underscores that agents ‘interpret, adapt, implement, resist, ignore and facilitate’ existing social structures with their actions and senses. Meanwhile, social structures can either empower or limit their actions. The change of social structures intersects with individual agency. Hall’s view of articulation between ideology and subjects resonates with Giddens’s (1984) explanation of structure and agency. An examination of individual agency in the process of their interactions with neoliberal ideology and social structures therefore contributes to exploring the dominance of neoliberalism and how individuals pander to or resist it.

Through the literature review on neoliberalism and ideology, the economic theory face and political-economic regime face emerge as sources of ideas and policies that individuals can articulate during the primary stages of neoliberal ideology formulation. The face of governmentality explains the processes by which individuals are governed by neoliberalism, actively adopting different subjectivities and contributing to the reproduction of neoliberal governance. Meanwhile, the development of ideology
provides possibilities for this study to investigate the impact of neoliberalism and the face of ideology on constructing individuals as subjects and to explore their agency within the neoliberal system. The study therefore aims to shed light on how neoliberal ideas permeate education and language education by influencing the policies that individuals articulate. It also aims to examine the subjectivities formed by individuals within educational institutions and assess whether their agency in the educational system can be identified and improved. The following sections explore the literature on how neoliberal ideas shape the fields of education and language education, impacting individuals within these realms.

2.4 Neoliberalism, Education and Education Policies

The discussion of the four faces of neoliberalism illustrates its ideological underpinnings and the way it permeates all spheres of individuals’ lives through free market principles. Drawing on Althusser (1971), education is part of the ideological state apparatus, transmitting a general ideology to people unconsciously and making them easier to control in everyday life. Scholars are increasingly investigating the widespread acceptance of neoliberalism in education (Block, 2018c; Exley & Ball, 2013; Harris, 2007; Van Doorn, 2014) by examining neoliberal governance through education policies and practices from sociological or anthropological perspectives. Based on the literature, this section firstly discusses neoliberalism’s impact on education with reference to Bourdieu’s (1986, 1991, 1998) theory of capital, habitus by field. Secondly, it explains how neoliberalism manifests in education policies through implementing strategies of new managerialism. The section concludes by focussing on the influence of neoliberal education policies on individuals’ identity construction in practice by examining teachers’ motivation and students’ investment.

2.4.1 Neoliberalism and Different Forms of Capital in Education

Harvey (2005) argues that success or failure under neoliberalism hinges on the extent to which individuals invest in human capital through education. Schultz (1960) introduced the concept of human capital into education, proposing that education serves as an investment in individuals, with the outcomes of education seen as human capital that provides valuable productive services to the economy. Becker (1964), a neoliberal economist, contends that human capital is tradable and should be organised
using neoliberal free market theory to acquire economic benefits. Ball et al. (2007) criticise the neoliberal management of human capital, arguing that it reduces the objectivities and substance of education to equip students only with the most profitable skills and potentials.

In essence, neoliberalism has infiltrated education by transforming whatever students acquire from education, such as knowledge and creativity, into tradable commodities for economic capital accumulation in the created free market it has created, as well as being viewed as human capital contributing to economic capital. Bourdieu (1986) claims that education involves a dual process of investing and attaining cultural and social capital. Individuals invest their cultural and social capital in education, shaping their readiness for learning, while education enhances and expands this capital by providing socio-cultural resources such as qualifications, networks, honours and titles.

Bourdieu (1986) claims that capital manifests itself in three fundamental forms: economic capital (money and property), cultural capital (cultural goods and educational qualifications) and social capital (social connections and titles). According to Bourdieu, capitalism can convert economic capital, the most material type of capital, into intangible forms of cultural or social capital. This means that economic theories, such as profit maximisation, can be extended to non-economic exchanges to achieve the governance of social functioning and the chance of. In certain conditions, the three forms of capital are interconvertible forms of value to individuals with possessions or the embodiment of them. Within a capitalist framework, cultural and social capital can be transformed under capitalist conditions into economic capital and vice versa, to exert capitalist governance over individuals and society. Bourdieu’s capital theory suggests that neoliberalism can utilise free market principles to facilitate transformations between economic, cultural and social capital, thereby influencing all aspects of people’s lives.

To demonstrate the control exerted by neoliberalism over individuals’ educational practices through the transformation of these three forms of capital, we need to explain the relationship between individuals’ practices and habitus and capital within a certain field. Habitus, according to Bourdieu (1977), refers to ‘a subjective but not individual system of internalised structures, schemes of perception, conception, and action common to all members of the same group or class and constituting the precondition for all objectification and apperception’ (p. 86). Smith (2020) sees Bourdieu’s concept
of habitus as a system of dispositions that shape and direct people towards certain perceptions, values and practices, which may in turn regulate their habitus. Habitus suggests that the objective structures prevalent in communities can to some extent predetermine the capital individuals possess and can attain within practices, while habitus is (re)produced by capital accumulation. According to Maton (2014), habitus does not stand on its own but necessitates an understanding of Bourdieu’s notions of capital and field. For Bourdieu (1998), fields are structured social spaces wherein actors from different variations of habitus struggle to transform or preserve their capital. Bourdieu (1998) argues that the social structure of a field produces domination and inequalities. Individuals’ positions are dominated by their habitus, and the capital they possess within the field is easily stratified.

In the field of education, neoliberalism works as a structure that controls educational practices by organising participants’ habitus and capital. According to Block (2018c), neoliberalism can develop a certain habitus, such as self-interested thoughts and economic preferences, by implementing its free market principles within the field of education. Block argues that the neoliberal habitus encourages students to mould themselves into ‘more saleable subjects in the job market’ (p. 577). Therefore, educational practices are transformed into practices of producing marketable students. Block contends that to enhance saleability within the field of education, participants must acquire and accumulate cultural and social capital to adapt to neoliberal requirements. He explains that cultural capital has three states: the embodied state, represented by long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body; the objectified state, represented by cultural goods such as books; and the institutionalised state, a form of objectification combining original properties and the presumed guarantee of cultural capital, as seen in educational qualifications. Social capital denotes the aggregation of actual or potential resources within a network of social connections which can be mobilised for specific purposes.

In line with this, the embodied state of cultural capital, as represented by dispositions, is connected to habitus. Dean (2014) suggests that neoliberalism shapes the embodied state of cultural capital in education by defining what dispositions are valuable within the participants’ habitus. Nash’s (1990) analysis of reproduction in education through Bourdieu’s theories shows that regulated cultural production, when operating under certain structural principles, can reproduce structure. Meanwhile, the
objectified state of cultural capital, endorsing and practising neoliberal ideas (e.g., expensive educations for profitable skills), is encouraged to (re)produce neoliberal ideas in education. Meanwhile, the objectified state of cultural capital finds support from – and in turn supports – the institutional state of cultural capital (Arthur, 2011). As defined by the neoliberal market, institutional forms of profitable skills and potentialities are established through curricula or programs, while students' skills and potentialities are evident through differently graded qualifications, which receive endorsement from institutions such as the government and the school. These endorsements give participants an officially recognised ‘guaranteed competence’ (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 51). Bourdieu explains that the amount of social capital of given agents depends on the size of the network of connections they can mobilise and the volume of economic and cultural capital they and their connections possess. This shows that educational participants can profit from the resources that are accessible within their networks. These resources are arranged to (re)produce different forms of capital needed by the neoliberal market.

The impact of neoliberalism on education is not just economic; choices relating to cultural capital invested into education and social capital education created are also influenced by market preferences (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; R. Moore, 2012). Neoliberalism therefore manages education by organising the forms of capital that educational participants possess or can attain. Participants invest in required cultural capital to obtain economic capital and accumulate social capital, thus consolidating and accumulating economic, cultural and social capital and consequently improving their marketability within the neoliberal education market. Ball (1990) claims that policies ‘are the operational statements of values’, and education policies project ideal images of education based on society’s values (p. 3). To assess whether and how neoliberal values are embedded in policies to manage education, the following section explores neoliberalism’s impact on education policies.

2.4.2 New Managerialism and Education Policies

To explain how neoliberalism organises forms of capital in educational practice, Ball (2012, 2017b) argues that neoliberal ideas become consolidated through embodied education policies. He contends that education policies are increasingly conceptualised and implemented in the context of the pressures and requirements of
neoliberalism and within the specific framework of political rationality. Ball’s (2012a, 2012b) analysis of education policies also highlights neoliberalism’s ideological management of education practices, emphasising that neoliberalism seeks managerial control of everyday life. Lynch (2014) and Fraser (2017) add that New Managerialism (NM) (also called New Public Management) represents the organisational arm of neoliberalism applying private sector management systems and managerial techniques to the public sector, particularly in education. NM involves quantifiable and measurable outcomes as well as audits or inspections to manage and control public sector practices. Davies (2014) sees this as ‘actually existing neoliberalism’, as it converts qualities into quantities in practice, potentially creating conditions conducive to neoliberal market ideals (p. 15).

In discussions of the institutional form of cultural capital (Section 2.3.1), qualifications with grades backed by institutions are emphasised. Qualifications show how NM converts teaching and learning outcomes into quantitative data based on grades and ranking (Lynch, 2015). Lynch sees qualifications and grades as an accounting method of responsibility or accountability used by NM to exert more control over organisational structures by assigning quantifiable goals to individuals. Harvey and Ringrose (2016) assert that accountability is a significant factor through which NM achieves neoliberal governance in schooling and education to change educational participants into evaluable subjects. When accountability is embedded in policy, the outcomes or goals of education and even the educational participants themselves undergo a transformation into grades and measurable data that can be easily defined, mobilised and organised. In education practices, students’ performance is defined by their grades, while teachers’ performance is evaluated by students’ success in exams and the accomplishment of administrative tasks.

Ball (2012a) uses the concept of ‘performativity’ – which he describes as ‘a technology that links effort, values, purposes and self-understanding to measures and comparison of output’ – to explain the interplay between individuals and the performance management of neoliberalism (p. 19). Analysing the relationship between accountability and performativity in the context of neoliberal educational, Harvey and Ringrose (2016) argue that performativity represents neoliberal managerial technology, wherein accountability is manifested through participants' performance in the competitive field of education. Biesta (2004) claims that accountability is a
management strategy that uses performance data in all aspects of education. Meanwhile, performativity shows how participants perform in educational practices and whether they internalise and present accountability.

Roberts (2007) explains that neoliberalist education policy encourages a form of knowledge standardisation driven by performativity. Performativity transforms knowledge into standardised outcomes, enabling knowledge to be traded in a competitive market within an educational or a broader global socioeconomic context. In the neoliberalised education system, knowledge that cannot be standardised for the market loses its value. According to Roberts (2007), neoliberalism defines the value of knowledge in education via educational policies which encourage educational participants to accept this neoliberal market logic, drawing clear distinctions between those who perform according to the logic and those who do not.

Ball (2017b) concurs regarding the influence of neoliberalism on policymaking and suggests that education policy is contextually shaped by the pressures and requirements of expanding the neoliberal market for individuals. Drawing on Bourdieu’s theory, Smith (2020) concludes that neoliberalism inserts its preferences for cultural and social capital into standardised policies that are easily managed and accessed through NM. Participants in education are transformed into evaluable subjects based on their ability to obtain the different forms of capital needed to meet standards and achieve success in a neoliberalised education system. Bourdieu (1991) regards language as a form of legitimised symbolic capital for individual success. The next section explores the impact of neoliberal preferences on language education and associated policies by examining English language preferences under neoliberalism.

2.5 Neoliberalism, Language Education, English Language Education

This section examines the impact of neoliberalism on language education, particularly ELE, by exploring Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic capital. Bourdieu’s (1991) argument that language can be viewed as linguistic capital puts language acquisition under the category of symbolic capital. The accumulation of specific linguistic capital can contribute significantly to individuals’ success. Building on Bourdieu’s theory, various forms of capital can be exchanged for one another. However, Bourdieu (1989) contends that only capital forms that have been transformed into symbolic capital and
recognised as having value can be exchanged. Bourdieu defines symbolic capital as ‘the form that various forms of capital assume when they are perceived and acknowledged as legitimate’ (p. 17). Southerton (2012) explains that symbolic capital is not a *de facto* form of capital, but rather a legitimised and acknowledged form of other types of capital. In other words, while not all forms of capital can be directly exchanged, any form of capital can undergo a process of conversion into symbolic capital, thus gaining recognition as a legitimate and valuable asset.

Swartz (1997) posits that symbolic capital implies the presence of a symbolic structure that can enforce the means of understanding and adapting social structures. This is achieved by disguising itself as economic and political forms, theories and policies. Symbolic capital is therefore related to power and exerts its influence on people while transforming symbolic power into economic, cultural and social capital, thereby facilitating transformations within preset social structures. Drawing on Bourdieu’s (1998b) and Mitrović’s (2005) arguments, neoliberalism can be seen as a form of symbolic power that legitimises specific economic, cultural and social capital and converts them into symbolic capital in fields run by neoliberal free-market theory. The following sections will discuss how neoliberal free market theory in the field of education legitimises linguistic capital as symbolic capital, and how ELE in particular is related to individual success under neoliberalism.

### 2.5.1 Language Education and Its Policies under Neoliberalism

Based on Marxist and Gramscian interpretations of ideology and language, Holborow (2015a) asserts that language is intertwined with the (re)production of the dynamics and conflicts of ideology. Language is not just a means of communication; it is a social process reflecting and disseminating ideologies recognised by the ruling classes. Language interacts with individuals through social practices and then shapes their social consciousness, so dominant ideologies can be strengthened through language. According to Holborow (2015a), neoliberal ideology has been widely and overwhelmingly diffused, and its widespread presence in language is a sign of this. In other words, language as a social process has been adopted to present and understand the internal and social workings of the neoliberal market. Bourdieu (1991) contends that language becomes a form of linguistic capital under neoliberalism since certain languages achieve dominance in social life and as different forms of capital in
the neoliberal market. Meanwhile, individuals’ political dominance or authoritative positions also shape and reinforce the value of their language. According to the neoliberal free market theory, language therefore becomes an invaluable asset as linguistic capital.

From Swartz’s (1997) point of view, linguistic capital can work as a legitimised form of symbolic capital because the authority or political dominance has the power to exert their preferences for language on others. Certain forms of cultural capital, such as educational qualifications, can derive symbolic power from the legitimised linguistic capital it contains, becoming valuable and exchangeable. Bourdieu (1991) uses education as an example to explain that the value of students’ language skills is recognised as linguistic capital by the market, which then legitimises the symbolic value of language qualifications and scores as cultural capital to exchange for economic capital.

Applied linguists, including Block, Holborow and Gray (2012), O'Regan, (2021), and Simpson and O'Regan (2018), address the process through which neoliberalism commodifies language. They analyse how language, initially alienated as an idealised construct or abstract entity that can be learned, is subsequently transformed into linguistic capital via the learning and teaching processes of language education, ultimately becoming a commodity of economic capital. Language education can then be seen as a process of accumulating linguistic capital by acquiring legitimised cultural capital in the form of language qualifications and social capital through networks of language-speaking communities. Language education becomes a field in which neoliberalism governs individuals by managing their capital. Da Silva et al. (2007) argue that viewing language as a commodity changes language from an inherent individual quality to something separate from personhood. This perspective suggests that language education mobilises participants as neoliberal subjects catering to markets and consumers.

O'Regan (2021) argues that class- and ethnically-based elites operate at the core of capitalism, monopolising their desired education provision by exerting dominance over political, legal, economic and educational systems, including language education policies. Walter and Benson (2012) highlight the instructional purposes of educational policies regarding language use, noting that ideological meanings embedded in language allow policymakers to organise its use in educational settings to serve their
interests. In a neoliberal educational system, language use is therefore shaped by language education policies that align with the interests of neoliberal markets. Ricento (2015) claims that neoliberalism imposes market-preferred languages as the natural and neutral medium of language education via subtle language policies, contributing to capital accumulation and competition.

It is therefore reasonable to argue that foreign languages choices in education and the methods employed to enhance linguistic skills for the neoliberal world market inevitably become focal points of language education policies. Examining the formulation and adaptation of foreign language education policies and their implementation in teaching practices identifies the influence of neoliberalism on language education. The following section discusses the English language as the selected language in education policies for the neoliberal world market.

2.5.2 English Language Education under Neoliberalism

Many sociolinguistic scholars have explored market-preferred languages in the era of neoliberalism, arguing that English, often referred to as Global Language, Lingua Franca and World English, undergoes objectification, instrumentalisation and commodification in the neoliberal market. English becomes a flexible and profit-maximising tool for individuals with English language skills to accumulate linguistic capital from the neoliberal standpoint (Block et al., 2012; Gray et al., 2018; Holborow, 2015a, 2015b; O’Regan, 2021; Pan, 2015; Simpson & O’Regan, 2018). Meanwhile, Gough (2012) argues that neoliberal socialisation practices promote the spread of English by adding value to the use of linguistic knowledge for economic benefit and individual development. In Bourdieu’s (1991) terms, this process transforms linguistic capital into economic capital. Beyond this, the transformation of English into a skill, a quality and an individual ability acts as a form of internalisation. Gough (2012) argues that the transformation of the English language helps to internalise neoliberal social relations into individuals’ minds, adding value to language knowledge so that individuals who possess this knowledge become more valuable and can be transformed into subjects under neoliberal ideology.

Holborow (2015a) claims that the English language completes the shift from the language of linguistic imperialism to a language of business through its transformation
into a market-preferred language under neoliberalism, (re)producing neoliberal ideology in the process of its spread. In Orientalism, Said (1978) critiques Western countries for utilising their culture and ideologies to manipulate the thoughts of people in other nations, transforming these countries into de facto cultural colonies. Said (2004) further claims that Western countries operate within an imperial setting, generating rhetorical power by conflating economic success with democracy and freedom to conceal their desire to dominate other nations.

Informed by Said’s (1978, 2003) postcolonial perspectives, Phillipson (1992, 2011) posits that linguistic imperialism confers linguistic advantages upon the dominant language and its speakers, endowing power to the language and its users within social and cultural setting to engender inequalities. Phillipson (1992) asserts that English, as the language associated with global capitalism and world dominance, embodies the characteristics of linguistic imperialism by asserting its dominance in the (re)constitution of global social and cultural structures. The perpetuation of English language dominance in such structures results in inequalities between English speakers and speakers of other languages. Phillipson (2008a) claims that the English language is packaged into linguistic capital, enabling individuals to access technology, modernity, material advancement and efficiency, thereby creating linguistic hegemony worldwide. Phillipson (2008b) suggests that neoliberal economic theory legitimises and reinforces the English language as a form of access to economic, cultural and social benefits. The influence of English as a symbolic system in the global neoliberal market is such that its legitimacy is accepted uncritically.

According to Chun (2021), Holborow (2015a, 2015b), Holborow and Gray (2013), and Kubota (2011), English has become global linguistic capital, with discourses of neoliberalism enacted in the ELE industry and the marketisation of education. According to Gray et al. (2018), neoliberalism fosters conditions in which international capital and national education systems place excessive emphasis on English. The accumulation of ELE products adds personal and national linguistic capital, as well as cultural and social capital, in the global neoliberal market. Observing the types and quantity of English language products individuals possess and can obtain contributes to understanding the influence of neoliberalism and the potential inequalities arising from it in educational practices. The subsequent section explores the specific impact of neoliberalism on individuals through identities that are reflected in the motivation
and investment of educational participants in personal practices.

2.6 Neoliberalism and Educational Participants’ Identity, Motivation, and Investment

Budd (2008) believes that analysing ideology through critical theory means examining the discourses used to perform ideological forces and statements. According to Baxter (2008), individual identities are shaped by various subject positions, endorsed by their community or culture and made available to them through particular discourses within the social structures of their practices. Foucault (1984/1997), examining how discourse transmits and produces power, notes that individual identities are recognised, constructed and regulated through producing and receiving discourses. Detecting individuals’ identities in changing times and spaces would therefore help researchers to examine the influence of discourses used by dominant ideologies on individuals.

Hall (1990, 2021) explains that identities involve utilising historical, linguistic and cultural processes of becoming rather than being, suggesting that identities are constructed through the interaction between the self and other social, cultural and political structures. According to Davies and Harré (1999), positioning is a way of exploring individuals’ identity in the discursive process. Positioning shows where individuals in conversations are situated as observably and subjectively coherent participants in the collaborative production of discourses. This implies that individuals can construct different ‘selves’ by assuming different positions in the discursive process and can also position themselves and be positioned by others within the ongoing process. By analysing how individuals do this in different contexts, we can explore the fluidity of identities and negotiation with changing identities.

Neoliberalism ideologically imposes its economic theory on individuals through discourses in political, cultural and social structures. Drawing on Foucault’s (1988) discussion in Section 2.2.5, neoliberalism enables its governance of individuals by producing subjectivities that follow market logic, such as responsibility, accountability, performativity and consumption. The choice of embracing these subjectivities represents the process through which individuals position themselves within neoliberalism. Examining individuals’ changing identities through their positioning and
interaction with neoliberal discourse in political, cultural and social structures can therefore unveil their subjectivities, thus highlighting the governance of neoliberalism on individuals. In the following sections, two identity-related concepts – motivation and investment – are introduced to identify the ways in which individuals position themselves under neoliberal influence.

2.6.1 Teachers’ Motivations in Education

Lee (2014) describes the relationships between motivation and identity as relationships between people’s goal-oriented action and the kind of person they are or may become. Wigfield and Wagner (2005) claim that identity development has important implications for the development of motivation, and that a discussion of motivation would be incomplete without considering the effects that identity development processes have on the constructs of motivation. Both claim that individuals’ motivations and their identities are mutually constituted. Exploring individuals’ construction of motivations could therefore help position their identities in the development process.

In the field of education, the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER, 2020) suggests that teachers can be intrinsically and extrinsically motivated in their teaching practices, and recommend using self-determination theory (SDT) to understand teachers’ motivation. According to the NFER, SDT suggests that teachers can become self-determined when their needs for competence, connection and autonomy are fulfilled. According to Ryan and Deci (2000), SDT underscores the importance of intrinsic motivation (inherent interest and enjoyment) for teachers’ satisfaction and well-being and shows how extrinsic motivation (extrinsic rewards and punishments) may influence teachers’ choices.

As discussed in Sections 2.3 and 2.4, neoliberalism influences education and language education as a dominant ideology. Miller and Rose (2008) explain that neoliberal policies guide individuals to make decisions under neoliberal economic theory without being aware that their decisions are regulated, arranged and managed by the dominant ideology. Neoliberal ideology therefore controls individuals in a disguised way, and Butler (2015) discusses its interplay with teachers’ motivations, arguing that teachers may have their own intrinsic motivations to achieve their professional goals, such as better ways of teaching, but their goals are covertly
regulated by the requirements of neoliberalism. In terms of extrinsic motivation, accountability in neoliberal education system reforms and increasing reliance on high-stakes testing should promote extrinsic teacher motivations, but it also results in a narrowed focus on raising scores by any means.

By reviewing the literature on SDT, Roth (2014) summarises two types of motivation - autonomous motivation and controlled motivation – which would help to explore teachers’ motivation further. Autonomous motivation includes intrinsic motivation and internalised forms of extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation comprises teachers’ interest and enjoyment in being an English language teacher, while Roth (2014) categorises internalised forms of extrinsic motivation with identified and integrated regulation. Identified regulation means that teachers identified an activity as being important, then performs it autonomously. Integrated regulation shows that an activity is experienced as deeply internalised and autonomous because it has been assimilated into other aspects of teachers’ selves. Autonomous motivation can therefore be used to show how teachers’ intrinsic choices are positioned by neoliberalist regulation to construct their identity, while internalised forms of extrinsic motivation provide good resources for discussing the internalisation of the neoliberal education system.

Controlled motivations refer to an external or internal sense of compulsion and includes poorly internalised forms of extrinsic motivation (Richardson et al., 2014). Roth (2014) claims that controlled motivation is influenced by external and introjected regulation. External reward and punishment contingencies belong to external regulation, while the value and regulation of expected behaviours which are not accepted by individuals as their own represent introjected regulation. Discussing whether teachers align themselves with external or introjected regulation reveals their positioning against certain subjectivities in the neoliberal education system, so the controlled motivation of teachers under neoliberalism could be used to analyse the neoliberal subjectification of educational participants.

In this thesis, teachers’ autonomous and controlled motivations will be examined to explore their internalisation of neoliberal ideas and their alignment with China’s education system. Meanwhile, to observe students under neoliberalism, I use Norton’s (2015) investment theory to examine their identities and aligned subjectivities. The following section examines relationships among language learner identities, capital
2.6.2 Students’ Investment in Language Education

Norton (1995) defines investment by whether students are motivated to learn a language and how they commit to learning that language, while Darvin and Norton’s (2015) model of investment is based on interrelationships between identity, ideology and capital constructs. The influence of neoliberalism on students’ identity emerges from studying their capital and hidden ideologies in investment in which interactions among identity, ideology and capital are noticeable.

Darvin and Norton (2015) believe that their investment model responds to the current world order driven by globalisation and neoliberalism because it seeks to highlight the mechanisms and powers that drive learners to select and promote a language to serve a purpose and provide material benefits. To make visible the operation of power in different language learning contexts, this model examines three central constructs of investment: identity, ideology and capital. Inspired by Bourdieu’s theory of symbolic capital, Norton’s (1995, 2015) theory of investment recognises that language learners have complex multiple identities that are continually changed, constructed, and reproduced through social interaction.

Identity is the basis of the model, Norton (2013) defines identity as ‘how people understand their relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how people understand their possibilities for the future’ (p.4), which echoes previous discussions of identity at the start of this section. Darvin and Norton (2015) believe that unveiling learners’ identities show how invisible mechanisms and power under globalisation and neoliberalism operate language learners’ investment.

Capital is another factor in the investment model. Using Bourdieu’s theory of capital, Darvin and Norton (2016) explain that language learners invest in a specific language to equip themselves with the linguistic capital legitimised by neoliberalism to achieve benefits and values in education or the future job market. Meanwhile, the economic and social capital learners gain can be transformed into valuable symbolic capital in a learning context operated under neoliberalism. Examining learners’ investment in language learning is therefore bound to how languages, knowledge and other forms
of resources operate as symbolic capital in the neoliberal context.

The last construct in this model that has significant implications for learners’ investment is ideology. Darvin and Norton (2016) explain that examining ideology in the investment model allows us to analyse the relationship between learners’ communicative practices and systemic patterns of control at micro and macro levels (i.e. institutional and societal levels). Based on the discussion of language and ideology in Section 2.4.1, the value of language, the preference for specific languages in policies and the construction of linguistic identities are inscribed by language ideology. The way learners value a language, whether they accept the policies’ preferences and how they position their linguistic identity can therefore help us explore the ideology behind their investment.

The three constructs of the model of investment overlap. Learners’ identities are constructed, changed and positioned under the influence of neoliberal ideology, and the value of the capital they possess or are willing to obtain indicates their identities and imagined identities, while the symbolic meaning of different forms of capital is consistent with the dominant ideology. The investment is located at the intersection of these three constructs, and the analysis of one construct cannot be established without the other two. The way students position themselves in the neoliberal education system through language learning can thus be revealed through investment theory, highlighting their alignment to neoliberal subjectivities and guiding the study of neoliberal impacts on students in the language education process.

The investment model complements motivation from a sociolinguistic standpoint, and holds a significant place in language learning theory to demonstrate the socially and historically constructed relationship between language learner identity and learning commitment (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009; Murray, Gao, & Lamb, 2011; Murray & Overton, 2011; Norton, 2015). Compared with investment, which allows for specific identity negotiation and development in language learners, motivation illustrates broader developmental goals for teachers’ identity constitution (Kaplan & Flum, 2009; Lee, 2014). Discussing the influence of neoliberalism teachers’ educational practice through their motivation focuses on how they actively or passively adjust their construction of motivations. Teachers enforce and are regulated by educational policies in the teaching process to position their identities, either adapting to or resisting the neoliberal education system. Norton (2015) shows how addressing
students’ investment in language education explains how language ideology works on learners’ complex identity across time and space during the implementation of educational policy. The investment model allows us to understand the long-term impact of English education and associated policies on students’ development in different areas under neoliberalism from a more specific perspective.

2.7 Summary

In summary, this theoretical framework chapter began with a discussion of neoliberalism as an ideology based on a review of neoliberalism’s four faces, followed by an explanation of how neoliberal ideology imposes its free market economic theory on education, language education, educational policies and educational participants. Using Bourdieu’s capital theory, concepts of New Managerialism, motivation and investment, this chapter shows how neoliberalism works in various guises to govern individuals as subjects by overseeing repressive state apparatus – which Althusser (1984) refers to as ideological state apparatuses. The next chapter offers a critical review of empirical studies on education in the era of neoliberalism. Before delving into a specific review of studies in China, the following chapter offers an introduction to the context of this thesis, including an overview of the education system, ELE and related policymaking in China.
Chapter 3: Review of Empirical Studies and Research Context

3.1 Introduction

The previous chapter established the study’s theoretical framework, illustrating how neoliberal ideology influences education, language education, ELE and individuals within educational systems. A growing body of empirical studies addresses the impact of neoliberal ideology and policies on education, focusing on various themes. Drawing from the theoretical framework outlined in Chapter 2 and a review of existing empirical studies, four main themes were identified in the literature: the existing neoliberal system in education (Levin et al., 2016; Peters, 2015), neoliberal New Managerialism (NM) and education (Kalfa & Taksa 2017; Leach, 2014; Teelken 2012), capital, neoliberal economy and inequality in education (Gao, 2018; Gao & Park, 2015; Moss, 2015; Simmons, 2010), and neoliberal ideology and individuals in education (Bouchard, 2017; Fu & Clarke, 2019; Morrison, 2017).

This chapter contains three sections. Firstly, empirical studies on neoliberalism’s impact on education and education policies are reviewed, focusing on the four themes identified. The influence of neoliberalism on language education across global regions is also addressed. The second section introduces the context of this research, including China’s educational system, rural-urban education disparities, and a historical overview of ELE. A review of existing empirical studies on language education in China is also presented. Based on the first two sections, the third identifies gaps in the literature and outlines the research setting and research questions.

3.2 Related Empirical Studies on Education, Language Education, and ELE

The influence of neoliberalism on education, including language education and ELE, has gained significant attention in education studies and applied linguistics. Empirical studies in education are categorised into four themes outlined in Section 3.1. Regarding language education and ELE, regional differences emerge in empirical
studies due to varied language education policies worldwide. A review of empirical academic studies in various global contexts is conducted to illustrate neoliberalism’s impact on language education.

3.2.1 Empirical Studies of Neoliberalism and Education

Several studies focus on highlighting the current neoliberal system in higher education, showing neoliberal policies and strategies in various contexts. Levin et al. (2016) and Peters (2015) discuss neoliberal public policies and neoliberalist development directions of Canadian universities through a secondary analysis of governmental, institutional and academic documents, while a content analysis of interviews with faculty and administrators in different regions of Canada is conducted to show participants’ identity changes under neoliberal policies. Sin et al. (2018) analyse European higher education policies and their driving forces, showing how European institutions and EU member states formulate and implement neoliberal higher education policies. Empirical research on universities under neoliberalism from different global regions has also been compiled in the literature. Shin (2016) gathered 14 empirical studies to present and discuss neoliberal policies and higher education projects in East Asian countries. Adriany (2018) examines neoliberalism in relation to early childhood education in Asia through discourse analysis, presenting a new subjectivity in early childhood education discourses. Wilson’s (2015) study, conducted in the US, involved students aged 5-18 in a private school, examining the influence of neoliberal ideology and underlining neoliberal political policies in primary and secondary education. Although these studies were conducted in diverse contexts, they demonstrate the infiltration of neoliberal ideology into education by summarising and presenting neoliberal education policies.

Meanwhile, neoliberal New Managerialism (NM as discussed in Section 2.3.2), has received significant attention in academia. Unlike the simple presentation of neoliberal policies and strategies, a group of researchers including Deem and Brehony (2005) and Lynch (2012, 2014, 2015), examines how neoliberal policies control education through ranking and other numerical evaluation criteria. They review neoliberal education policies in the UK and Europe, demonstrating how neoliberalism gives rise to NM. Other studies explore NM in higher education in different contexts. Teelken
(2012) conducted a comparative study with staff members from 10 universities in three European countries, observing how these individuals distance themselves from the neoliberal managerial measures. Kalfa and Taksa (2017) designed a case study in an Australian business faculty to explore the nexus between employability, managerialism and performativity in higher education. They collect interview and diary data from staff and alumni, revealing that the increasing emphasis on employability and performativity has shifted the focus of higher education from increasing students’ knowledge to developing practical skills that are valued vocationally. They argue that higher education in business management and related programmes has resulted from managerial demands under neoliberalism. Leach (2014) explores NM in adult education and claims that neoliberalism will remain dominant in New Zealand, using critical discourse analysis on education policy development for adults to show how neoliberal policies manage adult and community education through accountability. Holford (2016) analysed three cases from twentieth-century adult education in England, British colonies, and UNESCO’s Fundamental Education, revealing that neoliberal ideas, presented as sustainability, introduced business discourse into adult education. By emphasising profitability, productivity and performativity, neoliberal ideology manages the development of adult education projects and individuals involved in them. In primary and secondary education, Jeffrey and Troman (2004) conducted an ethnographic study in a British primary school to examine how neoliberal education policy discourses affected the school, teachers and students. They argued that performativity has achieved hegemonic dominance in individuals’ practice under neoliberal policies.

Many studies also examine the impact of neoliberalism on education based on Bourdieu’s capital theory and neoliberal economy. Studies on this theme suggest that managing different forms of capital in education using neoliberal economic ideas increases inequalities in education. Moss’s (2015) research, set in England, discusses the application of technologies to young children in a contemporary society controlled by neoliberal ideas. A discourse analysis of documents offers alternative discourses on education to foreground democracy, emancipation and potentiality, thereby resisting the hegemony and inequalities of neoliberal discourse. Oviedo (2014) analyses the interplay of international neoliberal discourses in the Ecuadorian basic education system, using content analysis of international institutional documents,
related Ecuadorian curricular discourses and semi-structured interviews with educational system actors. It explores how neoliberal ideology governs basic education in a pre-colonised country using market theory, leading to new inequalities within international discourses. Taking a Bourdiesuan perspective on power and capital, van Zanten (2019) conducts document analysis studies on higher education policies in France. She discusses the interplay between institutions, students and market devices in higher education, arguing that neoliberal education policies contribute to the perpetuation of educational inequalities through managing capital distribution.

To criticise inequalities in higher education, some scholars claim that neoliberalism functions as the dominant ideology in higher education, increasing inequalities in society. Saunders (2010) conducted a secondary analysis of organisation documents and political records in US higher education. This study provides a brief overview of how neoliberal ideas developed in the US, and how neoliberal ideology serves the interests of capital and the ruling class in US higher education through the analysis of higher education policies, leading to increased inequalities. Simmons’s (2010) study of further education in England proves that neoliberalism and the dominant knowledge economy have transformed further education into a market-oriented system, arguing that neoliberalism firmly positions further education at the lower end of the institutional hierarchy in England’s class-stratified educational terrain.

The fourth group of studies takes a step forward, focusing on how neoliberal ideology operates on individuals in education, framing them as subjects and exploring resistance from individuals. Saunders (2010) claims that neoliberalism will continue to be the dominant hegemony in US higher education, governing faculties and students as competing entrepreneurs and customers. This assertion is supported by numerous studies in other contexts. Press et al. (2018) examine the stratifying impact of neoliberalism in education policy on early childhood education in Australia and New Zealand. They analyse forms of educational discourse on childhood education, arguing that neoliberal market ideas in education policies transform parents into consumers, leading to narrowly defined, individualised self-interest and advancement from childhood education onwards. Goldstein and Beutel (2009) focus on the K-12 education stage in the US, discussing the relationship between educational participants under neoliberal policies and examining how neoliberal political
discourses in education establish teachers and teaching as allies in managing students and barriers to student learning.

Jeffrey and Troman (2009) highlight the emergence of agency among educational participants in combating hegemonic discourse. They show how the emerging agency of educational participants against the hegemonic discourse can be traced through creative teaching and learning, although this approach also reproduces the neoliberal performativity and market strategies in primary education. Similarly, Teague (2014) explores power, resistance and agency in schooling inequalities using ethnographic research, specifically examining increased accountability in neoliberal classroom testing regimes in a British primary school. Teague advocates for fostering the agency of teachers and students to resist inequalities in marketised education, underscoring the need to recognise the complexity and ambivalence of power relations in the classroom during acts of resistance. Houghton (2017) undertook a six-month qualitative study in three UK universities, analysing interviews with university staff, higher education experts and students. The study showed how neoliberal subjects are constructed in higher education, framing students as individually responsible for cultural and economic hierarchies in their future careers. Houghton concludes that neoliberalised higher education in the UK allows the internalisation of neoliberal ideologies among students. Compared with the other studies, Teague and Houghton provide more insightful critical analyses of the influence of neoliberalism on individuals, especially students, in education through ethnographic studies.

These empirical studies of neoliberalism and education do not deviate from a critical analysis of government, institutional policies and other relevant discourses. Regardless of their specific themes, the studies focus on the implementation of neoliberal education policies in practice, underlining how neoliberal hegemony in education results in inequalities governing education participants through marketised educational policies. They offer good examples of how neoliberalism can be examined in different educational contexts. However, most studies focus predominantly on policy analysis, with limited attention given to the educational practices of teachers and students or the interactive dynamics among educational participants. Goldstein and Beutel (2009) explore the teacher-student relationship in K-12 education under neoliberalism. However, they only focus on the effect of teachers’ teaching practice on students rather than considering the education practices as mutually constituted
processes. Many studies view education practices under neoliberalism as a top-down process of implementing educational policies and governing individuals, ignoring the idea that educational policies and educational participants can also be mutually constructed. While Jeffrey and Troman (2009), Teague (2014) and Houghton (2017) discuss participants’ agency against powerful neoliberal educational discourses, there is a notable absence of adequate qualitative data to represent teachers’ or students’ perspectives on teaching and learning practices when examining the interplay between policies and practices.

Current empirical studies on neoliberalism and education share a common limitation in that they lack sufficient data and discussion on educational participants’ practices, interactions in practical settings and the mutual influences between these participants and educational systems within a neoliberal framework. It is also worth noting that most studies focus on one context and are set in European and North American countries. More attention should be paid to other areas of the world, especially the disadvantaged neoliberal global markets. The comparison between different contexts may provide more opportunities for researchers to explore inequalities in education under neoliberalism because neoliberalism is deeply related to capital distribution in different fields, as discussed in Section 2.3. The following section discusses empirical studies on neoliberalism and language education, while similar limitations can be found in language education and ELE studies.

3.2.2 Neoliberalism and Language Education in Different Areas of the World

For language education under neoliberalism, sociolinguists and applied linguists including Block et al. (2012), del Percio and Flubacher (2017), Flores (2013), Heller (2003), and O’Regan (2014), advocate for the development of a critical understanding of the political-economic conditions influencing language and education. Empirical studies in this domain use a critical approach to unveil political discourses and neoliberalist regimes embedded in language teaching and learning practices across diverse global regions. These studies link language education to the commodification of language under neoliberalism and investigate resulting questions on industrialised education and entrepreneurial identities in the international expansion of neoliberal
market theory. Most empirical studies on language education under neoliberalism focus on ELE in different contexts.

Ricento (2015) provides case studies from Grin, Bruthiaux, Piller and Cho, Wright, and Sonntag to explain the political-economic influence of globalisation on ELE in Europe, Southeast Asia, Korea, South Africa and India. Grin analyses previous ELE studies, concluding that measuring market effects is useful for examining ELE outcomes, whether in general or in the European context. He provides data from a study he conducted in 2001 in Europe, arguing that although the English language is not the only additional language skill that brings people economic benefits in their work, the market preference for English encourages uniformity in ELE and forfeits the conceptual repertoires and cultural references associated with other more marginalised languages. Bruthiaux examines complex interactions between language, commerce and politics in Southeast Asian countries in the Mekong basin. The study analyses previous literature, policies and political documents on language education in these countries, arguing that although ELE is encouraged by the Greater Mekong Subregion Tertiary Education Consortium Trust,3 the benefits it brings affect only a minority of people in this area. The population living in severe poverty in these countries is marginalised in a globalised economy through ELE. Piller and Cho present a case study in South Korea through critical analysis of documentary data on the spread of English as a medium of instruction in South Korean higher education. They reveal that the competitive structure of university rankings results in a covert form of language policy that explicitly privileges ELE as a terrain in which individual and societal worth is established.

While Piller and Cho reflect on the social cost of the global spread of English through neoliberal structures of competition, Wright’s study shows that English functions as an indispensable commercial and industrial *lingua franca* with or without neoliberalism in South Africa. Based on the analysis of political documents, Wright points out that the neoliberal preference for English leads to an absence of African languages in the technical business domain. The failure to provide ELE is marginalising African languages and the rural poor in South Africa. Sonntag focuses on language education policy in the state of Karnataka, the so-called Silicon Valley of India. This study

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3 The Greater Mekong Subregion Tertiary Education Consortium Trust is an agreement signed by six countries around the Mekong River to confirm the coordinated aspects of funding regional development.
reasserts the official state language, Kannada, as the medium of instruction at primary school level in public schools and English-medium private schools. She discusses the interviews she conducted with teachers, linguists, writers, business executives and public intellectuals, and examines newspaper accounts and academic studies to critically analyse the competition for hegemony between English-medium education and Kannada-medium education in India. She argues that ELE facilitates India’s global integration and enables Indians with English-language skills to achieve the social and economic interests of neoliberalism. The opposition between ELE and local, regional languages education is therefore structured by political policies to govern individuals’ development in India.

Ricento’s (2015) empirical studies reveal three themes of ELE under neoliberalism. Firstly, ELE expands the education system in different global contexts. Secondly, the spread of ELE leads to inequalities and the marginalisation of different languages and groups of people. Thirdly, neoliberalism makes ELE a political strategy for achieving real and potential benefits and managing individuals in countries where English is not the dominant language. These studies focus on documents or narratives related to political issues in ELE, which only describe and discuss top-down influences of neoliberalism from policymakers to grassroots levels. In del Percio and Flubacher’s (2017) book, which contains empirical studies of language education in different social and cultural contexts, Gao, De Korne, Flores, Park, Luke, Tabiola and Lorente, del Percio and Van Hoof, Koyama, Hadley, and Zimmermann and Flubacher examine how neoliberalism leads to the commodification of language and language education in countries such as China, Mexico, Korea, Canada, the Philippines, Italy, the USA, Japan and Switzerland. Unlike Ricento (2015), this book pays more attention to the commodification of language and its influence on individuals in practice in neoliberalised ELE education, rather than focusing only on political discourses.

In del Percio and Flubacher (2017), De Korne’s exploration of neoliberal influences on local language education in Mexico, based on interviews with local language speakers and education stakeholders, shows that local language learners and teachers serve as symbolic agents engaged in challenging neoliberalism. However, the pervasive neoliberal impact still results in the marginalisation of local language education. Flores brings the critical study of neoliberal discourses to US bilingual education programmes, claiming that language is reconceptualised as a resource or an economic asset in
bilingual education. This reconceptualisation moves racism away from the institutions that create and exacerbate racial inequalities, focusing instead on individual prejudice because neoliberal ideas link language choices to personal interests. Park contends that South Korean learners play a role in implementing neoliberal ELE policies in higher education by downplaying their native language and aligning with subjectivities in ELE, perpetuating the dominance of English language hegemony. Tabiola and Lorente examine the interconnection between ELE and neoliberal economic project development in the Philippines by analysing political discourses related to projects, arguing that ELE aid projects sponsored by the US exemplify the ways in which neoliberalism frames development aid. For the US and Filipino authorities, promoting ELE represents an investment in cheap, skilled and linguistically proficient employees. ELE is perceived as a form of interchangeable transnational capital in the global neoliberal market.

The empirical studies in Flubacher and del Percio (2017) underscore the focus of literature that shows the endorsement or rejection of ELE under neoliberal policies in different countries. They identify ELE as a recruiting political tool in national and international neoliberal educational, economic and social systems, and in neoliberalised individuals’ acceptance of and resistance to commodified ELE. Ricento (2015) reveals the problems arising from neoliberal language policies, offering observations of neoliberalism’s impact on language education, ELE and stakeholders in practice, drawing on various discourses. In general, these two volumes focus on various aspects of language education, covering almost every stage of education in public and private schools. They provide a picture of neoliberalism’s impact on language education, especially ELE, and examine neoliberal regimes worldwide from a critical standpoint.

The themes and topics covered in these two volumes largely address concerns in empirical studies of ELE under neoliberalism. For example, Okuda (2019) explores the growing emphasis on language tests for global workplace preparation in Japan. The author discusses the use of English language tests encouraged by policies in higher education, aligning with the government’s goal of cultivating a globally proficient workforce. However, these volumes show a lack of direct attention to the voices of ELE participants with limited studies conducting interviews and observations with ELE participants. In the most recent volume of Rojo and Percio (2019) on language and
neoliberal governmentality, McCabe and Fernández-González and Rojo provide data from interviews and observations of ELE participants to criticise the governance of neoliberal ELE on individuals. However, studies in this area still lack sufficient data and discussion of ELE participants’ daily practice, their change of positions and identities, their interaction with each other and mutual influences between stakeholders and neoliberalised ELE systems. While these studies encompass diverse global contexts and propose cross-regional comparisons, the social, economic, and cultural inequalities and marginalisation that result from neoliberalism in ELE demand further in-depth critical qualitative research with more robust data support.

In my examination of neoliberalism and ELE, I focus on ELE participants’ practices and their interaction with each other and with ELE policies to explore the way neoliberalism shapes individuals and changes ELE participants into neoliberal subjects. Specifically, my study involves urban and rural contexts, providing insights into potential inequalities arising from neoliberalised education. Before moving to a detailed illustration of my research setting and research questions, the subsequent section provides information on education and ELE in my research context, China, along with a review of empirical studies on ELE in China.

3.3 Research Context and English Language Education Studies in China

The previous section explored global studies on education, language education and ELE under neoliberalism, and suggests that qualitative data-backed studies are needed to investigate interactions between educational participants and the neoliberalised educational system. This study focuses on rural and urban ELE within the compulsory education stage in China. To fully understand the research context, it is essential to examine the Chinese educational system, address ongoing educational reforms and policies, explore the historical development of ELE and review relevant empirical studies in China. Given the study’s focus on two distinct Chinese educational contexts, the section also introduces the disparities between rural and urban education by examining the influence of neoliberalism as discussed above.
3.3.1 Structure of China’s Education System

The official PRC State Council website identifies the Ministry of Education (MOE) as an agency in charge of educational affairs and language work in China. Zhang’s (2020) study on the evolution of Chinese education policy suggests that the MOE formulates educational standards and monitors the education system MOE under the management of the Communist Party of China (CPC). It therefore organises and implements education policies and curricula under the CPC’s ideological and political instructions. According to the MOE (2019), China’s education system includes pre-school, compulsory, senior secondary, vocational, higher and higher vocational education.

The compulsory phase, involving six years of primary and three years of junior secondary education, was legally established in 1986 to guarantee that all children over the age of seven receive nine years of education without paying tuition fees (Gov.cn, 2022). The MOE (2019) announced that 99.95% of school-aged children in China received compulsory education by the end of the 2010s. MOE statistics show that about 50% of students go on to receive three years of public senior secondary education after passing the Senior Secondary School Entrance Examination (SSSEE) organised by the Department of Education in every province. These students are categorised by academic performance and sorted into regular public or key public senior secondary schools (Gao, 2017), while other students can choose vocational secondary schools or private schools or terminate their education. The National College Entrance Examination (NCEE) determines whether students receive higher education or higher vocational education. Senior secondary school graduates are then classified into different levels of universities and colleges based on their NCEE results.

This study focuses on educational participants in compulsory education because this stage contains the largest number of educational participants, lays the foundation for national education in China and provides every student with basic knowledge, skills and moral qualities for future development (MOE, 2019). The effects of compulsory education run through students’ different education stages and future lives, so it is

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4 The official PRC government website is www.gov.cn, and the website of the Ministry of Education is www.moe.gov.cn. China’s policy documents in this paper are sourced from the document repository of gov.cn. Educational policies cited herein are from the literature section of moe.gov.cn. Official translations are employed for documents with an official English title, while the author translates those without an official English title.
worth observing whether participants in compulsory education in China are influenced by neoliberalism.

3.3.2 Compulsory Education under Education Reforms

Zhang (2020) pointed out that the educational system and policies formulated by the MOE should be coordinated with economic and political developments in China, which means that the CPC’s educational reforms must adapt to changes in economic structure, political requirements and educational conditions. In his 1978 economic reform programme, President Deng Xiaoping stressed that in China’s Reform and Opening-up, education is the only way to improve the economy and enhance China’s skills in science and technology against international competition (Chen 2011). Harvey (2005) believes that Deng’s policies were the turning point for China to neoliberalise its communist-ruled economy. Wang (2009) claims that after 1978, educational reforms and policies began to reflect the government’s approval of privatisation and marketisation. Based on the review above of neoliberalist influence in education via economic theory, Deng’s plan pushed Chinese education into neoliberalism by connecting it with privatisation and marketisation.

Deng emphasised the role of education in economic, technological and social development, and incorporated educational development and reform into the overall design of Reform and Opening-up and the construction of modernisation in China. In 1985, the CPC Central Committee issued its Decision on the Reform of the Education System, announcing the implementation of the nine-year compulsory education system. This document declared that the state council would decide general education policies and macro educational planning while the formulation, implementation and management of specific policies would be delegated to local governments (MOE, 2006). The 1986 Compulsory Education Law of the PRC established the 1985 CPC education reform as part of Chinese citizens’ basic rights and obligations, representing an important step for establishing the priority of basic education in national economic and political development. The responsibility for education reforms and implementation is distributed at different levels of government, which a developed education according to the governmentality and new managerialism of neoliberalism reviewed in Section 2.3.
In 1993, the CPC and the PRC State Council declared the development goal of popularising nine-year compulsory education to face global competition, state modernisation and future development in their *Outline for Education Reform and Development in China*. According to Meng et al. (2021), the 1993 Outline indicates that state plans and market regulation should be introduced into the field of education to meet the needs of economic development and national modernisation. The 1993 Outline converted modernisation into the goal of developing compulsory education to build strong connections among individuals, education and the development of society. The *Ninth Five-Year Plan for National Education and the Development Plan for 2010*, issued in 1996, re-emphasised the goal of popularising nine-year compulsory education. The CPC’s 1999 *Decision on Deepening Education Reform and Comprehensively Improving Suzhi (Quality) Education* determined that Suzhi (Quality) education – an educational model aimed at cultivating well-rounded individuals – should be part of compulsory education. Education reforms to the end of the 1990s aimed to form a well-established compulsory education system across China and connect individual educational development more closely with national economic and social development.

In 2001, the State Council promulgated the *Decision on the Reform and Development of Basic Education*, carrying out major reforms to the rural basic education system to adapt to continuous changes and developments in rural Chinese economics. Liu (2021) explains that this reflected the state’s approach to dealing with problems encountered in the process of implementing compulsory education. Due to economic poverty and lack of resources in rural China, basic education could not be guaranteed, and reforms demanded that all levels of government ensure the implementation of compulsory rural education by allocating economic capital and educational resources (MOE, 2008). The MOE supported this by issuing *Some Opinions on Further Promoting the Balanced Development of Compulsory Education* in 2005 to standardise rural and urban areas in China, and this standardisation process became the theme of compulsory education.

The *Outline of the National Medium- and Long-Term Programme for Education Reform and Development 2010-2020* (MOE, 2010) explains the balanced development of compulsory education from various dimensions. Liu (2021) suggests that balanced development does not mean achieving educational equality across the country, but promoting a balance between schools including enrolment opportunities, teaching staff,
school management system and objective educational resources at county level by emphasising a county-based management system. The 2014 *Opinions on Fully Deepening Curriculum Reform to Implement the Fundamental Task of Cultivating Virtuous Citizens* emphasised the importance of individual education for the first time by focusing on the comprehensive development of individuals. The 2021 *Guidelines for the Quality Evaluation of Compulsory Education* stipulated that schools should strictly control examinations and not publish results and rankings to protecting students’ rights as citizens.

*China’s Education Modernisation 2035* was issued in 2019, presenting a comprehensive and systematic plan for education modernisation from 2020 to 2035, strategically linking education to the broader goal of modernisation. In this education reform document, quality and balanced development became the focus of compulsory education to support national economic and social modernisation. Yang and Liu (2020) summarised that high quality and balanced development requires compulsory education to focus on the balanced allocation of basic educational resources between regions and the quality of education. High quality and balanced development call for the acceptance of regional differences after balanced development is reached, and encourages local government to improve the quality of regional education by stressing the distinctive features and advantages of various areas. They also claim that achieving high-quality and balanced development across the country reflects an ideal education model that starts with balance on a small scale, such as within counties.

China’s educational reforms promoting the development of compulsory education are intended to cooperate with national economic and political development. Central reform policies assign the responsibility for compulsory education to sublevel governments, schools and individuals, and limit the balanced development of education to the allocation of resources in specific areas. According to the analysis of neoliberalism in Chapter 2, these reform policies in compulsory education reflect clear neoliberal characteristics. Because the last two decades of educational reform have focused on rural basic education and balance between urban and rural education, the next section discusses the state of rural and urban education and English language Education (ELE) in China by reviewing empirical studies.
3.3.3 The Disparity between Rural and Urban Education and ELE in China

Based on Li’s (2018) study of the balanced development of urban and rural compulsory education at province level, urban and rural areas are divided into three parts: urban, town and rural regions. Urban regions refer to municipal districts and cities; town regions refer to county capital towns and non-county capital towns, and rural regions refer to areas outside towns. According to Statistical Announcement on the Implementation of National Education Funding in 2020 (MOE, 2021), urban regions are part of urban areas, while town and rural regions belong to rural areas.

Zhang (2013) identifies the urban-rural gap in his China National Human Development Report, arguing that the gap is caused by China’s rapid urbanisation. The report suggests that the gap reflects disparities between rural and urban areas in various social and cultural dimensions, including education. Liu and Deng (2013) conducted a meta-analysis of previous studies on the balanced development of urban and rural education in China, concluding that the disparity between rural and urban compulsory education was manifested in school conditions, funding, teachers’ professional skills and education quality, as well as curriculum organisation, school management, educational ideas and government management of balanced allocations. Lin’s (2021) quantitative research on free compulsory education and urban-rural disparities suggests that free compulsory education has reduced these disparities. For each additional year affected by the policy, the urban-rural education gap has narrowed by approximately 0.3 years. However, Wang (2019) analysed the official China Population and Employment Statistics Yearbook and argued that although there is little difference between rural and urban enrolment in compulsory education, roughly 50% of junior secondary school graduates in urban areas can enter senior secondary schools, compared to 9.9% in rural areas. As early as 2006, Zhu and Zhou (2006) described the gap in compulsory education outcomes between rural and urban areas by studying national statistics of senior secondary school enrolment. They state that the imbalance in compulsory education outcomes reflects disparities between urban and rural students’ academic and career development after education, which inevitably reflect imbalances in economic and political resources that have existed since the beginning of the compulsory education plan. Wang (2019) attributes this disparity to political and economic imbalances between urban and rural areas, which means that education
reform policies with neoliberal characteristics have not altered differences in urban and rural education in the past ten years.

In terms of ELE, Ricento (2015) believes that English is the most learned foreign language in China and is treated as a carrier of economic and social mobility. The US Congressional Research Service Report (Sutter & Sutherland, 2015) showed that rapid economic development in China makes enlarging the international market and acquiring the world market’s economic benefits the main goal of national political activities. Liu’s (2015) documentary analysis of ELE development in China argues that since the Reform and Opening-up, ELE in China has made remarkable progress and achievements. However, Hao (2015) conducted a two-year mixed-methods study on the balanced development of compulsory ELE in a Chinese province using questionnaires, interviews and classroom observations. This study showed a clear imbalance in ELE performance between rural and urban schools, claiming that teachers’ professional skills, school facilities, students’ motivation and family environments led to this disparity. Yuan (2015) also undertook a mixed-methods study on disparities between urban and rural junior secondary school ELE in another province in China using statistics on SSSEE performance, questionnaires and interviews. She claimed that the difference in school facilities and teaching materials is not obvious, but the differences in teachers’ professionalism, parents’ educational ideas and the educational resources outside schools were apparent, resulting in disparities between rural and urban ELE. Through document analysis, questionnaires and field observations, Chen (2018) analysed disparate efficiency levels and results of compulsory education – especially English education – between rural and urban areas in a Chinese province. The results showed a disparity in average scores between schools in rural and urban areas in every subject, with the biggest disparity occurring in English language.

These studies on rural and urban education disparity, compulsory education and ELE in China mainly focus on illustrating the differences rather than exploring the underlying reasons for them. Wang and Li (2009) believe that disparities between rural and urban education in ELE reflect uneven social, cultural and economic developments at national level. However, more empirical studies involving the practices, ideas and reflections of educational participants should be conducted to explore the social, cultural and political factors that influence rural and urban education.
Wang’s (2018) qualitative research discussed educational disparities between rural and urban schools in education in general and specifically in ELE, based on official statistics of economic and material investment. Wang points out that market-oriented educational resource allocation may be one reason for increasing disparities, but empirical data on how this allocation affects individuals to lead to these disparities are still missing. My research will include interviews with teachers and students in both rural and urban schools as well as classroom observation to explore the relationship between disparities and participants through the lens of social, cultural and political backgrounds. Moreover, few previous studies involved ELE policies to analyse the influence of political management and the formulation of dominant ideas on the disparity in ELE. This study will include a critical analysis of China’s ELE policies to fill this gap. The next section will provide an introduction and review of ELE, policies and related studies in China.

3.3.4 A Historical Overview of ELE and Related Empirical Studies in China

Liu (2015) offers a brief historical overview of ELE in China, which is divided into four stages from the end of the Qing dynasty to the new era after the Reform and Opening-up. Combining the introduction of historical influence on ELE, Liu mainly discusses ELE policies in different periods, and sees post-1978 policies as a single group. Liu’s framework of different periods is similar to Adamson’s (2004) work on the history of ELE in China. However, Adamson sees post-1993 ELE as a new period in which ELE policies came to be influenced by globalisation. Gill (2015) and Lam (2002, 2005) divide ELE since the founding of the PRC into five periods: the influence of Russia from 1949 to the late 1950s; the return to English from the late 1950s to the mid-1960s; the repudiation of foreign languages from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s; modernisation under Deng Xiaoping from the mid-1970s to the early 1990s; and English to improve international stature from the early 1990s onwards.

According to these historical reviews of ELE and related policies in China, the development of ELE is closely connected to the country’s political and economic needs. The reviews imply that the role of ELE changed from a marginalised foreign language to a main subject in the curriculum. These studies of ELE and associated policies highlight connections between political events and ELE development, but there is no
analysis of the associated political implications. Few studies examine ELE policies in the post-Olympic period, even though scholars such as Pan (2015) claim that ELE in China has experienced huge social, cultural and political changes since the Olympic Games.

Other studies on ELE and related policies in China can be divided into two groups. The first includes studies that examine the pedagogies and curricula of English education, such as Cheng (2019), Han and Huang (2018) and Xie and Chen (2017). These studies analyse the development of ELE teaching and learning methods, providing resources for investigating second language acquisition in China. The second group includes Gao (2016), Pan (2011, 2015), Pérez-Milans (2011, 2013), and Zhang and Bray (2017), who address the ideologies and policies of English in language education in China. Pan (2015) analyses the ideological discourses of English in language education by looking at policies from the Qing dynasty to the 2010s and teachers’ and students’ questionnaires. Pan’s critical analysis of ELE policies and discussion of quantitative data provides a general map of ideological change in ELE. However, because ideologies and individual practice are mutually constituted, the way the English language is used and displayed in daily practice in education or society needs to be investigated further to understand ideological changes over time.

Gao (2016) conducted an ethnographical study of ELE in China, discussing how the English language conveys neoliberal ideology and influences individuals’ English language learning practices in the most popular English-speaking region in China. However, Gao’s study was not performed in the public school setting and makes no reference to educational policies. Pérez-Milans (2013) explored the meaning of modernisation in contemporary education in China through an ethnographical study in and outside ELE classrooms of three urban schools in China. He provides a variety of discourses and discusses how national, linguistic and cultural ideologies related to modernisation are institutionally (re)produced through individuals’ everyday practice. Although the research does not focus specifically on the ideologies in ELE in China, this study is a good example of investigating the interactions between individuals (educational participants) and ideologies in a school setting through the critical sociolinguistic and ethnographic lens of the Chinese context.
Few studies on ELE and its policies in China involve rural and urban students and teachers to investigate differences between their daily practices under the influence of ELE policies. Research on neoliberalism in ELE in China is even rarer, apart from Zhang and Bray’s (2017) study of neoliberalism’s impact on interactions between public and private education in Shanghai. This paper overemphasises the effect of neoliberal ideology on institutions and education participants and lacks investigation and reflection on mutually constituted interactions between macro-neoliberalism and individuals.

I intend to explore the ideologies of ELE and related policies in China from the post-1978 period to the post-Olympic period, because this study is about the impact of neoliberalism on the disparity between rural and urban ELE in China. The year 1978 was the turning point for neoliberalism in China (Harvey, 2005), and reflection on conflicts between neoliberal ideas in ELE and Chinese nationalism emerged during the post-Olympic period (Pan, 2015). In Chapter 5 of this thesis, ELE policies from 1978 to the beginning of the 2020s will be presented and critically analysed. Following this, the daily practices of educational participants in rural and urban settings and their interactions with ELE policies will be observed and discussed through the critical linguistic ethnographic lens.

3.4 Research Setting and Research Questions

The research aims to explore the disparities within ELE between rural and urban schools at the compulsory education stage in China. It focuses on investigating differences between rural and urban educational participants in their daily practices under neoliberalism. In this study, ELE policies were critically analysed before the observation of educational practices. Analysing the formulation and modification of policies shows the emergence, development, and potential impacts of neoliberalism in ELE in China. During the observation, teachers and students in both areas were recruited as participants. Their daily practices were critically analysed to explore how they position themselves and their perspectives on ELE. Participants’ understanding and reflection on language teaching and learning processes under policies helped detect the manifestation of neoliberalism in practice. In this way, this research
identifies how neoliberalism achieves its governance and management of individuals through policy practice.

Given the significant number of students in rural China and the ongoing insufficient exploration of rural-urban disparities in ELE, this study addresses this gap by including both rural and urban schools in observations. Focusing on the different interactions between policies and both types of schools, this study attempts to provide a comprehensive understanding of how educational participants in different regions interpret and implement policies. Meanwhile, it also explores the role of ELE in managing individuals and increasing regional disparities in China. The research contributes to reflections on how to resist governance under the marketisation of language education and how to promote educational equity.

The research questions that drove the study are:

**RQ1:** How does neoliberalism impact the formulation of compulsory ELE policies in China?

**RQ2:** How do neoliberal policies influence teachers and students at the compulsory education stage in rural and urban schools in China?

**RQ3:** How are disparities in ELE between rural and urban schools embodied in teachers’ and students’ English language teaching and learning practices?

The research questions are interrelated and of equal status contributing to addressing the overarching aim of investigating the influence of neoliberalism on the disparity between urban and rural compulsory ELE through foreign language education policies in China. The first research question examines the potential impacts of neoliberalism in formulating ELE policies, setting the groundwork for understanding the broader context in which disparities between urban and rural schools exist. The second research question explores how educational participants perceive and experience neoliberal ideologies within the ELE system. Finally, the third research question investigates the mechanisms in ELE through which neoliberal governance contributes to regional inequalities. In summary, these three questions progress from exploring the top-down neoliberal control manifested in policies, to investigating whether this management is internalised by individuals in practice, and ultimately examining how this internalisation perpetuates inequality. By addressing these three questions, this study can
comprehensively investigate the intricate relationship between neoliberalism, ELE policies, individuals, and disparities.
Chapter 4: Methodology

4.1 Introduction

The literature review and the contextual background reveal a lack of studies on individuals’ daily practices in ELE, their interaction with one another and their interplay with policies under neoliberalism. This study therefore aims to investigate the relationship between language education policies and individuals within rural and urban compulsory English language education in China under neoliberalism. This chapter presents the methodology used in this study, including the justification for the research design, the choice of methods, sampling processes, ethical issues, data gathering and analysis and considerations of research quality such as reliability, validity, trustworthiness and reflexivity. Including the introduction and summary sections, this chapter is divided into eight sections. The following section introduces the research design based on critical ethnography, linguistic ethnography and critical discourse analysis (CDA).

4.2 Methodological Theories of Research Design

As a critical inquiry, the research design of this thesis is also grounded in critical theory, which I have discussed in Chapter 2. Bohman (2019) argues that no matter how critical theory develops, it always has an empirical orientation that aims to promote democratic norms in social practices. Based on developments in critical theory, empirical social inquiries following the paradigm of critical theory have relied on different methodological theories over time. Carspecken (1996) claims that methodological theories provide the principles for designing research projects, developing field techniques and interpreting data, while criticalists have not really offered a methodological theory. The first generation of critical theory relied on social theory and philosophy to uncover social and ideological structures. By incorporating linguistic and communicative aspects, the second generation focused on discourse analysis and communicative action, and now uses genealogy, ethnography and intersectional analysis to examine how power operates through language and social practices, (re)producing inequalities and marginalisation. A critical social empirical study could therefore follow methodological theories that are best suited to examining
power relations, inequalities and marginalisation embedded in specific political and institutional contexts.

Heller et al. (2017) claim that research design is an ongoing process driven by how the researchers plan to answer the research questions. Based on results and gaps in previous empirical studies, this study focuses on the impact of neoliberalism on individuals’ daily practice and their perspectives on ELE through language education policies. Punch (2005) argues that qualitative approaches collect non-numerical data to gain individuals’ perceptions of the world. According to the literature review (Chapter 3), most empirical studies use qualitative methods to detect the influence of neoliberalism on education, education policies and individuals in education, such as document analysis, classroom observation and interviews. Merriam (2002) suggests that qualitative research investigates individuals’ construction and interpretation of the world, and how meaning is socially constructed through their interactions with the world. Theoretical and empirical studies on education and ELE indicate that neoliberalism leads to inequalities and marginalisation in different educational contexts and linguistic groups. The review of the research context in Section 3.3 of Chapter 3 highlights the disparity between rural and urban education and ELE in China, so this study will adopt a qualitative approach to investigate how individuals in rural and urban schools interact with ELE policies under neoliberalism and how disparities are embodied in educational practice.

According to Merriam and Tisdell (2015), critical research in qualitative methodology not only uncovers the interpretation of people’s understanding of the world but also assumes that all thought is mediated by historically and socially constructed power relations that critique and challenge inequalities and oppression produced by power relations. Heller (2011) discusses the ontology of critical research, arguing that critique requires understanding the underlying processes that connect social differences to inequality and social stratification. Carspecken (1996) argues that critical epistemology asks for clarification of how oppression works and how identities, forms of thinking and beliefs are ensnared within oppressive relations. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) believe that the ontology and epistemology of critical research are relativism and constructivism, while critical research focuses on unjust social constructions of knowledge and social reality. To achieve the aims of this study and answer the research questions about individuals’ perspectives and the disparity between rural and
urban schools, this research is designed as a critical inquiry and is divided into two parts. The first focuses on relevant language education policies, while the second emphasises the social construction of individuals’ perspectives on ELE at the compulsory education stage in China.

This study adopts ethnography as the methodology to examine how neoliberalism works as the dominant ideology in ELE, leading to disparities between rural and urban schools, and how it oppresses individuals within institutional systems. Among the various qualitative research methodologies, ethnography stands out as an approach that centres on the examination of processes and practices in which legitimising ideologies are created, challenged or reproduced, particularly in relation to the generation and distribution of resources and the regulation of access to them (Heller, 2011). Incorporating ethnography with critical theory, the subsequent sections discuss critical ethnography as the research methodology and how it relates to linguistic ethnography and critical discourse analysis.

### 4.2.1 Critical Ethnography

Critical ethnography is closely related to critical theory, and has emerged as a methodology rooted in ontology, epistemology and frameworks of critical theory. Fitzpatrick and May (2022) describe critical ethnography as a methodology rather than a method because they believe it is an overarching philosophical framework that sets a broad direction for research by combining the methodological tools of ethnography with critical perspectives from social theory to examine power relations, social inequalities and forms of oppression. Critical ethnography ‘engages with issues of importance to people, environments, and communities, and at the same time critiques and troubles understandings, practices, and processes of knowledge production’ (Fitzpatrick & May, 2022, p. 15). This means that the theory drives the questions, and the context drives the inquiry, so the experiences of subjects in lived and located realities are not overwritten or (re)constructed through the theory. In other words, critical theory provides critical ontology and epistemology, leading to questions about unjust social realities and the construction of oppression. Meanwhile, ethnography offers subjective understanding and practices within relationships of oppression by conducting social inquiries using ethnographic methods. As explained in the review of
the theoretical framework, empirical studies and context, this study identified the disparity between rural and urban schools of China in ELE under neoliberal ideology, indicating the unequal development of education from the critical approach. The empirical research design based on ethnography aims to uncover interactions between stakeholders in the practice of ELE and the institutional education system under neoliberalism.

As the previous section explained, any social inquiry following a critical paradigm should focus on subjective and communicative practice. In this study’s research design, interviews with students and teachers were conducted to explore subjective perspectives on ELE. Brewer (2000) defines ethnography as the investigation of individuals within their natural environments using data collection methods that capture their social and everyday behaviour. Ethnography therefore provides methods for exploring how these perspectives are practised in research contexts. Heller (2011) explains that ethnography requires researchers to participate directly in daily activities in the research setting to gather data systematically without imposing external interpretations or biases. Reeves et al. (2013) argue that direct participation is an important factor in ethnography, allowing researchers to understand where participants’ perspectives come from and why they have value. Through participation, researchers can also witness how ideology unfolds in a setting that helps them trace the (re)production of ideological statements. This study therefore conducted direct observation in rural and urban schools to see how individuals’ perspectives were constructed and influenced by dominant ideology in both contexts. Fitzpatrick and May (2022) argue that researchers’ subjectivity fundamentally impacts fields through direct participation, which makes researchers’ positionality, critical reflection and reflexivity important in ethnographic inquiries.

According to Madison (2012), ethnography requires researchers to attend to subjective selves and consider how subjectivity in relation to others in the field informs and is informed by engagement and the interpretation of others. Ethnography therefore demands researchers’ critical reflection on how their and participants’ positionality – such as individuals’ backgrounds and experiences – frame the ethnographic research and interactions with others. This critical reflection is seen as reflexivity in ethnography, which is important because it allows researchers to acknowledge that the methods used to describe the world are part of the realities they
describe (Atkinson et al., 2014). Pérez-Milans (2016) and Tusting (2019) argue that reflexivity is representative of individual agency, which encourages the reinterpretation of all participants throughout the study while encouraging researchers to be open to complexity and contradiction which may shape the research process. Fitzpatrick and May (2022) claim that reflexivity is a key ongoing methodological component of critical ethnographic fieldwork. Informed by critical theory, reflexivity in critical ethnography requires the reflection of researchers’ and participants’ positions in embedded power relations in the field and the research process. This indicates that critical ethnography inquiries using reflexivity can investigate how interactions among participants and between researchers and participants (re)produce power relations in context.

Throughout this study, I maintained a continuous process of self-reflection on my role as researcher, acknowledging the interactions between myself and the participants and other available resources in research sites. Meanwhile, conducting interviews with students and teachers in rural and urban schools served as valuable sources for examining the participants’ positionalities and their impact on communicative practices in English language teaching and learning. Because this study focuses on language education and involves the analysis of conversational resources, linguistic characteristics were taken into consideration during the research design. Critical ethnography informed the adoption of a linguistic ethnography approach for this research.

### 4.2.2 Linguistic Ethnography

Regarding direct participation in the critical ethnographic investigation of teaching and learning in ELE, this study relied strongly on the language used in educational practice. Firstly, the thesis is a critical study about learning and teaching a language as well as disparities in language education. Secondly, ethnography requires interactions among participants and between researchers and participants. Creese (2008, 2017) and Copland and Creese (2017) combine linguistic and ethnographic approaches to explore the interaction of language practice and social life in a wide range of settings, defining this approach as linguistic ethnography. Hymes (1964a, 1980) is an early sociolinguistic proponent who combined ethnography with linguistic study. He argues that ethnographic approaches to language and education illuminate diverse ways of
speaking and focus on their validation within a wider democratising and anti-hegemonic research setting. This means that linguistic ethnography is closely related to the critical approach from the beginning. Fitzpatrick and May (2022) see critical ethnography as a broad and inclusive methodology that provides a materials-rich and theory-driven approach to questions on language representation and practices within the context of education, since it engages with a wide range of critically oriented social theories. Conducting a critical ethnographic study on language and education, this study was therefore designed as a critical linguistic ethnography.

Rampton et al. (2004) argue that linguistic ethnography combines theoretical and methodological approaches from linguistics and critical ethnography to research social questions about language. This combination is essential for investigating established views of the value of specific language practices. In this study, the English language is the specific language, and educational practices are observed to investigate the value of the language and how value is constructed. Hymes (1964b) claims that linguistic ethnography is a descriptive theory that advocates for the importance of participants’ voices, implying that linguistic ethnography should focus on how participants produce meaning in ways that are similar to or different from dominant norms. Fitzpatrick and May (2022) argue that linguistic ethnography emphasises how those language practices impact participants differently, privileging some and disadvantaging others. Linguistic ethnography thus reveals the relationship between participants and the institutional system and stratification among participants through participants’ voices. According to Creese (2008), linguistics and ethnography benefit each other in linguistic ethnography, while Rampton et al. (2004) argue that direct participation allows linguists to understand participants in their contexts comprehensively, aligning more closely with natural interactions. Creese (2017) asserts that reflexivity allows researchers to study the authoritative analysis of language use that linguistics can provide to ethnography. Ethnography therefore benefits from linguistics by adopting linguistic perspectives to analyse participant observation and field notes.

This study considers two primary aspects. Firstly, the study intertwines with language in use to examine the implementation of language education policies. Secondly, it investigates the presence of neoliberal ideology within the context of ELE, thereby necessitating an in-depth examination of teaching and learning practices. By using a
critical linguistic ethnographic approach, the study aims to directly observe how neoliberal ideas are manifested in daily school life and explore how these ideas are (re)produced in learning and teaching processes. During the ethnographic fieldwork, interview data were gathered from participants to investigate their views on using English inside and outside the classroom. The interview data helped me to explore the presence of neoliberal ideology within the education system and the relationship between participants’ language learning and teaching practices and the political structure influenced by dominant ideology. Critical linguistic ethnography was the study’s chosen data collection and analysis methodology. As previously discussed, this necessitated investigating the implementation of language education policies. Following the critical approach, the CDA of related policies was also involved in the research as a factor of critical linguistic ethnography.

4.2.3 Critical Discourse Analysis

Budd (2008) claims that analysing ideology in critical theory necessitates examining the discourses used in performing ideological forces and statements. Gee (2015) analyses the use of language in society, arguing that language is used to situate action by giving context-specific meanings to actions and the objects involved in those actions. Gee (2014a) developed the concepts of little ‘d’ and big ‘D’ discourse to study how language is used to convey perspectives by giving people alternative ways to view a single state of affairs. Little ‘d’ discourse refers to the analysis of specific instances of language-in-use. Big ‘D’ Discourse refers to ways of thinking, acting, doing and being in the world. Weis and Fine (2012) suggest that critical ethnography’s focus on power relations should be linked to the research and to wider historical, social and political forces. When researchers understand subjective selves and others in deep and nuanced ways, they must consider how strongly connected the research field and the wider socio-political contexts are, and how power relations dominate the interactions between local and wider contexts. The discourses involved in critical ethnographic studies are big ‘D’ discourses, although they are written as discourses. The discourse in CDA is also a big ‘D’ discourse because CDA emphasises the need for interdisciplinary work to gain ‘a proper understanding of how language functions in constituting and transmitting knowledge, in organising social institutions or in
exercising power’ (Wodak & Meyer, 2015, p. 7). In this study, before the research phase, a CDA of political documents related to ELE at the compulsory education stage was designed to explore whether neoliberal ideology impacted the institutional education system for ELE in China. Fairclough et al. (2011) propose that CDA aims to expose the ideological implications of language use and the power relations embedded in discourses by critiquing social practices, emphasising that CDA considers discourse a form of social practice encompassing various semiotic forms such as words, pictures, symbols and gestures. Fairclough (2010) argues that discourse involves a dialectical relationship between a specific discursive event and the diverse social elements that frame it. In this relationship, discourse is shaped by social institutions and structures, and shapes them in return. Consequently, Heller (2011) suggests that analysing the practical functioning of discourse reveals the interplay between discourse and the ideology it conveys. Gee (2014b) asserts that discourse analysis serves as a tool for studying the dominant social order, particularly emphasising language in use. CDA can therefore be viewed as a practical framework within critical theory for addressing issues related to linguistic semiosis. Additionally, Fairclough (1995), Van Dijk (2013) and Wodak and Meyer (2015) claim that these discourses are generated and reproduced through practical processes of ideological statements.

In this study, the critical linguistic ethnographic investigation following the CDA of political documents focuses on the (re)production process in rural and urban schools. By integrating CDA with critical linguistic ethnography, the study presents a comprehensive examination of neoliberal ideology’s production, construction and reproduction within the realm of ELE. Employing CDA, the research initially explored how ideology takes shape in the form of policies within the socio-political context. Subsequently, through the lens of linguistic ethnography, the study explored how this ideology is consistently (re)produced in the day-to-day practices of individuals as they interact with and implement these policies. This dual-method approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of the processes through which neoliberal ideology influences and permeates ELE.

This study’s research questions show the need to study policies to investigate the production of neoliberal ideas and observe teaching and learning practices to identify the development, contestation or reproduction of these policies. In terms of specific
methods (besides CDA of political documents), Copland and Creese (2017) claim that linguistic ethnography aligns with ethnographic approaches promoting participant observation and interaction analysis. Brewer (2000) argues that ethnographic methods require researchers’ direct involvement within specific contexts. Figure 4.1 shows how the methodological steps undertaken follow from each other.

**Figure 4.1: Methodological Steps**
4.3 Data Collection Methods

Copland and Creese (2017) identify four data collection and analysis approaches to linguistic ethnography: interviews, fieldwork, interactions and text. Creese (2008) argues that data collection in linguistic ethnography is flexible, and any data collection and analysis methods related to the language in use can be used. As discussed in the previous section, following a CDA of political language education policies to understand broader social-political contexts, I participated in the research sites according to the requirements of critical linguistic ethnography. In these sites, I observed educational practices in rural and urban schools in China and undertook individual interviews with teachers and students. My interaction with participants and contexts, and participants’ interactions with each other, me and contexts were observed during the research process. The following sections introduce three main methods of data collection for this study.

4.3.1 Document Analysis

According to Copland and Creese (2017), there is no limit to the type of texts used in data collection for linguistic ethnography. Policy documents, police rights notices, annual reports, reviews and even photographs can be analysed to detect and contextualise language use and dominant ideology. In Chapter 2, I discussed how neoliberalism influences the formulation and implementation of language policies and related education policies, so the document analysis mainly focuses on whether neoliberal ideology controls language education in China. Bowen (2009) defines the analysis of texts and discourses as documentary analysis, which provides background and context of participants’ experiences through their accounts of those experiences. Bowen argues that the document analysis suggests questions for observation and interviews, offers supplementary data, helps track changes and development and verifies findings from other data.

The documents I chose were English language education policies, especially national curricula for English language in China. Cushing (2020) suggests that policies include national and local policies, national curricula and political documents which reflect educational mechanisms driven by ideology. In terms of documentary data collection, the national education policies and curricula were collected online before the field
studies. These policies on national education adjustment and observation were presented as the background and introduction of the research context in Chapter 3. This study aims to explore how neoliberalism affects ELE and related policies in China, and Harvey (2005) points out that Deng Xiaoping’s particular kind of market economy with Chinese characteristics since 1978 Reform and Opening-up increasingly incorporated neoliberal elements intertwined with centralised authoritarian control. I therefore trace the changes in the ELE policies formulated and issued after 1978. Ten English language curricula from different periods after 1978 were downloaded from the website of China’s MOE. Meanwhile, the direct participation and school policies related to educational practice or mentioned by the participants were collected as supplementary data to the observation and interviews.

4.3.2 Participant Observation and Field Notes

According to DeWalt and DeWalt (2011), participant observation is a vital approach to understanding the explicit and tacit aspects of a particular group’s routines and culture in ethnographic studies. This method necessitates researchers to actively engage in daily activities, rituals, interactions and events within the research context. Among various methods used for collecting ethnographic data, Papen (2019) contends that participant observation sets ethnography apart from other qualitative research approaches, such as interview-based studies. Atkinson et al. (2014) posit that in participant observation, researchers can adopt various roles, such as being a complete participant, a participant as observer, an observer as participant or a complete observer. The roles of complete participant and complete observer represent the extremes of ethnographic research (Smith, 1997).

According to Smith (1997), most ethnographic research falls somewhere between these approaches. The role of a complete participant allows researchers to gain insider perspectives but may limit the depth of the data collected due to reduced objectivity (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983; Smith, 1997). However, adopting the role of a complete observer provides researchers with the opportunity to reflect and analyse the situation but may result in a lack of deep understanding of the individuals within specific settings in the field (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983). Smith (1997) encourages researchers to adapt their roles based on the specific situations...
encountered in the field. Copland and Creese (2017) concur with Smith, asserting that there is only one form of observation in ethnography, emphasising the importance that researchers enter their fields without preconceived notions by considering the unique conditions of their research environments.

Davies (2008), Papen (2019) and other linguistic ethnographers emphasise the significance of researchers remaining conscious of the circumstances in which they participate and their own experiences within those contexts. They argue that researchers’ understanding is influenced by their backgrounds, relationships with research participants and active involvement in the studied activities. Campbell and Lassiter (2014) propose that researchers should direct their attention outward towards others and inward towards themselves, critically examining assumptions shaped by their sociocultural backgrounds. Papen (2019) calls this process ‘observing the observer’, while Davies (2014) refers to it as ‘reflexive observation’ (p. 83).

When approaching participant observation, I adopted a receptive mindset as a participant while concurrently maintaining specific aims, ideas and critical awareness as a researcher. Foster’s (2006) discourse on ethnographers’ positions explains how my open-mindedness allowed me to engage in educational practices without preconceptions, facilitating more profound interactions with research participants as a member of their community. Simultaneously, my research objectives and ideas served as a constant reminder of my focus, relevant contents and the importance of reflexivity as a researcher (Ciesielska & Jemielniak, 2017). Ciesielska and Jemielniak (2017) offer a list of dimensions to consider during participant observation, encompassing aspects such as time and space, objects, social actors, interactions and rituals. Reflecting on these dimensions helped me foster a reflexive approach to observation, and I adopted this list as a framework to explicate my observations (Table 4.1).

To record the conditions of participation, reflexive ideas and other pertinent information in the research field, observers maintain field notes. These notes represent the outcome of interactions between researchers, their observations and the context. They represent another form of written text in ethnography, distinct from documentary data (Papen, 2019). Walford (2009) asserts that field notes serve as a foundation for constructing ethnographies. As I approached the field with an open mind, my field notes included any significant descriptions that emerged during interactions with participants. Additionally, according to Papen’s (2019) perspective, researchers must
record their emotions, feelings, values and beliefs, which further underscore the indispensability of field notes despite recorded classroom observations. A sample of field notes is presented in the appendix (Appendix 2). The analysis of both observations and field notes will be explained in Section 4.5.2.

**Table 4.1: Participant Observation**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relevant Subset topics</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1. The Management of Time and Space</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Time: the first term of a new school year in China, from the beginning of September 2020 to the end of February 2021.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Space: mainly in the classroom, the other spaces for academic activities were also involved.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2. Objects</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The physical objects used for teaching and learning were taken into consideration. For example, the slides, images and posters. Some objects reflected economic disparities between the rural and urban areas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>3. Social Actors</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The study focused on how teachers and students look and behave in English classes. Their use of language and expressions in different contexts were noted. Their different reactions to different forms of discourse were taken into consideration.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>4. Interactions</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The interactions between social actors – in this context, between teachers and students – were taken into consideration. What topics were talked about in class, in what tone and what context? How were differences in power expressed, reproduced, negotiated or challenged in English language classes in rural and urban schools?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The timespan of participant observation is another matter for consideration. Many scholars (Hammersley, 2017; Jeffrey & Troman, 2004) advocate prolonged and regular observations, believing that this approach yields context-driven and enriched data for ethnographic studies. However, Pink and Morgan (2013) argue that short-term ethnography with intensive observation can yield profound and valid insights. Short-term ethnography proves insightful when applied to specific research practices and areas of significance. This study used a linguistic approach to explore the intersection of neoliberalism and ELE in junior secondary schools in China. Daily intensive observations were conducted at the research sites to explore specific practices in ELE classes. As such, short-term ethnography was adopted for this research. Meanwhile, my learning and teaching experiences familiarised me with research sites, and before entering them I had carefully reviewed related documents about ELE. The experiences and research background facilitated seamless integration into a six-month observation in rural and urban schools. During the ethnographic fieldwork, half the week was spent
in the rural school and the other half in the urban school. The intensity of participation was ensured by attending every English language class and actively engaging in daily activities during my presence. It is worth noting that my participant observation began after viewing national educational policies, as these policies provided valuable guidance in identifying significant focal points during observation. Swinglehurst (2015) emphasises that participant observation can generate valuable insights into the research background. The interviews in this study started in the second month after the observation began, so that issues emerging from observational data could be explored in the interviews.

4.3.3 Semi-structured Interviews

Richards (2003) introduces two main types of interviews: formal and informal. While informal interviews may occur spontaneously and without prior arrangement, formal interviews are scheduled and organised in advance. According to Copland and Creese (2017), interviews serve as a valuable means for researchers to understand the perspectives and ideas of interviewees. Traditional ethnographic research often relies on informal interviews without a fixed schedule to gain immediate insights into specific actions or events that unfold in the field (Agar, 2008). However, linguistic ethnography, especially when conducted in settings such as schools with young adults and children as participants may face challenges in conducting informal interviews. As a result, many linguistic ethnographic studies opt for short-term ethnography and find value in using formal interviews (Copland & Creese, 2017).

Formal interviews include three common forms: structured, semi-structured and open (Richards, 2003). In linguistic ethnography, where interview questions may not naturally arise within a limited observation period, researchers must prepare questions in advance to guide the interviewees. However, by adhering to a critical methodology, linguistic ethnography also allows sufficient time and space for interviewees to freely express their ideas, which can be informative, inspiring and emancipatory (Wilkinson, 2004). Semi-structured interviews are considered particularly suitable for this kind of study, as they enable researchers to deviate from the set questions, serving as a guide while allowing for open exploration of the main research questions. Interviews in linguistic ethnography play a complementary role to participant observation.
In this study, interviews started in the fifth week of observation, which allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the research landscape. Interviews provided insights into participants’ observed behaviour and helped me address any confusion or curiosities arising from the initial observation phase. Critical linguistic ethnography emphasises the significance of interviews in eliciting participants’ life trajectories and social positioning, thereby accessing the beliefs, values and ideologies that underpin their actions (Heller, 2011). Consequently, participants’ backgrounds and socio-cultural position inform subsequent observation phases. In this study, teachers and students, as key stakeholders in educational practices, offered vital information regarding the impact of neoliberalism on individuals’ experiences and perspectives.

Holstein and Gubrium (2011) highlight that interviewers and interviewees actively engage in the meaning-making process during ethnographic interviews. Knowledge is not solely derived from questions and responses but is co-constructed through interactive conversations between both parties (Alasuutari, 1995). Instead of providing an extensive list of questions, I therefore presented orientations to encourage interviewees to actively contribute to the interview to facilitate a collaborative and dynamic exchange of ideas. Holstein and Gubrium (2011) encourage researchers to adopt an active stance towards the interview process. As the active interviewer, the researcher is responsible for motivating interviewees’ responses and activating the production of narratives related to the research. Holstein and Gubrium see active interviewing as a form of interpretative practice which addresses immediate follow-up questions and unanticipated topics to construct meaning-making processes. I chose to conduct individual, active, in-depth semi-structured interviews with teachers and students in person to encourage them to express their perspectives and experiences.

The orientated interview questions were carefully designed based on Kvale’s (2007) instruction on developing interview questions. Kvale suggests that the researchers are their own research tool. The interviewer’s ability to sense the immediate meaning of an answer and the horizon of possible meanings it opens up is decisive. Kvale believes that designing interview questions requires knowledge of and interest in the research theme, the human interaction of the interview and familiarity with modes of questioning, so that the interviewer can devote his or her attention to the interview subject and the topic. Kvale provides nine types of questions that can be used in interviews, including
introductory, follow-up, probing, specifying, direct, indirect, structuring, interpreting questions and silence, allowing interviewees to reflect and offer further information.

Drawing from the theoretical framework and existing empirical studies that highlight the ideological dominance of neoliberalism in education, particularly in language education, policy-making and the potential shaping of individuals’ identities, this study focused on investigating practices in ELE, involving teachers and students as crucial social actors. Their perspectives on neoliberal language policies and their roles in the teaching and learning processes provided valuable insights into understanding how neoliberalism impacts individuals in empirical settings. The interview participants included teachers and students in the final year of compulsory education. According to Jamshed (2014), semi-structured in-depth interviews are conducted only once and generally cover 30 mins to over an hour. In this study, every interview lasted approximately 40 minutes. The interview encompassed various themes that aimed to stimulate participants’ thoughts and elicit insightful responses. Table 4.2 shows relevant topics for teachers and students in semi-structured interviews.

**Table 4.2: Semi-structured Interview Topics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topics for Students</th>
<th>Topics for Teachers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal beliefs and experiences about English learning.</td>
<td>Personal beliefs and experiences about English learning and teaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitude towards the English language class</td>
<td>National English Language curriculum in the school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Their likes and dislikes of English and English language class</td>
<td>Implementation of the curriculum and syllabus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exposure to English</td>
<td>School policies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Importance of English in daily lives</td>
<td>Guidelines for teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purposes of learning English</td>
<td>School Curriculum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Future expectations with English learning</td>
<td>The importance given to the English language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Authorisation to amend and interpret the syllabus and curriculum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Importance of English languages in daily lives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Relevant activities of English language teaching and learning</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*See the full set of interview questions in Appendix 3*
The following section explores the sampling process, covering the selection of research sites (including rural and urban schools) and the selection of teacher and student participants. The sampling strategy was essential in ensuring a comprehensive and representative understanding of the effects of neoliberalism on ELE in the specific context of this study.

4.4 Sampling

Sankoff (1974, p. 21) believes that every researcher should make a ‘sampling universe’ to decide the group they want to investigate. Daniel (2012) defines sampling as the selection of a subset of a population for inclusion in a study, pointing out that sampling in qualitative research is designed to facilitate the collection of rich information, enhancing understanding of the problem under study. Tagliamonte (2006) explains the relationship between research questions and sampling. While research questions raise problems, sampling produces appropriate data to address them. To investigate the language education practices of rural and urban students under neoliberal policies in this study, the first thing is to decide my ‘sampling universe’: where and who I collect data from.

Ethnographic studies use layers of sampling decisions to achieve rich descriptions of cultures, communities or social contexts (Lofland & Lofland, 1995). De Vaus (2001) believes that the principle of ethnographic sampling is targeting people in group whose responses and characteristics reflect those of the overall group. In Chapter 3, Section 3.3, I introduced the background and the context of this study, which focuses on ELE at the compulsory education stage in rural and urban areas of China, so sampling for this study should target the people in rural and urban areas who can provide experiences of ELE. Higginbottom (2004) suggests that sampling in ethnography can be described as purposeful or purposive, as the participants have specific knowledge or experience of interest to the researcher. Maxwell (2009) argues that purposive samples are used when specific people or settings are chosen because they are known to provide important information. In this study, teachers and students in rural and urban schools at the compulsory education stage must be selected as purposive samples to provide important information. Carspecken (1996) argues that critical ethnographic sampling procedures should provide what, where, how often and when
to observe people’s normative-evaluative (re)constructions of daily life in selected contexts. Informed by ethnographic sampling, to achieve a rich and deep understanding of people’s (re)construction of daily practice of ELE in selected social contexts, the following sections present detailed sampling procedures of research sites and participants.

4.4.1 Research Site Sampling

Buchstaller and Khattab (2018, p. 79) argue that ethnographic data collection differs from random sampling in that it does not prioritise representativeness or generalisability. Instead, ethnographic sampling seeks to explore the unique 'emic categories' that highlight social, cognitive, cultural and linguistic differences within a specific community. According to Eckert (2000), ethnographic sampling focuses on identifying what is deemed significant, so the initial step involves selecting a highly specific local context. The chosen local rural and urban schools in this study are in a province in the middle of China. Statistics show that the province has a population of over 63 million, of which 35 million live in urban areas and 28 million live in rural areas (National Bureau of Statistics, 2019). The province’s GDP ranks thirteenth among China’s 31 mainland provinces, which indicates that the social economic development of this province is just above the national average (National Bureau of Statistics, 2020). Dutta (2017) claims that ethnographic sampling should provide the most information-rich data possible. To develop a more informative sample, I selected the capital city, which represents the highest level of development in the province, as the urban context, and a national-level disadvantaged county in the province as the rural context.

I presented the research background, which introduced the educational setting in China, in Chapter 3, Section 3.3. I also explained that this study focuses on compulsory education, in which there is a Senior Secondary School Entrance Examination (SSSEE) for final year students, so the selected schools in this study are junior secondary schools which provide the last three years of compulsory education. The rural and urban schools were chosen according to average 2019 SSSEE scores, which I accessed through the local Bureau of Education’s website. I chose the ones that ranked in the middle of the results achieved in 2019 to represent the average language education efficiency of each area and conducted classroom observations in
each school. I chose ninth grade classes because it represents the last year of compulsory education, and the curriculum covered what students needed to learn at this stage. The rural school class I observed was one of two in the ninth grade classes, and the head class teacher was also the English language teacher. The class I observed in the urban school was one whose average English language score ranked in the middle of the ninth grade results, and the head class teacher here was also the English language teacher. Detailed information about the chosen school and observed classes is presented in Table 4.3.

Table 4.3: Research sites and selection criteria

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rural Junior Secondary School</th>
<th>Urban Junior Secondary School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>This school sat at the medium level of its county, as shown by its average score in the 2019 SSSEE. The statistic was accessed by searching published reports of the local Bureau of Education.</td>
<td>This school sat at the medium level of the capital city, as shown by its average score in the 2019 SSSEE. The statistic was accessed by searching the published reports of the local Bureau of Education.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This school is a public school in a national-level disadvantaged county. This county is a famous county because it is the hometown of renowned World War II generals. The county is set in remote mountains, and the economic conditions are disadvantaged, although it has received financial support from the national government because of its history.</td>
<td>This school is a public school in the capital city, which has the most advanced and richest economic, social, and cultural resources in the province.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I had worked in this county as a volunteer English language teacher for one year, so it was easier to access the school.</td>
<td>I have lived in this city since I was 13, so understanding the context was easier for me.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>One Class in Rural Junior Secondary School</th>
<th>One Class in Urban Junior Secondary School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>This class was one of the two 9th grade classes.</td>
<td>This class was a 9th grade one whose average score in the English language ranked in the middle of the school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The average score was based on the final 8th grade exam.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.4.2 Participant Sampling

Fetterman (2010) suggests that key informants who hold significant roles within the group can serve as valuable samples in ethnographic studies. Roper and Shapira (2000) agree, highlighting that key informants possess a wealth of cultural knowledge and can share this with researchers. As shown at the beginning of this section, ethnographic sampling can be purposeful or purposive, targeting participants who
possess specific knowledge or experiences of interest to the researcher (Higginbottom, 2004). In this study, the key informants were the English language teachers in rural and urban schools, who provided information on the implementation of language policies, school policies and national curricula in practice, as well as reflections on daily classroom interactions with students. Before I went to the two schools, I planned to interview four teachers, including the head of the English language department and the English teacher of the observed class. After I entered the field, I found that the only English teacher in the ninth grade of the rural school was also the head teacher of the department. Buchstaller and Khattab (2018) suggest that ethnographers could sample data according to ethnographic relevance and that researchers’ first-hand observation contributed to the sampling procedure. Based on this, I chose to interview three English language teachers. Table 4.4 provides details of the three teachers, including their schools, the pseudonyms they chose, positions and length of service.

Table 4.4: Teachers’ Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Length of Service</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>Jasmine</td>
<td>English language teacher and the head of English department</td>
<td>23 Years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>Feifei</td>
<td>English language teacher</td>
<td>6 Years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>Feng Jun</td>
<td>English language teacher and the head of English department</td>
<td>30 Years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The students were also key informants in this study because they provided information on their understanding, experiences and perspectives on the ELE they received in practice. The students (Table 4.5) were in the last year of compulsory education, and faced the problem of whether to continue to senior secondary school, vocational school or find a job. They would make that choice after the SSSEE at the end of the ninth grade. They also provided information on how compulsory education, especially compulsory ELE, might influence their future.

Given the inherent openness of ethnography, it is often impractical to predetermine the exact number of participants. Higginbottom (2004) contends that participant selection in ethnographic research is contingent upon the size of the group being studied, and suggests that different sampling techniques can be employed, such as individuals recommended by participants (snowball sampling) and opportunistic or nominated sampling.
I began by encouraging students to contact me, showing their interest in interviews. The English teachers for each class were asked to recommend student participants from the ones who showed interest. Regarding participant numbers, Emmel (2014) and Guest et al. (2006) propose that a suitable sample size for studies involving interviewees from a homogeneous group would range from six to twelve individuals. In consultation with the classroom teachers, it was determined that as the class sizes comprising about 40 students each, ten from each class would be recruited as interviewees. The English proficiency of the ten students in each class varied, encompassing a spectrum ranging from high and moderate to comparatively lower proficiency levels. Proficiencies were judged on the basis of their performance in the final examination of the previous school year. Table 4.5 shows students’ information about their school, the pseudonyms they chose, and which grade they started to learn the English language in.
4.5 Ethical Considerations

Gray (2014) explains that the ethics of research concern the appropriateness of the researcher’s behaviour in relation to the research subjects or those affected by the research. Blumberg et al. (2014) consider ethics as sets of moral principles or norms that are used to guide researchers’ choices of behaviour and their relationships with others involved. The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC, 2021) provides six principles of ethical research, including avoiding risk and harm, respecting the individuals’ rights and dignity, informing participation, conducting research with integrity, clearly defining responsibility and maintaining research independence. Gray (2014) concludes that ethical principles fall into four areas: ‘avoid harm to participants; ensure informed consent of participants; respect the privacy of participants; and avoid the use of deception’ (p. 73). Because this study involved teenagers as participants, avoiding harm to young people during the research process should be considered. As this study was conducted in China, the participants were interviewed in Mandarin Chinese to allow them to express themselves fully. Therefore, besides the basic principles of participants’ consent and privacy, this study also needed to consider whether a translated and transcribed text remained loyal to participants’ spoken statements. The following sections present how this study managed ethical issues.

4.5.1 Participant Consent, Privacy and Disclosure

According to Copland and Creese (2017), research ethics involves making decisions about right and wrong within the specific research context. In academia, particularly within the social sciences, ethical considerations are essential when conducting research. Before conducting interviews, I completed the ethical consideration form provided by the University of Edinburgh online and obtained approval from the School Research Ethics Committee. Crow et al. (2006) argue that research participants should be provided with sufficient accessible information about the research to decide whether they want to be involved. Consent forms and information sheets which outlined the research purpose, participants’ rights, potential risks and the researcher’s contact information were provided to all participants and signed (Cohen et al., 2018).

The consent forms and information sheets (Appendix 1) were designed according to Gray’s (2014) list of the information for participants. Information on the aims of the
research, who undertake it, who are being asked to participate, what kind of information is needed, how much time is required, voluntary participation, rights to respond or not respond to all questions, who will have access to the data, how the anonymity of respondents will be preserved and whether and when the collected data can be returned to participants was presented in the information pack. Campbell and Groundwater-Smith (2007) outline five interconnected ethical issues that researchers should address: understanding their own position in the research, gaining access to research contexts, obtaining informed consent, handling data storage and reporting research outcomes. I carefully considered these five issues throughout the course of my study.

Firstly, I examined the researcher’s role thoroughly in the participant observation phase, which will be discussed more in the reflexivity section at the end of this chapter. When conducting interviews, it is important to recognise that interviews are collaborative partnerships in which the interviewer needs to take responsibility for safeguarding the rights, interests and sensitivities of the interviewees (Murphy & Dingwall, 2001). With the teacher participants, I let them choose their own pseudonyms and comfortable places for interviews. During the interviews, I considered their emotions and reactions to the guide questions and always ensured they were willing to provide their answers and personal information. Secondly, during the COVID-19 pandemic, I entered the school campus according to the school admissions regulations and obtained permission from the administrative departments of both schools.

Thirdly, research participants were contacted in the field, and their voluntary participation was ensured without any practical incentives being offered. For interviews involving young participants, the permission of their guardians was obtained (O’Reilly & Dogra, 2018). More considerations about interviewing young people will be discussed in the next section. Fourthly, data were securely recorded and stored on my password-protected computer, with access restricted to myself and my supervisors. The findings of this study will be presented solely for academic purposes, with the use of pseudonyms to protect the identities of participants, institutions and locations. All interviews were conducted according to the ethical guidelines of the British Association for Applied Linguistics (BAAL, 2016), College Research Ethics and Integrity policies, and the General Data Protection Regulations guidance for researchers at the
University of Edinburgh. Finally, participants were informed that they could have access to the collected data and results whenever they wished.

4.5.2 Interviewing Young People

Considering that students are pivotal to language education practices and aligning with critical theory’s emphasis on student agency, interviews were conducted with final year junior secondary school students who were fifteen years old. Fraser et al. (2014) claim that young people were once considered less than ideal participants for interviews due to their perceived lack of social competence in recalling credible accounts of their experiences. However, a growing recognition of young people’s right to participate in research means that contemporary studies treat them as active agents in the research process. Lansdown (2000) criticises the tendency to view young people’s interests solely through the lens of adults, while O’Reilly and Dogra (2018) point out that researchers may lack the necessary skills to engage young people in interview settings effectively. Brubacher et al. (2015) suggest that respecting the rights of young people is fundamental in research involving them, while Söderbäck et al. (2011) emphasise the importance of representing and respecting young people’s viewpoints. Researchers should remain sensitive to young people’s emotions and ideas during interviews. It is crucial to reduce power imbalances and conduct interviews in a more child-centric manner.

O’Reilly and Dogra (2018) offer seven tips for interviewing young people, including reflecting on their place in the research, ensuring their willingness to participate, clarifying expectations, focusing on their perspectives, offering them control, encouraging them to ask questions and using appropriate language for their age group. Interviewing young people allows researchers to access their perspectives on important issues and enables self-reflection on the researcher’s position during these interactions (ibid.). I used O’Reilly and Dogra’s recommended strategies during my interviews with students. Information sheets were sent to all students in the observed classes before I started this research process. I interviewed students who showed interest in participating in the research after obtaining consent from their parents. The young students decided where they wanted to have the interview and chose pseudonyms themselves. Most of the questions in the interview were about their
perspectives and understanding of the policies and practices of ELE. They were told they could interrupt me and ask questions anytime during the interviews. I tried to be friendly and caring about their emotions and reactions during the interviews.

4.5.3 Translation and Transcription

In line with the principles of linguistic ethnography, my participation in the groups necessitated using Chinese Mandarin during observations and interviews. After the School Research Ethics Committee approved my ethics application form, the consent form and information sheet were translated into Chinese, and versions in English and Chinese were provided to participants. Atkins and Wallace (2012) believe that using participants’ language could reduce potential misunderstandings and establish the equal treatment of those involved. As linguistic ethnography involves data collected from the field, transcription and translation become essential tasks. Bucholtz (2000) emphasises the need for reflexivity among researchers during transcription, as this helps to embed the transcriber’s purposes and positionality within the text. When transcribing the interview data, I exercised caution to avoid unwarranted interpretations, remaining faithful to the participants’ original words. To ensure accuracy, the transcriptions were reviewed against the original data and returned to the participants after the interviews for member checking. Birt et al. (2016) define member checking – also known as participant or respondent validation – as a technique for exploring the credibility of results. Data or results need to be returned to participants to check for accuracy and resonance with their experiences for member checking. The checked transcriptions guaranteed the credibility of the results in this study.

Translation is a common practice in language education when investigating communication within contexts of mobility, diversity and change (Copland & Creese, 2017). As a native Mandarin speaker, I translated the data myself to ensure that no other person had access to the raw data, maintaining the participants’ privacy. Marshall et al. (2021) highlight the potential for inaccuracy when a word cannot be directly translated into the target language. To address this, I followed Robson’s (2002) suggestion of using back-translation, which involved translating the text back into the original language to verify accuracy. When there were crucial words or concepts that
did not have direct English translations, I used the original Mandarin terms and provided literal dictionary explanations. To ensure the accuracy of the translation, my translation was checked by one of my supervisors, another native Mandarin speaker. I maintained the reflexivity inherent in language education during the transcription and translation process while striving to improve the accuracy of both tasks. Examples of transcriptions and translations are presented in the appendix (Appendix 4). The next section goes on to introduce the data analysis methods.

4.6 Data Analysis

This section presents the methods and process of data analysis. The first part explains how documentary data are analysed through a framework of CDA. The second carefully introduces the thematic analysis of linguistic ethnographic data collected from participant observation and interviews.

4.6.1 English Language Education Policies and Critical Discourse Analysis

Ball (1990) considers that discourse theory perspectives have influenced policy analysis in education. Fulcher (1989) says that policies are the outcomes of struggles between ‘contenders of competing objectives’ where discourse is used tactically (p. 7). We could therefore use CDA to explore the relationship between policy texts and their historical, political, social and cultural contexts to reveal the dominant ideology and hegemonic power behind them. In CDA, data analysis aims at criticising the complex relations between discourse and society, illustrating the order of discourse, the practice of social participants and their cognitive processes (Wodak & Meyer, 2015). After presenting the theorisation of CDA by analysing the thoughts of different critical theorists, O’Regan (2006) provides an analytical framework for classroom-based CDA, in which he refers to text as a critical object (TACO). This means treating text as a texture which includes visual layout, lexical, grammatical and genre dimensions, the meanings they suggest, and the overall frames of social reference.

Theoretically, TACO is influenced by Adorno, Derrida, Habermas and Foucault. It is also a reformulation and development of Fairclough’s three-dimensional paradigm of
description, interpretation and explanation. Fairclough (2011) defines discourse as a form of social practice, and texts are discursive events shaped by situations, institutions and social structures in social practices. His three-dimensional framework focuses on detailed consideration and interpretation of the discursive features of the text. However, O’Regan (2006) believes that Adorno’s understanding of immanent critique asks readers to develop a broader understanding and overview of the text before moving to a detailed analysis.

O’Regan adopts Derrida’s deconstructive interpretation, which suggests a second reading of the text in which its texture is studied in closer detail. Derrida’s (1978) deconstructive strategy includes two layers of interpretation. The first is a classical reading to explore the author’s original meaning in the text. The second is a deconstructive reading which disrupts what the classical one affords through identifying and discussing the contradictions. O’Regan (2006) develops a four-stage framework of CDA, including descriptive, representative, social and deconstructive interpretation. Descriptive and representative interpretations echo classical reading, while social and deconstructive interpretations draw from the deconstructive reading.

The TACO framework provides questions for researchers to solve at every stage of the CDA of target texts (Table 4.6 presents the full set of TACO questions). The first stage focuses on the frame, topic and how the text wants to be read. The second asks what social values can be attached to the image, vocabulary, grammar and genre in the text. The third stage considers the text’s social background, while the fourth analyses the influence of descriptive, representative and social interpretations of the original text.

In this study, I followed questions using TACO to analyse policy documents. Informed by Derrida’s deconstruction, I group TACO’s four stages into two parts. The first is the general descriptive and representative interpretation of these policies, mainly focusing on how the ELE policies in China are framed, organised and publicised, as well as their preferred reading and ideal readers. The second presents the social and deconstructive interpretation of policies in China by discussing interactions between policies and the changing social and political contexts of different periods to discuss contradictions in policies.
This thesis explores neoliberalism’s influence on policies of compulsory English education in China. It focused on policy processes and social changes since 1978
because Harvey (2015) believes that 1978 was when China began to take neoliberal steps in a communist-ruled economy. Moreover, given that the selected policies are the ELE curricula, the CDA in this thesis predominantly concentrates on texts in the preface of the curricula, as well as sections concerning teaching objectives and requirements. It is within these texts that the relationship among language, language use, and requirements for ELE is presented. The CDA of documentary data enables further reflection on participant observation and interviews because it draws a detailed picture of ELE and its related policies and explores how ELE policies have been adjusted to cope with the social, economic, political and cultural demands under neoliberal ideology.

4.6.2 Ethnographic Data and Thematic Analysis

In terms of the observation and interview data, thematic analysis was used for data analysis. According to Clarke and Braun (2014), thematic analysis is ‘a method for systematically identifying, organising, and offering insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a data set’ (p. 57). Braun and Clarke (2006) show that thematic analysis is flexible and applicable to a range of theoretical and epistemological approaches. Squires (2023) argues that data analysis in thematic analysis is iterative and reflexive, although the method is often presented as a linear, step-by-step process. Therefore, thematic analysis is suitable for a critical linguistic ethnography to explore how meaning is constructed in daily practice.

Table 4.7: Six-step Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>Description of the process</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Familiarizing yourself with your data:</td>
<td>Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Generating initial codes:</td>
<td>Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Searching for themes:</td>
<td>Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Reviewing themes:</td>
<td>Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic ‘map’ of the analysis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Defining and naming themes:</td>
<td>Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Producing the report:</td>
<td>The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4.6 shows Braun and Clarke’s six-step thematic analysis framework, which is recognised as a clear guidance on how to analyse qualitative data in practice.

In this study, I followed the six-step framework in analysing ethnographic data, including interviews with teachers and students and my own field notes. For step one, as discussed in Section 4.5, I transcribed and translated the raw data collected from the research sites. I familiarised myself with the data during the transcribing and translating process. For step two, generating codes meant highlighting text sections, usually phrases or sentences, and coming up with shorthand labels or codes to describe their content. Braun and Clarke (2008) explained that researchers need to make decisions regarding the approach they will use because their choices have implications for the coding process. According to Squires (2023), there are two approaches to coding. The deductive approach codes data in alignment with predetermined research questions or theoretical frameworks. Researchers take the coding process with preconceived themes derived from existing theory or knowledge. In the inductive approach, researchers allow patterns and themes to emerge from the coding process, letting data dictate the themes.

This study combined the inductive and deductive approaches to analyse interview and observation data and generate themes. From the deductive approach, the reading before data collection informed the research design and set the aims of exploring the influence of neoliberalism on ELE, teachers and students. During the process of coding and defining themes, the reviewed literature guided me to find related information and name codes and themes according to concepts in the literature. In the meantime, using the inductive approach, I approached the data with an open mind, looking for patterns and themes to emerge from the data itself. Some themes were developed from the data rather than being imposed onto it, following a bottom-up approach in which themes emerged organically from the data. Examples of coding, categorising codes and defining themes are presented in Appendix 6. Since this study is a critical inquiry, during the process of thematic analysis and producing the report, I also focused on discussing ideologies in the education system and how participants’ language learning and teaching practices interact with political structures under the dominant ideology.
4.7 Research Quality

Ethnographic research and other forms of qualitative research are often criticised for their limited generalisability due to their reliance on specific contexts (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982). Researchers using the same data may arrive at different conclusions, further contributing to the challenges of achieving broad applicability (Pope & Mays, 2020). Gray (2014) argues that qualitative researchers show that qualitative research can achieve rigour through a range of strategies, and that the quality of qualitative research can be addressed through validity, reliability and trustworthiness. Meanwhile, Anderson (1989) argues that the most pressing issue facing critical ethnographers with respect to the validity or trustworthiness of their accounts is the exploration of reflexivity, which encourages self-reflective processes that prevent the critical framework from becoming only a container of data. The next section examines reliability, validity and trustworthiness, and is followed by a section on reflexivity.

4.7.1 Reliability, Validity, and Trustworthiness

According to Gray (2014), reliability in research is characterised by the consistency and stability of findings. Denzin et al. (2014) assert that a reliable observation is one that could have been made by any observer in a similar context. Meanwhile validity, originally associated with quantitative research, has been adopted within qualitative research to denote the accuracy of findings. LeCompte and Coetz (1982) argue that some ethnographers resist using reliability and validity as criteria of quality in ethnographic research, claiming that absolute reliability and validity are impossible goals in any research model. However, ethnographers should use strategies to reduce threats to reliability and validity because ignoring such threats weakens the results of any research, whatever its purpose. This study adopted LeCompte and Coetz’s (1982) perspectives by trying to reduce threats to reliability and validity.

LeCompte and Coetz (1982) contend that ethnographic research operates within distinct contexts that cannot be replicated precisely, introducing potential challenges to the reliability of ethnographic findings. These challenges can be further compounded by the influence of field traditions, ideologies and researchers’ knowledge, experiences and ideologies, and the external and internal reliability of ethnographic research may be compromised. Drawing upon an analysis of prior
ethnographic studies, LeCompte and Coetz (1982) propose several strategies to address these issues. To improve external reliability, ethnographers are advised to acknowledge and address five primary concerns: researcher status position, informant choice, social situations and conditions, analytic constructs and premises and methods of data collection and analysis. To mitigate threats to internal reliability, researchers can use low-inference descriptors, involve multiple researchers, engage participant researchers, subject the work to peer scrutiny and incorporate mechanically recorded data.

To enhance external reliability, I constantly reflect on my social role within research sites and the influence of my cultural background, ideology and expertise in ELE during the research design, data collection and data analysis. When choosing the informants, I adopted both teachers’ and students’ perspectives in the research sites. I consulted English language teachers with students’ information and involved their levels of English proficiency as references to gain more general perspectives from the students. I asked teachers and students to introduce their social and cultural backgrounds to provide descriptions of those who provided the data. Before entering the field, I analysed education policies and reforms in China during the past forty years and introduced the social and cultural backgrounds of the research sites to provide information on their specific social settings. I combined CDA and thematic analysis with critical ethnographic methods to explore linguistic problems and describe the process, providing explicit results of the data and the potential for subsequent researchers to reconstruct analytical strategies. To mitigate threats to internal reliability, I audio-recorded classroom interactions between teachers and students, took field notes of my reflections and other information and encouraged teachers and students to reflect on their educational practices and relationships with each other.

According to LeCompte and Coetz (1982), the concept of validity necessitates demonstrating that the propositions formulated, refined or tested in the research align with actual causal conditions. There are two key considerations of validity. Internal validity reflects whether researchers effectively observe or measure what they intend to observe or measure. External validity relates to the extent to which abstract constructs and assumptions formulated, refined or tested by scientific researchers are applicable across different groups (Campbell & Stanley, 1963; Cook & Campbell, 1979). LeCompte and Coetz (1982) argue that ethnography possesses high internal
validity because it requires the researchers’ participation in the research sites and asks for their self-reflection during ethnographic data collection and analysis. However, because ethnography focuses on specific phenomena in specific research sites, its external validity is often ignored by ethnographers. LeCompte and Coetz (1982) list four factors in ethnography that may affect external validity: selection effects, setting effects, historical effects and construct effects. Through analysing these factors, more information and discussion on the phenomena and the research sites are provided for other researchers, directing them to examine comparable effects in other populations. As ethnographic research, my participant observation, interviews with students and teachers and reflexivity throughout the process ensured the internal validity of the study. My critical analysis of the documents reflected the setting and historical effects, while my thematic analysis and critical discussion of participants’ perspectives showed how the effects of observed phenomena were construed.

Gray (2014) indicates that in research on social practices, trustworthiness is more important than concerns over validity or reliability. Guba and Lincoln (1994) provide measures for developing trustworthiness in qualitative data, which focus on credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. These terms are used to examine the study design and method, explore the relationships between findings and context, evaluate the reliability of the conclusions, and address which steps can be replicated. So, trustworthiness is also about the reliability and validity of research. The previous discussion of the reliability and validity of this study, including the research design, sampling, data collection, data analysis and critical discussion of the results ensured this research’s trustworthiness.

### 4.7.2 Reflexivity

As discussed in the research design, data collection methods, ethics and data analysis sections, reflexivity appears in every phase of research as a crucial element in ethnography. Marshall et al. (2010) assert that reflexivity is foundational to ethnography as ethnographic study data stem from the researcher’s reflexivity, particularly during the observation phase. Jones (2019) underscores the significance of reflexivity in ethnographic research, viewing ethnography as contingent upon the researcher’s capacity for participant observation. Liang (2015) highlights reflexivity as
a process that prompts researchers to contemplate interactions and dialogues between their multiple selves, the researcher and the research, the researcher and the researched, and the researcher and potential readers. Field notes in particular result from the reflexive engagement between the researcher and the context and all actors within that context. Ethnographic researchers immerse themselves in a specific social context throughout the study process, aiming to provide the foundations for a reconstructed logic through their reflexivity. Anderson (1989) argues that critical ethnography also emphasises two other forms of reflectivity, namely reflection on the researcher’s bias and the dialectical relationship between structural and historical forces and human agency. Anderson (1989) concludes that reflexivity in critical ethnography involves constant reflection on dialectical processes in the researcher’s constructs, the informants’ common-sense constructs, the research data, the researcher’s ideological biases and the structural and historical forces that inform the social construction under study.

Sánchez (2010) regards positionality as the idea that personal values, perspectives, and situatedness in time and space influence one’s understanding of the world. In this study, my positionality was always considered during the research design, data collection and data analysis stages. Jorgensen (2011) analyses the positionality of researchers in participant observation, arguing that researchers assume an insider’s position during observation. Ethnography offers direct experiential and observational access to the insiders’ world of meaning. Therefore, as an insider who designed this research, engaged in participants’ daily life, and recorded data, I must constantly reflect upon my values, perspectives, educational background, work experiences, and how my interactions with participants and other forms of discourse influence this study.

My study incorporates two research sites situated in the province where my hometown is located. I was born in the county where the rural school is situated, and served as a volunteer English teacher at a primary school in that county for one year. I pursued my junior and senior secondary education in the city where the urban school is situated. I also worked as an English teacher in a secondary school in the province for two years. This meant that before designing this research, I understood the economic, social and cultural contexts of the research sites, the state of English language teaching in China, the fundamental disparities between urban and rural schools and the evolving policies of English education in recent decades. These personal experiences facilitated my
access to the research sites, my establishment of rapport with participants and my integration into the daily lives of the participants. One could argue that I had been an insider in this context before entering the research sites. My choice of critical linguistic ethnography as the study methodology was informed by my observations of the unequal development of English education in rural and urban schools during my past experiences and professional engagements. Before initiating the research, I conducted an extensive review of theoretical literature on neoliberalism, language education and education policy, and examined empirical studies on the urban-rural educational gap in China as well as other relevant research to provide a comprehensive background and incorporate relevant educational policy changes in China. This approach ensures that the research design does not overly rely on my own personal experiences.

Upon entering the research sites, it became evident that my status as a doctoral student in an English-speaking country significantly influenced the attitudes of teachers and students towards me. They perceived me as an English language learning expert, which was reflected in their respectful demeanour during conversations and interactions. My social identity and associated cultural attributes gave me access to the participants I wished to interview and the authority to obtain the necessary data from the two schools. However, this also established a power dynamic in my relationship with participants, who might have unconsciously complied with my suggestions and requirements because of my academic qualifications and perceived professional standing. When collecting data from the research sites, I remained vigilant to avoid influencing classroom instruction and participants’ interview responses. I consistently reflected on how my professional background affected classroom behaviour and interviews with teachers and students. Additionally, as a researcher who received primary and university education in China and postgraduate and doctoral education in the UK, I remained aware of the influence of both countries’ educational systems and their respective cultural and social contexts throughout the research process. I was aware that my social and cultural background inevitably shaped my research design, data collection and analysis.

During the data analysis phase, as a critical ethnographic researcher I not only reflected on my relationship with participants and the neoliberal socio-cultural structure and unequal power relations between participants, but also upon the potential
limitations on my analysis imposed by my own social and cultural background. I strove to employ methods such as thick description and careful analysis of social and cultural contexts to provide a more comprehensive understanding of my research questions and the research sites. This approach should also encourage readers of this thesis to engage in their own reflexivity when interpreting findings.

4.8 Summary

This chapter introduced the research design grounded in critical theory, justified the adoption of critical linguistic ethnography as the methodology, and mapped the research step by step from data collection methods and sampling to data analysis. Ethical considerations, research quality and reflexivity were considered and presented. The following three chapters analyse and discuss documentary data, teachers’ and students’ observations and interview data.
Chapter 5: Critical Discourse Analysis of English Language Education Policies in China

5.1 Introduction

Chapter 4 examined the reasons for choosing CDA and the TACO framework for document analysis in this research. In this chapter, I will analyse the policies of ELE in China from 1978 to the beginning of the 2020s using the four stages of TACO – descriptive, representative, social and deconstructive interpretation. This chapter provides a detailed picture of ELE and its related policies in China’s pursuit of national development and explores the adjustment of ELE policies to cope with changing social, economic, political and cultural demands within the global neoliberal context.

In Chapter 3, Section 3.3, I reviewed ELE policies during different periods in China from the end of the Qing dynasty, arguing that changes in ELE policies aligned with the socio-political requirements of different periods. Harvey (2005) points out that Deng Xiaoping’s market economy with Chinese characteristics since the 1978 Reform and Opening-up increasingly incorporated neoliberal elements as a form of authoritarian centralised control. I will therefore trace the changes in ELE policies since that year. Meanwhile, Adamson (2004) believes that the ELE in China after the 1990s was affected by globalisation. In reviewing empirical studies, I pointed out that the current studies of ELE in China lack critical analysis of the policies in the post-Olympic period, when conflict between neoliberalism and Chinese nationalism in ELE policies seems to have intensified.

The three sections of this chapter organise ten central policies for China’s compulsory English education since 1978 into three groups: The English Syllabus for Full-Time Primary and Secondary School (1978-1990), the Nine-year Compulsory Education Full-time Junior Secondary School English Syllabus (1988-2000), and the English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education (2001-2022). Policies promulgated in each group represent revisions of previous policies in that group. The analysis involves the post-Olympic period and refers to important socio-political influences, such as the Reform and Opening-up, globalisation in the pre-Olympic and post-Olympic periods, on policy modifications.
According to Section 4.6.1, the analysis of policies in these three groups follows a two-part process. The first is a general descriptive and representative interpretation of the three groups of policies, and the second offers a social and deconstructive interpretation. However, the latest version of the standards in the third group, which was implemented after my ethnographic study, will be analysed separately. The observed practices in ELE were based on the previous standards, and the analysis of previous syllabuses and standards shows similarities and changes in ELE policies and reveals hidden neoliberal governance according to varied discursive expressions. The analysis of the latest standards shows whether neoliberalism still affects the ELE policies and the suggested future development of ELE in China.

Table 5.1 shows general information about the policies that will be analysed. It is worth noting that the ELE policies involved here all refer to the compulsory education stage in China because the focus of this research is on disparities in ELE within that stage. The central policies selected for this research are national English language syllabus documents for the compulsory education stage published by the MOE. They are ‘programmatic documents of the national language planning and policy’ (Cheng, 2019, p.21), which contain the curriculum content, pedagogical approaches and official national political expectations of English education. Hou (2017) points out that syllabuses and curricula guide ELE at the basic school stage. Hou (2017) and Liu (2019) argue that besides setting academic objectives and planning specific content for ELE at all school stages, syllabuses and curricula are formulated to achieve national education reforms, and therefore convey the ideological intentions of different times. The ELE syllabus and curriculum standards in this chapter are regarded, selected and analysed as education policies. Following the analysis, the chapter concludes with a brief summary of findings that emerged from my analysis of policy documents.

Table 5.1: The English Language Education Syllabus and Curriculum Standards for Chinese Compulsory Education since 1978

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Table of Contents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1978</td>
<td>English Syllabus for Ten-Year Full-Time Primary and Secondary Schools (Trial Draft)</td>
<td>General teaching objectives and requirements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Teaching principles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Teaching methods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Teaching requirements and specific contents for each grade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Title</td>
<td>Sections</td>
</tr>
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<td>--------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>English Syllabus for Ten-Year Full-Time Primary and Secondary Schools (Trial Draft – Revised Edition)</td>
<td>General teaching objectives and requirements, Teaching principles, Teaching methods, Teaching requirements and specific contents for each grade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>English Syllabus for Full-time Secondary Schools</td>
<td>General teaching objectives and requirements, Teaching principles, Teaching methods, Teaching requirements and specific contents for each grade, Appendices: Senior Secondary School ELE Schedule; Vocabulary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>Nine-year Compulsory Education Full-time Junior Secondary School English Syllabus (Preliminary Draft)</td>
<td>Preface, Teaching objectives, Teaching requirements, Teaching contents, Issues that should be paid attention to in teaching, Appendices: Functional and Notional Items; Phonetic Items; Vocabulary; Grammar Items</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>English Syllabus for Full-time Secondary Schools (Revised Edition)</td>
<td>Revision Notes, General teaching objectives and requirements, Teaching principles, Teaching methods, Teaching requirements and specific contents for each grade, Appendices: Senior Secondary School ELE Schedule; Vocabulary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>Nine-year Compulsory Education Full-time Junior Secondary School English Syllabus (Trial Edition)</td>
<td>Preface, Teaching objectives, Teaching requirements, Teaching contents, Issues that should be paid attention to in teaching, Examination and evaluation, Appendices: Daily Expressions in Communication; Phonetic Items; Vocabulary; Grammar Items</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>Nine-year Compulsory Education Full-time Junior Secondary School English Syllabus (Revised Trial Edition)</td>
<td>Preface, Teaching Objectives, Teaching requirements, Teaching contents, Issues that should be paid attention to in teaching, Teaching assessment, Appendices: Daily Expressions in Communication; Phonetic Items; Vocabulary; Grammar Items; Topics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>English Curriculum Standards for Full-time Compulsory and Senior Secondary Schools (Trial Edition)</td>
<td>Preface, Course objectives, Content standards, Implementation suggestions, Appendices: Phonetic Items; Grammar Items; Functional and Notional Items; Topics; Language Skills Teaching Reference Sheet; Teaching Terms in Classroom; Vocabulary</td>
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<td>------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2022</td>
<td>Standards for different levels</td>
<td>Course nature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Implementation suggestions</td>
<td>Course philosophy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Appendices: Phonetic Items; Grammar Items; Vocabulary; Functional</td>
<td>Course objectivities</td>
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<td></td>
<td>and Notional Items; Topics; Examples of Classroom Teaching;</td>
<td>Course contents</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Evaluation Methods and Examples; Language Skills Teaching</td>
<td>Academic quality</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reference Suggestions; Teaching Terms in Classroom</td>
<td>Curriculum Implementation</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Appendices: Core competencies in different school stages; Phonetic</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Items; Vocabulary; Grammar Items; Examples of Classroom Teaching</td>
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</table>

5.2 English Syllabus for Full-Time Primary and Secondary Schools (1978-1990)

Based on Liu (2017) study on the implementation of English language policies in China, these syllabuses were formulated to guide the EL teaching practices, representing the frameworks for designing EL teaching materials, conducting official ELE examinations and directing ELE teachers’ teaching (Liu, 2017; Wu, 2009; Xie, 2011). According to Table 5.1, four ELE syllabuses for compulsory education were published in this period: the 1978, 1980, 1986 and 1990 syllabuses. These could be grouped because they have similar names and structures, and the last three syllabuses are all revised editions of the 1978 syllabus. To interpret these syllabuses descriptively and representatively, I will introduce the structure, main contents, characteristic language and other forms of discourse within these policies by referring to extracts from the original documents. The four syllabuses are all based on language education policies promulgated by the MOE under the leadership of the CPC. To a certain extent, their main contents, teaching objectives and requirements embody the political requirements of ELE. I have generalised three main themes for the social and deconstructive interpretation of the syllabuses in this group, including instrumentalised ELE, Sixiang and Zhengzhi (ideological and political) education in ELE and local governments’ responsibility and students’ future in ELE.
5.2.1 Descriptive and Representative Interpretation

The 1978 syllabus was the first formal governmental publication for ELE after the Cultural Revolution and was formulated by MOE for primary and secondary school stages. Adamson (2004) notes that it was the first language teaching syllabus for all grades in basic education in China. Published by the People’s Education Press (PEP), the official publishing agency of the Chinese government for education, the syllabus is divided into four sections: general teaching objectives and requirements, teaching principles, teaching methods and specific teaching requirements for each grade. In the syllabus, the objective of ELE is described as nurturing ‘foreign language talents who are faithful to communism and well-trained for different professions’ to develop ‘the four Modernisations of agriculture, industry, national defence and science and technology’ (PEP, 1978 in PEP, 2001, p. 120). Referring to Mao’s revolutionary diplomacy and the need to build a strong socialist country, this syllabus shows a strong political tone. Political implications can also be found in the second part of the document, ‘teaching principles’ which sets the discursive content in teaching materials, claiming they ‘should help educate students to love leaders, the party and the socialist motherland...’ (PEP, 1978 in PEP, 2001, p. 120).

The third section of the syllabus contains teaching methods. Here, the teachers are asked to analyse and criticise learning materials written by foreigners from a Marxist-Leninist stance. The solid political tone also can be seen in the final section, ‘teaching requirements and special content for each grade’, which provides detailed objectives for each grade, from primary school grade three to the last year of senior secondary school. In that final junior secondary school year, the syllabus proposes adding English readings about the leader (Mao), and older revolutionary leaders and heroes. Wu (2009) points out that the political characteristics of this syllabus act as ideological guidelines in ELE at the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s.

The main change in the 1980 syllabus compared to the 1978 syllabus is a weakening of political propaganda. The new syllabus was also divided into four parts using the same headings the 1978 syllabus. Although the general objectives still advocate nurturing foreign language talents for ‘building a strong socialist country’ (PEP, 1980 in PEP, 2001, p. 140), the texts about Maoism, class conflict and other political ideals are deleted in the first and the second part of the ‘teaching principles’ section. As well as deleting political requirements in the 1980 syllabus, a more noticeable change is
the call for more reality-centred teaching. In ‘teaching principles’, instead of emphasising the control of relationships between political and ideological education and language teaching, the principles advocate summarising ‘Chinese students’ habitus in learning English’. The syllabus calls for ‘practical abilities’ and ‘the comprehensive development of students’ listening, speaking, reading, and writing, especially reading skills’ (PEP, 1980 in PEP, 2001, p. 140-141).

It also demands the ‘professional abilities of English language teachers’ (PEP, 1980 in PEP, 2001, p. 141). The teaching methods and teaching requirements for each grade are modified slightly because language teachers complained about practical difficulties in implementing the 1978 syllabus. According to Yi (2010), teachers thought that too much vocabulary and complex grammar caused students to lose interest in learning English. Teachers believed that meeting the requirements of the syllabus was impossible because teaching materials were too complicated and unrelated to students’ lives. Han and Liu (2008) argue that in the early syllabuses, the MOE, policymakers and intellectuals who participated in syllabus design tried to restore language education in China too quickly after the Cultural Revolution. Due to the undeveloped reality of ELE in China, they suggest that teaching requirements in the previous syllabus went beyond teachers’ professional competence. According to Wang (2010) and Yi (2010), the adjustments in 1986 brought the syllabus more in line with the reality of restarting ELE in China.

In general, the 1986 syllabus had the same structure as the 1978 and 1980 versions, containing four parts named ‘general teaching objectives and requirements, teaching principles, teaching methods and specific requirements for each grade’ (PEP, 1986 in PEP, 2001, p. 162-202). However, compared with the previous syllabuses, it possessed three characteristics making it more realistic to restore ELE. Firstly, the 1986 syllabus was devised only for full-time secondary schools instead of covering the ten-year education system including primary and secondary stages. Liu (2015) explains that to solve the problem of the shortage of secondary school teachers and the low education efficiency in primary schools, the MOE decided to suspend ELE in primary schools and transfer all English language teachers to secondary schools to strengthen secondary education.

Secondly, the 1986 syllabus stabilised the newly constituted education system by identifying the role of English in secondary education (Zeng & Wang, 2018). In 1981,
the MOE changed the ten-year schooling system into a twelve-year system, including six years of primary education, and three-year junior and three-year senior secondary school. The 1986 syllabus explained that English is a ‘compulsory subject’ in secondary school education and set the ‘learning starting points’ for the two stages of secondary education so that the syllabus was more widely applicable to the needs of ELE in different stages and areas (PEP, 1986 in PEP, 2001, p. 162). The various language education systems were thus built to adapt to the development of secondary education. Thirdly, the 1986 version took the specific contents of students’ language acquisition into consideration for the first time. The teaching requirements, methods and principles in the previous syllabuses mainly covered what teachers should do in teaching English. In the ‘teaching requirements and specific content’ of the 1986 syllabus, particular requirements for students’ listening, speaking, reading and writing skills and criteria for accessing students’ linguistic competence were explained. A 2000-word list is added in appendices to clarify the vocabulary required for students.

The 1986 syllabus required teachers to adjust and improve their teaching by judging whether the specific requirements were being met in practice. According to Wang (2010), this represented the start of studying the relationship between teaching and learning in China’s ELE syllabus. Yi (2010) believes this was a significant advance on previous syllabuses. Liu (2015) explains that the change showed the effect of China’s Reform and Opening-up. In her opinion, theoretical research of behaviourist psychology, cognitive psychology, sociolinguistics and applied linguistics were introduced to China in 1978, making policymakers pay attention to students as an active part of language education. The focus on students was further demonstrated in the 1990 syllabus, which was a revised edition of the 1986 syllabus. In the revision notes, policymakers announced that the revision reflected that ‘the previous requirements are too high for many junior secondary school students, especially those in rural areas, causing them to be under too much academic pressure’ (PEP, 1990 in PEP, 2001, p. 209). Requirements on vocabulary and the class hours in the 1990 syllabus were therefore reduced. There is no apparent change in other parts of the syllabus.

By interpreting syllabuses in this group descriptively and representatively, three specific themes were identified: instrumentalised English language, ideological and political education and local government responsibilities. Each theme contained static
and changing elements reflecting social and political requirements. The following social and deconstructive interpretation discusses these within the three themes.

5.2.2 Social and Deconstructive Interpretation

Firstly, regardless of any adjustments and content revisions were made in the four editions, all the syllabuses saw ELE as an instrument that would contribute to the country’s and the CPC government’s political and economic needs. The following extracts are from the first section – ‘general teaching objectives and requirements’ – of these syllabuses, showing the emergence and development of instrumentalised ELE therein. In the 1978 syllabus, English is seen as an ‘important tool’ to help achieve the goals in the international context.

**Extract 1:**

English is a widely used language throughout the world. English is also a very important tool: for international class struggle, for economic and trade relationships, for cultural, scientific and technological exchange and for the development of international friendship … …

We have to hold high the great banner of Chairman Mao Zedong and effect the policies initiated by the Party under Hua Guofeng’s leadership so that by the end of this century, we can achieve the Four Modernisations of industry, agriculture, science and technology, and national defence and make China a strong socialist country. To uphold the principle of classless internationalism … we need to nurture a quantity of ‘socialist experts’; people proficient in a foreign language and different disciplines, and we have to strengthen both primary and secondary teaching.

(PEP, 1978 in PEP, 2001, p. 120)

The word ‘tool’ reflects the concept of linguistic instrumentalism, suggesting that language ability becomes a skill for achieving utilitarian goals (Kubota, 2011). Hirtt (2009) points out that the idea of developing English skills to strengthen a nation’s economic competitiveness and increase economic returns is related to a broader discourse of neoliberalism. However, it is hard to identify who makes the assertion and who needs this ‘important tool’. Yeatman (1990) indicates that this is a common feature of policy documents, in which power and authority are difficult to identify.

In the second half of this extract, the subject pronoun ‘we’ means those who are giving statements. The shift from no subject to ‘we’ indicates an invisible power trying to sell the obligation of achieving these objectives and requirements to every receiver of the syllabus. The teaching objectives and requirements themselves show a nascent
neoliberalist idea by introducing English as an essential tool for ‘economic and trade
relationships’ in international and ‘world’ contexts to ELE participants. As discussed in
Chapter 2, Section 2.4.2, linguistic instrumentalism views English skills as linguistic
capital (Bourdieu, 1998), which can be exchanged for economic benefits in the ‘world’
and ‘international’ market. The depoliticised language in the post-1980 syllabuses
demonstrates a further shift in governmental focus from class struggle to economic
development, as can be seen in Extract 2 below:

**Extract 2:**
A foreign language is an important tool for learning cultural and scientific
knowledge and conducting international communication to improve the scientific
and cultural level of the entire Chinese nation and achieve modernisation.
(PEP, 1980 in PEP, 2001, p. 140)

Compared with Extract 1, the reference to Maoism was deleted in the 1980 syllabus,
while the idea of instrumentalising ELE for modernisation was strengthened. The
Xinhua News Agency (2019) quotes Deng’s speech in 1979 which described the Four
Modernisations as industrial, agricultural, national defence and science and
technology in the Chinese context. Gong (2018) defines modernisation in Deng’s
period as a process in which the quality of productivity was improved, material wealth
increased, social rules and order were improved, and spiritual values were also
maintained and improved. According to the Xinhua News Agency (2019), Deng (1979)
claimed that every sphere of modernisation required support through economic
development. The emphasis on modernisation in the syllabus indicates that ELE could
support China’s economic growth through international communication and exchange.
Chen (1998) claims that removing political expressions from the 1980 syllabus
reflected Deng’s prioritisation of the Four Modernisations, of which science and
education were seen as the essential elements. He argues that political ideology in
the national syllabus should be de-emphasised to adapt to the market economy
development following the Reform and Opening-up. Tsang (2000) believes that this
change followed Deng Xiaoping’s prioritisation of educational efficiency in developing
skilled English language talents for the economy, while Hu (2005) thinks that
prioritising educational efficiency related English to economic benefits and social
prestige and embodied the neoliberal market character of efficient production. The
instrumentality of English and modernisation are further emphasised at the start of the 1986 syllabus, as we can see from Extract 3:

**Extract 3:**

A foreign language is an important tool for learning cultural and scientific knowledge, acquiring information on all aspects of the world and conducting international communication. Education must be oriented to modernisation, the world, and the future…

(PEP, 1986 in PEP, 2001, p. 162)

This extract confirms the importance of English as a tool that could help national development. The direct quotation – ‘Education must be oriented to modernisation, the world, and the future’ – was Deng’s inscription for a secondary school in Beijing in 1983. Wu (2009) sees this quotation as the declaration of an education revolution that advocated utilising foreign intelligence to take the Reform and Opening-up into education to reduce the gap between China and developed countries. This syllabus was the first ELE syllabus after the advocacy of educational reform. The 1985 *Decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on the Reform of the Education System* decided to implement the nine-year compulsory education programme. It was a follow-on policy to *The Decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on the Reform of the Economic System*, which aimed to solve problems of economic development and educational disadvantage (Kipnis, 2007). The extract therefore presented a close relationship between education and economic development in China.

As discussed in Chapter 3, Section 3.2, educational modernisation encouraged the development of education for industrial and economic purposes. ELE was aligned with neoliberal demands by emphasising the instrumentality of language in modernisation. The ‘world’ in the extract emphasised that one educational objective was to connect China with the rest of the world. The word ‘future’ indicates that education would bring long-term benefits, such as ‘meet[ing] the needs of future study and employment’ (PEP, 1986 in PEP, 2001, p. 162). According to Bourdieu (1991), treating language education as linguistic and educational capital that can be added to social capital proves that it can improve economic capital. As such, connecting ELE with individuals’ futures and careers can be seen as linguistic and educational capitalisation.
In Chapter 2, Section 2.1, I discussed how neoliberalism controls people’s educational practice by (re)producing different sorts of capital. The 1986 syllabus shows that ELE was changed into a (re)producing process of linguistic capital for students under the leadership’s preference for neoliberal ideas. This neoliberalised understanding of ELE as an instrument of modernisation was maintained, and no changes were made in the 1990 syllabus, showing that neoliberal views on ELE remained consolidated in this group’s syllabuses.

Secondly, syllabuses in this group provide ideological instruction to ELE participants by stressing the value of Sixiang and Zhengzhi (S&Z) education, translated as ideological and political education. According to Liu and Zheng (2018), who were the editors of ELE policies and materials in PEP, S&Z education means education about outlooks on the world, life and values. The views of many Chinese scholars on S&Z education include four main issues: patriotism and cultural awareness, principles of right and wrong behaviour, beliefs about values in life and what is worth achieving or obtaining in the future (Li & Zeng, 2020; Liu, 2014; Wang, 2011; Xiong & Qian, 2012). Xiong (2012) argues that S&Z education in ELE aims to construct relationships between ideological understandings of ELE and China’s political and economic conditions. In the 1978 syllabus, combining S&Z education with language education was a primary principle. The first principle in the ‘teaching principles’ covered S&Z education:

**Extract 4:**

**Teaching principles**

1. Correctly handle the relationship between S&Z education and language education in English language teaching. English teaching must be conducive to changing students’ thinking. Guided by the standpoint, viewpoint and method of Marxism-Leninism, political and ideological content should be infiltrated into teaching materials and teaching so that students can receive ideological and political education while learning English well.

(PEP, 1978 in PEP, 2001, p. 120-121)

The 1978 syllabus advocated S&Z education through ELE. Although there is no explanation of what S&Z education actually is, it may in this period have been used to promote socialist ideas, since Maoism and Marxism-Leninism are listed in the syllabus. Hu (2005) claims that English was at the time still seen as the language of the capitalist enemy because this syllabus included the first official foreign language after the ten-year Cultural Revolution. Liu (2015) claims that although Deng’s reforms, in which
developing market economy was the most important factor, was confirmed by National People’s Congresses and would be gradually implemented, although language education policymakers were still influenced by Cultural Revolution, which advocated the adoption of socialist political ideologies in every sphere of life. As this was the first ELE syllabus after the Cultural Revolution, it took time for policymakers to abandon the previous ideological understanding of English in governmental policies. On one hand, the syllabus showed the urgency of achieving economic development through international exchanges in different fields by stressing the Four Modernisations; on the other, the worry about ideological influence through ELE and international exchanges can be detected by its emphasis on S&Z and demands that students ‘love leaders, love the party, and love the socialist motherland’ (PEP, 1978 in PEP, 2001, p. 121). This conflict may reflect the MOE and policymakers’ concerns about the uncertainty of Deng’s national political and social reform, of which 1978 represented only a first attempt. By 1980, after two years of adjustment and adaptation, China’s reform and development were officially prioritised (Wang, 2010). The idea of highlighting economic development and weakening political intentions in the 1980 syllabus was discussed in Section 5.2.1, but the attention to S&Z education can still be traced:

**Extract 5:**

General teaching objectives and requirements:

To build our country into a powerful socialist country, we need to nurture a large amount of ‘socialist experts’; people proficient in a foreign language and different disciplines…

Teaching methods

The Marxist-Leninist standpoints and viewpoints should be appropriately analysed where necessary for the works of some foreign authors. Attention should be paid to being concise and to the point to avoid tediousness.

(PEP, 1980 in PEP, 2001, p. 140-143)

In this extract, the main objective of learning English and advancing international communication was to build a powerful socialist country, showing that ELE was seen as a valuable instrument for national development – although this development came under the instruction of socialist viewpoints. The extract from the ‘teaching methods’ shows concerns about the threat of ideas and ideologies conveyed by English. The syllabus asks teachers to analyse foreign authors’ work from Marxist-Leninist standpoints to avoid any negative influence from English materials. Although S&Z education does not appear in the ‘teaching principles’, the description in ‘teaching
method’ indicates that it had infiltrated the practice of ELE. Yi (2010) argues that this is closely related to the long-standing antagonism between socialism and capitalism. While China worked towards improving its disadvantaged condition by joining the international market, it still did not want to be influenced by capitalist ideas in politics. This contradiction between embracing the neoliberal international market and maintaining the socialist political system in language syllabuses may reflect the political conflict between socialism and capitalism in China at the beginning of Reform and Opening-up period. In the 1986 syllabus, the wording of S&Z education was adjusted:

**Extract 6**

General teaching objectives and requirements

To build our country into a highly civilised and highly democratic socialist modernised country, it is necessary to improve the cultural and scientific quality of the entire nation and to nurture a large number of talents with lofty ideals, moral integrity, good education and a strong sense of discipline, with proficiency in foreign languages and various disciplines. Under such circumstances and requirements, the importance of foreign languages as a tool becomes more prominent. Therefore, foreign languages are listed as a basic subject in our secondary schools...

Teaching principles

1. Follow the rules of language teaching and integrate Sixiang education into language teaching.

To carry out various ELE training, especially the materials of reading, we should not only pay attention to the needs of language teaching but also to the content. The content should help students to establish correct thinking and cultivate good morality. It is necessary to integrate ideological education into language teaching or infiltrate ideological education into teaching materials and teaching practice so that students can learn English well and at the same time receive good ideological influences.

(PEP, 1986 in PEP, 2001, p. 162-163)

‘Talents with lofty ideals, moral integrity, good education, and a strong sense of discipline’ comes from Deng’s quote in a children’s magazine in 1980, and was generalised as a new generation with four qualities (lofty ideals, moral integrity, good education, and a strong sense of discipline) and then written into *The Compulsory Education Law of the People’s Republic of China* in 1986. That law related to *Suzhi* (quality) education, which aimed to nurture talents through the comprehensive development of morality, intelligence, physical education, art and labour (MOE, 1986). The word *Suzhi* covers a Chinese concept full of connotations which are difficult to define in one English word. According to Pang et al. (2020), *Suzhi* education helps
one to improve their comprehensive Suzhi through long-time personality improvement, knowledge accumulation, training, practice, reflection and internalisation. Suzhi education demands the multidimensional assessment of students instead of depending on academic grades. The new generation that embraced the four qualities was also the beginning of Suzhi education.

Li (1994), who was the head of the MOE, claimed that the four qualities were the most crucial aspect of Suzhi education, and that it was the responsibility of education to nurture new generations with a socialist consciousness to build their ideals, moral integrity, and other qualities needed for China’s economic and political development. Kipnis (2007) claimed that Suzhi is a trope of neoliberalism in China and a reified neoliberal concept. Suzhi is considered as a human quality, and Suzhi discourse refers to the myriad ways in which human quality is used in governing contemporary China. Kipnis (2007) believes that Suzhi education is a way of producing ‘talents’ who are acceptable in the neoliberal market. This echoes Bourdieu’s (1989, 1991, 1993) theory of social capital, which claims that human qualities can be exchanged as marketised human capital. According to Li (1994), Suzhi education was a sign that Deng Xiaoping considered the development of education and human capital through a lens of socialist modernisation.

The ‘teaching principles’ extract shows that Zhengzhi (political) education has been removed, and only Sixiang (ideological) education remains as the first principle of the syllabus. The content of this principle indicates that Sixiang education is about ‘correct’ thinking and ‘good’ morality, without providing the criteria of what is correct and what is good. In the ‘teaching methods’ section, the 1986 syllabus encourages ELE materials by British and American writers, but suggests that these materials are ‘checked or adapted’ to help students formulate ‘healthy values of life’ (PEP, 1986 in PEP 2001, P. 163-165). Combining the analysis of the new generation with four qualities and Suzhi education, I assume that the ‘correct’, ‘good’ and ‘healthy’ ideas need to meet the country’s developing economic and political requirements. The description of ideological education still implied conflict between ELE and political concerns about capitalist ideologies conveyed by English. However, in this syllabus this concern is presented in more covertly. The disappearance of Z from S&Z education and the change from Marxism-Leninism to ‘correct’ thinking, ‘good’ morality and ‘healthy’ ideas indicates that authorities still articulate dominant ideologies with
individual development through ELE. This change in the 1986 syllabus appears an attempt to balance the economic requirements of ELE in the neoliberal global market with China’s socialist political system, which echoes Deng’s idea of socialism with Chinese characteristics, using elements of market economics to achieve the goals of communism (Gregor, 1996). The S&Z education, a new generation with four qualities and Suzhi education represent discursive strategies of ideological education in ELE syllabuses to portray ELE as the essential instrument for economic development and political stability.

After implementing the Compulsory Education Law (MOE, 1986), the 1988 Nine-year Compulsory Education Full-time Junior Secondary School English Syllabus (Preliminary Draft) was published. In Wang’s (2010) opinion, the 1990 syllabus represents a bridge between previous and new syllabuses for compulsory education. More attention is paid by policymakers to improvements and adjustments of the 1988 syllabus, so there was no significant change in the content of the 1990 syllabus related to S&Z education. In general, S&Z education in this group’s syllabuses reveals the governance of individual practice in ELE through ideological education. The syllabuses encourage individuals to take responsibility for China’s economic and political development by connecting ELE with student quality. According to Foucault (1988), neoliberalism governs individuals by producing subjectivities such as responsibility, following market logic. By aligning themselves with produced subjectivities in daily life, individuals internalise neoliberal ideas to become neoliberalised subjects. S&Z education therefore also becomes a neoliberalist strategy for governing individuals in ELE, despite articulating socialist ideas as human qualities. This strategy of producing and distributing responsibility is more evident in the third theme – local government responsibility and students’ future in ELE.

Thirdly, local government responsibility and students’ future in ELE were first involved in the syllabuses in 1980. The 1980 syllabus offers two approaches to ELE organisation.

**Extract 7:**

There are two ways to set up English classes:

One is to start from the third grade of primary school. Through eight academic years of study, students are required to master basic phonetics and grammar, master about 2,800 words and a certain number of idiomatic phrases and be able
to use dictionaries to read medium-to-difficult readings on general topics. They should also have specific listening, speaking, writing and translation abilities.

Another is from the first grade of junior secondary school. Through five academic years of study, students are required to master basic phonetics and grammar, master about 2,200 words and a certain number of idiomatic phrases and be able to use dictionaries to read easy-to-read and straightforward materials on general topics. They should also have preliminary listening, speaking, writing and translation abilities.

(PEP, 1980 in PEP, 2001, p. 140)

This extract shows that the 1980 syllabus sets higher requirements for ELE from primary school onwards. The similarities and differences in requirements between the two ways shown in Extract 7 are clearly defined. Yi (2010) discusses English language teachers’ complaints about how difficult the 1978 syllabus was in practice. Teachers, especially rural teachers, considered some of the requirements so difficult to achieve that they made the students lose interest. Zhou (2015) claims that differences in economy and educational resources in different provinces made the policymakers face the reality that it was impossible to set the same requirements for ELE nationwide. Deng (1978) advocated the idea that advantaged regions and people should become rich first, leading and helping disadvantaged areas and people to achieve common prosperity. This two-way process shows the interdiscursivity of Deng’s common prosperity proposal, which encouraged local governments in different regions to impose different requirements of ELE based on local conditions so that ELE could improve and develop the advantaged areas first.

Cortazzi and Jin (2013) show that this two-way organisation demonstrates a contradiction between educational equality and educational efficiency by distributing ELE responsibilities to local education departments and letting them choose according to their conditions. At the first glance, this two-way organisation would suit local ELE development because it offered local governments the right to explore approaches to suit their regions, while lower requirements helped students gain confidence in learning English. However, this organisation was seen as a national government strategy to distribute responsibility to local governments by creating two different types of ELE for the local government to choose, making them responsible for ELE outcomes. Hu (2003) claimed that this showed the national government’s dilemma and represented a strategy that could improve educational efficiency with less investment at national level. Hu (2002), Hu (2003) and Tsang (2000) agree that the 1980 syllabus
showed unequal access to English provision determined by national government demands for educational efficiency, although it seemed appropriate for developing ELE nationwide. Tamim (2012) claims that social capital addressed social stratification and (re)produced inequality, and the division of ELE frameworks for different areas showed an unequal and marketised allocation and acquisition of social capital in China. Limited economic and social capital forced disadvantaged regions to choose the lower requirements, (re)producing their social and economic disadvantages through ELE. Meanwhile, the syllabus seemed to indicate that local governments were responsible for their disadvantages. According to the discussion of NM in Chapter 2, Section 2.2.3, quantifiable and measurable requirements listed for the two ways make it easier for national government to organise and manage local government by evaluating their ELE results according to neoliberal market ideologies.

The 1986 syllabus provided two starting points for ELE, one from the first year of junior secondary school, and the other from the first year of senior secondary school. The 1986 syllabus was the official revision of the 1978 and 1980 syllabuses, but was a syllabus only for secondary schools. The previous syllabuses were devised for the ten-year education system, including primary and secondary school stages. In 1981, the MOE changed the ten-year system into a twelve-year system, so the 1986 syllabus caters only to the needs of secondary schools. In the 1982 Opinions on Strengthening Foreign Language Education in Middle Schools, the MOE asked that ELE in secondary school should ‘proceed from reality, differentiate requirements, focus on practical results, actively create conditions, strive to improve quality, and develop in planned and gradual steps’ (PEP, 1982 in PEP, 2001). Based on the 1982 Opinions, the 1986 syllabus claims that ‘rural and remote areas could start the ELE from the first year of the senior secondary school’ (PEP, 1986 in PEP, 2001, p. 174). This adjustment echoes the analysis of the 1980 syllabus, arguing that lower requirements in the syllabuses were specifically designed for disadvantaged regions. Improving ELE efficiency was demanded in CPC’s 1985 Decision on the Reform of the Education System (Gov.cn, 1985). Zhou (2015) argues that adjustments to ELE starting points made the ELE syllabus more widely applicable for secondary schools while improving ELE efficiency. However, it also led to the complete absence of ELE in primary and junior secondary school stages in some disadvantaged areas.
The ELE was considered an ‘important tool for learning cultural and scientific knowledge, acquiring information on all aspects of the world, and conducting international communication’ (PEP, 1986 in PEP, 2001, p. 162). However, students in disadvantaged areas lost access to this tool in their primary and junior secondary school years, reproducing their disadvantages in ELE. Meanwhile, the 1986 syllabus points out:

**Extract 8:**

> Considering the different destinations of junior secondary school graduates in the future, English teaching in junior secondary schools should be strengthened where conditions permit, and proficient teachers should be equipped to help students lay a good foundation to meet the needs of future study and employment.

(PEP, 1986 in PEP, 2001, p. 162)

On one hand, this statement can be seen according to Bourdieu’s capital theory (1991) as linguistic and education capitalisation under the influence of neoliberalism, meaning that students in disadvantaged areas would achieve less capital than the others. On the other, it links ELE with students’ development and teachers’ success. According to Foucault (1988), this may represent neoliberal strategies creating subjectivities to align individuals and govern them as neoliberal subjects. The 1986 syllabus created different approaches to ELE in different regions and better future employment prospects based on ELE. For local governments, choosing a starting point forced them to align themselves with specific social and economic positions – advantaged or disadvantaged. Each position met different neoliberal goals. For individuals, whether aligning themselves with better employment prospects would determine their ELE practice. To some extent, the 1986 syllabus distributed the responsibility for economic and political development through ELE to local governments and individuals, turning local governments and individuals into neoliberal subjects that can be more easily managed.

The 1990 syllabus demonstrated the same characteristics as the 1986 syllabus. Yi (2010) claims that it had little practical influence because the 1990 syllabus and the 1988 syllabus ran parallel for some time. The 1988 syllabus was more in line with national requirements for the nine-year compulsory education system. In summary, the syllabuses in this group set the role of ELE as a main subject in basic education, paid attention to the instrumental role English education played in China’s economic and political development, clarified the ideological and political requirements of ELE.
and emphasised the relationships between ELE practice and local conditions and between ELE and individuals. According to the analysis, syllabuses in this period began to show the neoliberal characteristics that controlled ELE participants and (re)produced inequalities.


The 1992 and 2000 syllabuses share a similar structure as the 1988 version, containing ‘preface, teaching objectives, teaching requirements, teaching contents, issues that should be paid attention to in teaching and appendices.’ Like the previous group of syllabuses, the 1992 and 2000 syllabuses represent revised editions of the 1988 syllabus. However, compared to the previous group, the Nine-year Compulsory Education Full-time Junior Secondary School English Syllabuses underwent significant changes. To interpret these syllabuses descriptively and representatively, I will discuss the structure, main contents, characteristic language and other forms of discourse in these policies based on the original documents. For the social and deconstructive interpretation of this group of syllabuses, I summarise three themes that have similarities to and differences from those three themes in previous syllabuses: ELE for modernisation and globalisation, developing Suzhi (quality) education in ELE, and promoting Sixiang and emotional education through ELE.

5.3.1 Descriptive and Representative Interpretation

The 1988 syllabus was the first ELE syllabus specifically designed for the Nine-Year Compulsory Education in China plan after the Compulsory Education Law was enacted in 1986. Its design was based on the requirements of the Compulsory Education Full-time primary school and Junior Secondary School Teaching Plan (trial version) (1988, MOE) for syllabuses in all subjects, including English. Apart from the preface, it was divided into four sections that differed from the sections in previous syllabuses. The ‘teaching objectives and requirements’ section was divided into two, the ‘teaching principles’ and ‘teaching methods’ sections were deleted and the ‘teaching contents’ of every school grade are no longer presented respectively. Instead of providing general methods for teaching every language skill and every textbook, the
1988 syllabus sets out qualitative and quantitative requirements for listening, speaking, reading, writing, phonetics, vocabulary and grammar. For example, it requires students to acquire 70% in listening, with a speaking rate of 100-110 words per minute when they finish junior secondary school. Secondly, the Functional-Notional Approach (FNA) teaching methods are introduced in the teaching content, officially introducing a specific teaching method for the first time in China’s language syllabus. According to Demirbüken (2013), FNA emphasises linguistic functions that reveal the purposes for which language is used in real-life situations. Teachers need to choose a situation and then teach the corresponding approaches for students to communicate in that situation. Williams (2018) explains that FNA adopts Halliday’s social-semiotic system and Austin’s speech act theory to achieve the aim of communication in language education.

Meanwhile, a section on ‘issues that should be paid attention to in teaching’ was added to explain the relationships between ELE and Sixiang (ideological) education, communication abilities, how to acquire different language skills, the use of the mother language in teaching, relationships between teachers and students and between classroom teaching and outdoor activities, improving teaching quality through language materials, language practices and creating an English speaking environment. Wang (2010) claims that by discussing these issues in this added section of the 1988 syllabus, Chinese ELE syllabuses started to explore ways of improving students’ English language communication competence instead of focusing solely on teaching language skills.

The 1992 syllabus also focuses on students’ communication competence. Communication terms are listed in the appendices as ‘Daily Expressions in Communication’ instead of FNA Terms. However, the terms on the list have not changed significantly, and the syllabus contained the same preface and four sections as the 1988 syllabus, although it had an addition named ‘examination and evaluation’ added after the ‘issues … in teaching’ section. Wang (2010) believes that this section represented an attempt to provide new assessment standards for ELE instead of the traditional ones focusing only on language knowledge. In other words, the syllabus aimed to improve students’ competence in language communication. The most important change in this syllabus was the division of teaching requirements, setting out two levels of requirements for teachers in different areas to meet. Level 2 includes more listening, speaking, reading, writing, phonetics, vocabulary and grammar.
requirements than Level 1 and was therefore more difficult. The two-level design aimed to adapt to different linguistic proficiencies of students in different areas (Wang, 2010; Yi, 2010). The first level was designed for students from schools in underdeveloped economic areas and in schools suffering disadvantaged conditions. Students in these categories needed to meet Level 1 requirements after two years of ELE starting from the first grade of junior secondary school. Whether students needed to continue learning to meet the Level 2 requirements depended on the specific situation of different areas, which the local education department decided.

Compared to the two-way organisation of syllabuses in the previous group, the two-level requirement frame removed ELE from certain schools in disadvantaged areas, establishing unequal access to ELE from the beginning. According to Wu et al. (1993), many researchers in China believe that disparities in educational outcomes in different areas in China resulted from adopting marketised strategies in education after the Reform and Opening-up, including this two-level requirement frame. At the end of the ‘examinations and evaluation’ section, the syllabus clearly says that only students who reached Level 2 could take the senior secondary school entrance examination, meaning that students in areas choosing not to provide Level 2 ELE did not have the chance to continue their studies after compulsory education. The uneven development of education would therefore inevitably (re)produce gaps in social, economic and cultural development between different areas.

The 2000 syllabus still adopted the two-level requirement frame in the ‘teaching content’ section. According to Zeng and Wang (2018), the 2000 syllabus significantly revised teaching objectives, requirements and teaching assessments because it needed to meet the need for education reform in the 1990s for Suzhi (quality) education based on the reflections of teachers’ and students’ eight-year experience of the 1992 syllabus. The 2000 syllabus, like the 1992 syllabus, comprised a preface and five main sections. The fifth section, ‘examinations and evaluation’, was renamed ‘teaching assessment’, and a new list of topics was added after the appendices. The modifications to this syllabus’s ‘teaching objectives’ covers recommendations for intercultural awareness. One objective of learning English language knowledge and skills is described as ‘knowing the cultural differences, cultivating patriotism, and increasing world awareness’ (PEP, 2000 in PEP, 2001, p. 472-473). In the second part of the teaching requirements section, the explanation of teaching requirements echoes
Wu’s (2001) interpretation of culture in citizenship education, saying that students should ‘have a certain sense of cross-cultural communication’ and ‘adopt a respectful and tolerant attitude towards foreign cultures’ (PEP, 2000 in PEP, 2001, p. 473).

A further characteristic of this syllabus was its focus on students’ position in the ELE classroom. The syllabus encouraged students’ critical thinking abilities in the ELE classroom in its preface. In the ‘issues…in teaching’ section, the syllabus discussed helping students to position themselves as active subjects in ELE and asked teachers to change their position from teaching to guiding. The syllabus asked teachers to ‘respect students’ individual differences…help students explore their own learning methods… develop students’ autonomy in learning’ (PEP, 2000 in PEP, 2001, p. 476). In earlier syllabuses, teachers played the dominant role in the classroom, and students learned what teachers and examinations chose for them. Yi (2010) claims that this modification in the 2000 syllabus encouraged students to develop their own interests in English and effectively avoided cramming in the learning process.

The last important characteristic of the 2000 syllabus was the emergence of lifelong learning. The emphasis on lifelong learning was found in the preface and the teaching objectives section. Lifelong learning was connected to the ‘sustainable development of students’ (PEP, 2000 in PEP, 2001, p. 473). In the fourth section, ‘issues…in teaching’, the 2000 syllabus claimed that ELE should ‘enable students to acquire the basic knowledge and basic skills of English required by a knowledge society…cultivate the ability of lifelong learning’ (PEP, 2000 in PEP 2001, p. 475-476). Based on Bourdieuan capital theory, sustainable development and a knowledge society were seen as strategies to accumulate social and cultural capital for economic development. According to Kaščák and Pupala (2011), lifelong learning is a common neoliberalist strategy to implant itself as a universal phenomenon in educational policies.

From the descriptive and representative interpretation of syllabuses in this group, it is reasonable to conclude that they made noticeable changes in their structures and contents compared with previous versions. However, these changes to some extent inherited and developed neoliberal connotations from three approaches – ELE for modernisation and globalisation, developing Suzhi (quality) education in ELE, and promoting Sixiang education through ELE.
5.3.2 Social and Deconstructive Interpretation

The syllabuses in this group portrayed ELE as an instrument for modernisation and globalisation, although the wording changed along the way. The 1988 syllabus was the first ELE syllabus after the Nine-year Compulsory Education (NCE) was enacted in 1986. It shared the same social background as the 1986 syllabus, but the ‘general teaching objectives and requirements’ section was renamed as the ‘preface’ in this group of syllabuses, changing the portrayal of ELE from requirements to the introduction. The ‘preface’ to the 1988 syllabus says:

Extract 9:

Education must be oriented toward modernisation, the world and the future... A foreign language is an important tool for international communication, and it promotes the development of the economy, science and culture in both our country and the world. To meet the needs of our country’s implementation of the Reform and Opening-up policy and the acceleration of socialist modernisation, as many people as possible should master some foreign languages to varying degrees.

(PEP, 1988, in PEP, 2001, p. 203)

This extract shows that the 1988 syllabus followed the example of previous syllabus by focusing on the instrumental meaning of ELE in developing socialist modernisation. The emphasis on economic development was clearly written in the syllabus for the first time, combined with scientific and cultural development. This indicates that the syllabus for the NCE was aimed at producing linguistic capital that could be transformed into different forms of capital instead of only focusing on economic and political development. The extract points out that English language is important to the development of China and the world. This indicates that as well as seeking international communication in the early years of Reform and Opening-up, the government began to position China as a part of the world, following the global English ideology that set English as a powerful form of global linguistic capital that dominated global communications in sciences and jobs (Fishman, 1996). Li (1994) claims that socialist modernisation refers to Deng’s Four Modernisations in agriculture, industry, national defence, and science and technology. The introduction of the English language thus strengthened the significance of ELE in developing socialist modernisation by positioning China’s development as an aspect of global development. According to Ball et al. (2010), this globalised view of education derives from neoliberal ideologies. The increasing needs of the neoliberal global market produced global
trends and pressures within regional, national and local education systems, leading to greater efforts to enter the global economic and political system. The 1988 syllabus began to give ELE the dual meaning of national instrument for economic development and linguistic capital for global integration, with both meanings driven by the prevalence of neoliberalism. However, in the ‘preface’ of the 1992 syllabus, the sentence ‘it promotes the development of the economy, science, and culture in both our country and the world’ was deleted. The ‘preface’ of the 1992 syllabus says:

Extract 10:

A foreign language is an important tool for international communication, and it promotes the development of the economy, science and culture in both our country and the world. To meet the needs of our country’s implementation of the opening-up policy and the acceleration of socialist modernisation, as many people as possible should master some foreign languages to varying degrees.

(PEP, 1992, in PEP, 2001, p. 252)

The deletion of these words shows the avoidance of linking the development of globalisation in every sphere of life with ELE and implies a resistance to the worldwide influence of economic and political development on education, which Block (2018) believes is a consequence of neoliberalism. However, this syllabus required ELE to play an essential role in building a modernised socialist country. Following Li (1994), I also claim that economic development is one of the most important factors of modernisation in the Chinese context. The concept of modernisation itself is deeply rooted in neoliberalism. Shcherbak’s (2018) study on the relationship between the modernisation hypothesis and neoliberalism suggests that modernisation is formulated to meet the requirements of neoliberal ideas, such as advocacy of individual benefits and the marketisation of every sphere in social lives to encourage economic improvement. According to Coffey and Marston (2013), instead of directly instructing people on the economic and social benefits of English as a global language, modernisation policies involve individuals in neoliberal-oriented development more covertly. The last sentence of the extract says: ‘as many people as possible should master some foreign languages’, meaning that resistance to the worldwide influence of economic and political development on education may be fruitless. In the 2000 syllabus, the expressions related to economic development and globalisation came back into the discussion:
Extract 11:

In today’s world, science and information technology are changing every day. The informatisation of social life and the globalisation of economic activities make foreign languages, especially English, increasingly become an important tool for our country to open up to the outside world and communicate with other countries. Learning and mastering a foreign language is one of the basic requirements for citizens of the twenty-first century...so that students can meet the needs of our country’s social, economic, scientific and technological development and international exchanges.

(PEP, 2000 in PEP, 2001, p. 472)

One possible reason for the 1992 syllabus hiding the economic and global implications of ELE may be the 1989 students’ political movement. China’s Reform and Opening-up policy was criticised for only focusing on economic development and its political tendencies toward capitalism, resulting in a lack of ideological and political loyalty to socialism (Chang, 2006). Economic ideas and related global context were removed from the 1992 syllabus, but along with the increasing economic and political benefits of embracing globalisation, the Chinese government reclaimed and consolidated the position of ELE in modernisation and globalisation in the 2000 syllabus. For the first time, globalisation appears in the ELE syllabus as an instructive definition.

This syllabus was revised again at the end of the twentieth century. China was set to join the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in 2001 – an organisation created for the neoliberal world market (Zajda, 2015). Pan (2015) claims that the WTO requires worldwide communication between countries in economic activities and many other fields, which inevitably influenced the language syllabus. English was portrayed as the language of global economic integration, globalisation and technological development, formulating the status of ELE as an interrelated social, economic and political force and type of capital for China and its citizens. In general, the syllabuses in this group enhanced ELE’s instrumentalism for socialist modernisation by involving ELE in globalisation. As modernisation and globalisation were derived from neoliberalism to achieve the growing demands of neoliberal markets, the syllabuses in this group to some extent (re)produced neoliberal ideologies in ELE. More evidence can be found in their descriptions related to Suzhi (quality) education.

In Section 5.2.2, Suzhi (quality) education was discussed as a new generation in learning, in which four qualities were seen to promote Suzhi education in ELE. Suzhi education was defined by the MOE as nurturing talents through comprehensive
development of morality, intelligence, physical education, art and labour. *Suzhi* education asks for a multidimensional assessment of students instead of depending on academic grades. Syllabuses in this group promoted *Suzhi* education in ELE by relating it to citizenship through pragmatic teaching approaches and students’ autonomy. The 1988 syllabus ran in parallel with the 1986 and 1990 syllabuses for a while, reflecting similarities with these syllabuses. In the preface of the 1988 syllabus, ELE was linked with the new generation of four qualities.

**Extract 12:**

To build our country into a highly civilised and highly democratic socialist modern nation, education must implement a policy of the well-rounded development of morality, intelligence, physique and aesthetics… At the same time, students should be trained to be socialist citizens who have lofty ideals, moral integrity, good education, and a strong sense of discipline to improve the ideological and moral qualities and the scientific and cultural qualities of the entire Chinese nation.

(PEP, 1988, in PEP, 2001, p. 203)

As discussed in Section 5.2.2, the requirements of *Suzhi* (quality) education were shaped by a new generation with four qualities (lofty ideals, moral integrity, good education and a strong sense of discipline). Although the four qualities conveyed socialist connotations, they worked to cultivate talents for economic development in the global market. In the extract above, the policy of well-rounded development of morality, intelligence, physique and aesthetics was added. Moral, intelligent, physical, and aesthetic education is called *Siyu* in Chinese, referring to four aspects of education. *Siyu* looks like a Chinese concept because it is an acronym composed of a number and a Chinese abbreviation, like many Chinese political slogans. However, it was based on Western philosophies. The first time the concept of *Siyu* (morality, intelligence, physique and aesthetics) was adopted in educational discourse in China was in *Opinions on Education Policy* (Cai, 1912). This article was the first essay in China to criticise traditional education policies and advocate Western educational ideas. He (2010) argues that involving morality, intelligence, physique and aesthetics (particularly aesthetics) in education breaks through the talent training model of traditional Chinese society and reflects the active absorption of Western educational ideas.

In the Western context, Spencer (1929) summarises the thoughts of philosophers in different times regarding physical, intelligent, and moral education, while Schiller
(1784/2002) emphasised how important aesthetics are in education. These European ideas were presented in the form of Chinese slogans combined with Deng’s four qualities in the 1988 syllabus. Yi (2010) and Wang (2010) see this syllabus as the outcome of 1985 educational reforms and as one of the outcomes of the Reform and Opening-up, as the syllabus is open to Western ideas. It is reasonable to conclude that the reforms provided the ELE syllabus in China with access to Western educational thoughts and methods – although these thoughts were presented in a Chinese formulation.

Gao (2020) analyses the conflicts in communication between Chinese and Western educational philosophies, claiming that Western educational ideas were transplanted into the Chinese education context from the 1980s. Referring to Huntington (1991), Gao concludes that Western educational approaches are related to classic and modern philosophy in Europe, America and other parts of the world that followed the path of European civilisation and liberalism. Meanwhile, Wu (2001) argues that Chinese educational approaches should always be based on Chinese social and cultural contexts, and that Western educational ideas need to be redefined and reframed by combining elements of Chinese philosophy to adapt to the Chinese context. The 1988 syllabus shows this reframing of Western ideas to adapt to the Chinese context. The formulation can also be used to reduce Western influences on ELE policies. In this syllabus, we can infer that Suzhi (quality) education started to include Western educational thoughts, but adapted to Chinese characteristics. This echoes Deng’s ideas in the Reform and Opening-up, which redefined neoliberal ideas as socialism with Chinese characteristics.

This can also be inferred from the use of the phrase ‘socialist citizens’ before describing the new generation of four qualities. The phrase ‘[s]tudents should be trained to be socialist citizens’ shows that education should also include citizenship education. Crick (1999) believes that citizenship education is a means of promoting civic engagement and democratic involvement. Democracies need active, informed and responsible citizens who are willing and able to take responsibility for themselves and their communities and contribute to the political process. Democracies are closely related to Western political ideas, and based on the previous analysis of neoliberalism from the Foucauldian approach, it is reasonable to assume that citizenship education accords with training students to accept produced subjectivities such as responsibility
for achieving different sorts of capital in the neoliberal global market for themselves and the nation. According to Yi (2010), this aspect of Suzhi education cultivates students’ sense of responsibility for the community and the country. However, Whiteley (2005) argues that citizenship education helps neoliberalism build and develop civically engaged subjects through social capital exchanges in their communities. Adding the adjective ‘socialist’ before citizens is a way of weakening the Western tone in the syllabus and emphasises the objective of citizenship to contribute to socialist modernisation through ELE. Therefore, although Western ideas adopted by Suzhi education in the 1988 syllabus were glossed over using Chinese and socialist wording, they still show the influence of Westernised educational ideas and the neoliberal subjectification of citizens in China’s ELE syllabus.

The expression of Suzhi education in the preface of the 1992 syllabus remains the same as the 1988 syllabus, although there are minor changes. The preface says: ‘education must implement the policy of well-rounded development of morality, intelligence, physique’ (PEP, 1992, in PEP, 2000, p. 252). The word ‘aesthetics’ in the 1988 syllabus was removed from the requirements of well-rounded development in the 1992 syllabus. As I discussed above, moral, intelligent, physical and aesthetic education (Siyu) may be derived from Western education philosophy in the 1988 syllabus, which indicates a combination of Western ideas and a Chinese way of expressing them. Here, removing aesthetics changed the requirements into morality, intelligence and physique, which echo the requirements of Sanhao students. Sanhao (Three Good) Students is a form of student honour in the PRC. According to Chairman Mao’s speech in 1953, Sanhao students should be good in morality, studiousness and health. The requirements for Sanhao students were confirmed as good morality, intelligence and physique by the MOE and the Communist Youth League of China (Moe.gov.cn, 1982). Changing Siyu to Sanhao may represent a return to Chinese political intentions through a Western tendency in Suzhi, and shows that the 1992 syllabus attempted to build connections between Suzhi education and the nation’s political requirements through ELE.

The resistance or removal of Western ideas may also relate to the 1989 students’ political movement. According to Zhang’s (2020) analysis, the CPC government believed that education reform in that period was responsible for the 1989 political movement because it promoted Western capitalist ideas rather than ideological and
political loyalty to socialism. Wei (2004) shows that Sanhao was adopted in education in 1954 but was abolished during the Cultural Revolution. It was reclaimed at the beginning of the 1980s, then in the 1990s the relevant benefits – including the right to choose further studies – started to be related to Sanhao students. The selection of ‘three good students’ was carried out in primary and secondary schools in China. Wang (2009) argues that Sanhao became the ambition of students, and become synonymous with the concept of a ‘good child’ and a ‘good student’ in China during this period. A certain subjectivity was created for students to align themselves by honouring Sanhao students so that the governance of students’ ideological understanding of ELE could be achieved through Sanhao and Suzhi education. The following extract shows that the 2000 syllabus continues to emphasise the Sanhao requirements:

**Extract 13:**

English language education in the compulsory education stage must implement the policy of well-rounded development of morality, intelligence and physique and be oriented towards modernisation, the world and the future. It should focus on cultivating students’ innovative spirit and practical abilities, thereby comprehensively promoting Suzhi (quality) education...English language should help develop students’ ability to think proactively and expand their social and scientific knowledge...so that they can adapt to the needs of our country’s social, economic and technological development and international exchanges. English language education should be oriented to all students, strive to create conditions for the full development of each student and lay the foundation for students’ lifelong learning.

(PEP, 2000, in PEP, 2001, p. 472)

This extract emphasises what ELE has to do to promote Suzhi education. The need for the well-rounded development of morality, intelligence and physique came to be specifically aligned to ELE rather than the general education field by this syllabus, showing that Sanhao students and Suzhi education had been implemented in every subject in compulsory education and that the requirements of Sanhao students and Suzhi education could relate to the characteristics of various subjects. In ELE, these requirements related to ‘the needs of our country’s social, economic, technological development and international exchanges’. As discussed in the previous section, ELE for social-economic development and international exchanges represents the neoliberalised understanding of ELE as an instrument that (re)produces subjectivities for students to compete for themselves and the nation in the neoliberal global market. By aligning themselves with ELE and neoliberal instrumentalisation, Sanhao students
and Suzhi education gained neoliberal connotations, echoing my discussion in Chapter 5, Section 5.2.2. Suzhi education is a way of producing ‘talents’ who are acceptable to the neoliberal market, thus indicating a marketised exchange of human capital.

This argument can be strengthened by the changing of Sanhao students in China. According to the MOE (2001), based on provincial Sanhao students selected at the secondary school stage, in which outstanding students are chosen and offered exemptions from the NCEE. Gu (2004) points out that the selection of Sanhao tags students as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ in a simplified way. Jia (2012) argues that the selection of Sanhao students has become alienated from education and has become a shortcut for students to gain a better further education. She indicates that many parents spend a great deal of money on extra classes for their children to gain qualifications in different extracurricular activities to improve their chances of winning the title of Sanhao. On one hand, according to Bourdieu (1989, 1991, 1993) and Darvin and Norton (2015), this (re)produces educational inequality among students who possess different levels of economic and social capital. On the other, involving competition shows the adoption of neoliberal market theory in education. The requirements of Sanhao and Suzhi education in the 2000 syllabus therefore show that neoliberal ideas have constantly been reinforced in ELE syllabuses at the compulsory education stage in China.

Extract 13 shows that cultivating ‘students’ innovative spirit and practical ability’ and developing ‘students’ ability to think proactively’ through ELE is to ‘comprehensively promote Suzhi (quality) education’ in the 2000 syllabus. One of the most important social-driven forces in formulating ELE syllabuses in this period was the publication of educational reform guidelines, especially the CPC’s 1999 Decision on Deepening Education Reform and Comprehensively Improving Suzhi (Quality) Education. The 2000 syllabus was specifically revised to advocate quality education. In the descriptive and representative interpretation of this syllabus, I believe that this syllabus began to focus on students’ practical abilities and autonomy in ELE. This development reflects the intention to improve students’ practical linguistic competence through FNA since the 1988 syllabus. In the 1992 syllabus, new assessment standards were carried out to reclaim the importance of students’ practical competence. Subsequently, in the ‘preface’ (Extract 13), the ‘teaching objectivities’, ‘teaching requirements’, ‘issues…in
teaching’, and ‘teaching assessment’ of the 2000 syllabus repeatedly stressed students’ well-rounded development, creative, practical and critical abilities and their autonomy.

Students’ autonomy in the ELE syllabuses of this period was portrayed as their interest in the English language, developing their learning strategies and taking part in authentic communicative activities. According to Olivier (2003), the subject was discursively constructed. The concept of students as subjects and their subjectivity in learning processes can be discursively constructed by studying classroom activities under the requirements of each syllabus, which shows that their autonomy was restricted by the classroom’s ELE syllabuses and English language practices. In the syllabuses of this period, the instrumentalism of English, as discussed in previous sections, leads to a focus on effective communication skills in readiness for economic success (Robichaud & Schutter, 2012). If teachers conduct their teaching as the syllabus suggests, students’ autonomy will be controlled by the way the syllabuses describe autonomy. From the Foucauldian approach, students’ autonomy would be restricted to aligning themselves with subjectivities created in the syllabuses. In this way, students may not be directly controlled by teachers in the classroom, but neoliberalism could always restrict their autonomy by creating neoliberal subjectivities in ELE syllabuses through education policies.

The 2000 syllabus also links lifelong learning to Suzhi education. Extract 13 shows that ELE should create conditions for each student’s development and lay a foundation for students’ lifelong learning. In other parts of this syllabus, as presented in the descriptive and representative analysis, lifelong learning is described as cultivating the sustainable development of students for a knowledge society. Holford (2016) argues that lifelong learning is closely related to knowledge societies and sustainable human development, a form of business discourse strongly influenced by neoliberal ideas. Olssen (2006) explains the relationship between neoliberalism and lifelong learning, arguing that lifelong learning is a technology of flexible adaptation which ensures that the responsibility for employment and the stability of certain aspects of economic and social life belong to individuals themselves. It attempts to restructure the context of education from a public system to an automatic system based on the ready availability of information and skills.
Adopting Althusser’s perspective, learners have become informative and skilful subjects waiting to be hailed by neoliberal ideas in their learning process and employment. Fleming (2010) believes that in a knowledge economy the sustainable development of human resources means that workers should be continually trained and educated to meet their labour needs so that they gain more skills. However, it is also a way of (re)producing skilled workers who can meet the economy’s specific and often shifting needs. According to this syllabus, adopting lifelong learning to stress the importance of Suzhi education enhances neoliberal impacts on ELE, describing ELE as a way for students to gain lifelong benefits through constant development. However, this embodiment of neoliberal ideologies has imperceptibly turned students from language learners into controlled, responsible and skilful subjects through quality education.

In the analysis of ELE syllabuses in Section 5.2, I discussed how Suzhi education combines with Zhengzhi (political) education as a facet of Sixiang (ideological) education. In syllabuses of this period, since the aim of educational reform changed to promoting Suzhi education (MOE, 1999), Sixiang education was gradually weakened and portrayed as social and emotional education for students to cultivate their cultural awareness, allowing it to become a factor of Suzhi education for students’ well-rounded development. The 1988 syllabus was the first ELE syllabus for the nine-year compulsory education system, acting as the syllabus for the transitional period between the 1986 and 1990 syllabuses. The Sixiang education in the 1988 syllabus showed a similarity to the 1986 syllabus in the ‘issues…in teaching’ section:

**Extract 14:**

Issues that should be paid attention to in teaching:

1. Follow the rules of language teaching and integrate Sixiang education into language teaching.

   The task of English teaching is to cultivate students’ ability to communicate in English through basic training. Only in accordance with the requirements of English teaching rules can we effectively explain basic knowledge, carry out basic training and cultivate listening, speaking, reading and writing skills. The ideological and moral factors should penetrate the content of teaching, and Sixiang (ideological) education should be integrated into language education. With the continuous growth of students’ knowledge, skills and abilities, their ideology and morality will also be influenced imperceptibly. Therefore, the language materials used in English teaching should not only conform to the rules of language teaching but also have healthy content in order to help students establish correct thoughts and cultivate good morals.

   (PEP, 1988, in PEP, 2001, p. 205)
In the 1986 syllabus, the ‘follow the rules of language teaching and integrate Sixiang education into language teaching’ excerpt belongs in the ‘teaching principles’ section. However, in the 1988 syllabus, this sentence was moved to the ‘issues…in teaching’ section. Changing the wording from ‘principles’ to ‘issues that should be paid attention’ turns the integration of Sixiang education and language teaching into a suggestion rather than one of the foundations of ELE. This weakens the mandatory tone of the syllabus, hiding the intention to govern education participants in practice. The content under this ‘issue’ in the 1988 syllabus focused on students’ communicative abilities instead of reading practices in the 1986 syllabus, echoing the need for students’ practical abilities in English and autonomy under Suzhi education. The extract shows that educational practices will imperceptibly influence students’ ideology and morality. The emphasis on English communicative practices thus conveys the Sixiang (ideology) that the syllabus intended to adopt. However, like the 1986 syllabus, this syllabus still uses the words ‘healthy’, ‘correct’, and ‘good’ to describe the Sixiang (ideology) education it preferred.

In terms of judging ‘healthy’, ‘correct’ and ‘good’ in the 1988 syllabus, the description of socialist citizens in the ‘preface’ (Extract 12) set the standards. The general requirement of education was to nurture well-rounded socialist citizens with ideological and moral as well as scientific and cultural qualities for the Chinese nation. The specific requirement of ELE was to develop students’ intelligence, broaden their horizons and improve cultural awareness. ‘Healthy’, ‘correct’ and ‘good’ students should therefore meet the requirements of socialist citizens. As discussed at the beginning of Section 5.3.2, the ELE syllabus portrayed the subjectivity of the socialist citizen for students to align and contribute to, making students take responsibility for national development under neoliberal logic. In the 1988 syllabus, Sixiang education was weakened through wording and by linking it to students’ self-development and their responsibility for the nation. Nevertheless, the content of Sixiang education still conveyed a tendency to portray ELE as an instrument of individual and national development. The neoliberal connotation in the images and subjectivities of ‘healthy’, ‘correct’, and ‘good’ students in the syllabus displays the contradiction between enforcing socialist beliefs and encouraging economic development in the neoliberal global market.
In the 1992 syllabus, *Sixiang* education was still the first part of the ‘issues…in teaching’ section, but its content was modified. Based on the 1988 syllabus, ‘correctly understand the world and enhance the understanding of English-speaking countries’ culture’ was added to the 1992 syllabus after ‘follow the rules of language teaching and integrate Sixiang education into language teaching’ (PEP, 1992, in PEP, 2001, p. 255). *Sixiang* Education was connected to culture in the ELE syllabuses for the first time. According to the editors’ interpretation of the ELE syllabuses, Chen et al. (2002) claim that adopting cultural education in the ELE syllabus aimed to deepen students’ understanding of language, broaden their horizons, enhance international understanding and help them better understand Chinese national culture.

In Section 5.3.2, I discussed that *Suzhi* education in ELE, as a part of *Sixiang* education, contributes to the neoliberal political governance of individuals through citizenship education. In the 1922 syllabus, linking *Sixiang* education with culture to enhance students’ international understanding demonstrated a combination of *Sixiang* education and citizenship education. Based on Byram’s (2008a) analysis of intercultural citizenship, the focus on culture in this syllabus revealed an educational response to internalisation in ELE in China. Byram (2008a) believes that people acquire linguistic, sociolinguistic and discourse competencies through language education to become intercultural speakers mediating between cultures of different nation-states as embodied in those countries’ languages. Byram (2008a) considers that intercultural speakers could engage in international social, economic and political communications using a critical cultural awareness that encourages evaluation of their own and others’ ideologies. In the ‘teaching objectives’ section of the 1992 syllabus, ELE aimed to cultivate talents for ‘international information and international communication’ (PEP, 1992, in PEP, 2001, p. 252). Meanwhile, the ‘issues…in teaching’ section showed that ‘understanding of English-speaking countries’ culture’ could teach students about other countries and ‘improve understanding of our [Chinese] culture’ (ibid. p. 252 & 255). The 1992 syllabus therefore aligned with Byram’s concept of language education for intercultural citizenship and worked towards making ELE contribute to China’s international communication needs.

However, ‘English-speaking countries’ culture’ in the syllabus and Byram’s (2008b) concept of cultures of different nation-states showed an essentialist view of culture by identifying culture and individuals by their nationalities and assuming that English-
speaking countries and people in one nation-state take on the same essence. Holliday (2005) argues that the essentialist view of culture is problematic because it defines and constrains people’s behaviour according to the culture in which they live, thus transferring agency from the individual to the culture. The essentialist view of culture and the call for critical awareness in intercultural citizenship are mutually contradictory, and essentialism results in a simplified categorisation of people, causing boundaries, hierarchies and discrimination between different groups and leading to colonialism by describing exotic cultures as deficient (Dervin, 2016; Holliday, 2019; Pennycook, 2006; Phillips, 2010). However, critical intercultural awareness advocates a reflective, exploratory, dialogic and active stance toward other cultures (Byram, 2008a; Guilherme, 2002). Critical intercultural awareness may not contribute to individuals’ critical assessment of cultures or communication between different cultures when the essentialist view reduces individuals’ agency and constructs unequal cultural groups. Therefore, rather than cultivating students’ intercultural citizenship for international communication, the 1992 syllabus was in danger of slipping into essentialism and constraining ELE participants’ agency.

The division between ‘English-speaking countries’ and ‘our nation’ (China) shows the construction of a foreign Other in the 1992 syllabus. According to Holliday (2019), the Other is constructed in opposition to the familiar self, and is often falsely related to negative or exotic characteristics that oppose the positive characteristics of the Self. In Orientalism, Said (1978) argues that the Western Self takes its ‘superior’ civilisation as a standard by which to measure the Oriental Other. By Othering non-Western cultures, the Western cultural hegemony reduces the people, places and things of the Eastern world to inferiority, thereby realising its cultural imperialism in non-Western countries. Meanwhile, Holliday (2019) argues that ‘Self and the Other’ is not unidirectional. The 1992 syllabus showed how ELE in China essentialises its own cultural identity to acquire power against ‘English-speaking countries’.

The essentialist view of culture in the syllabus constructed a distinction between the Self (Chinese culture) and the Other (English-speaking countries’ culture as a whole). In order to mitigate the negative or exotic characteristics of otherization, the 1992 syllabus portrayed learning the Other’s culture as a means of developing the Self. At the same time, to better understand Chinese culture through Sixiang education, the 1992 syllabus claimed that by learning English, students should receive an ‘education
for patriotism and socialism’ (PEP, 1992, in PEP, 2001, p. 252). According to Anderson (1983), this syllabus tried to construct an imagined national-level community with a homogeneous Chinese culture, thereby achieving its political aims of enhancing patriotism and socialism.

At first glance, it seems that the 1992 syllabus Otherises English-speaking countries to benefit the Self. However, as Holliday (2019) argues, the desire to assert national identity presents an over-simplified reality that feeds into English-speaking countries’ Othering of non-native English-speaking countries because the ‘Other and Self’ logic is accepted and generalised. The syllabus’s desire to assert national identity also contributes to the adoption of hegemony and governance that underpins the Self and Others, since in this way governments and institutions reduce anybody’s agency to an imagined national identity, then speak for them, represent them and explain them to others (Baumann, 1996). Thus in the 1992 syllabus, when the problematic view of ‘English-speaking countries’ culture’ was portrayed as a means to help students get to know the world correctly, the understanding of culture may give students a homogenised idea of English-speaking countries, causing them to believe that those countries are superior to their own. So instead of mitigating the influence of English-speaking countries, when the syllabus took the essentialist view of culture for developing nationalism, it made ELE participants more easily controlled by the ideology conveyed in the syllabus.

Cultural education was strengthened in the 2000 syllabus. For the first time, the ELE syllabus stated that ELE should ‘enrich students’ cultural experiences’ and ‘students should have cross-cultural awareness, respecting and tolerating foreign cultures’ (PEP, 2000, in PEP, 2001, p. 472-473). In the ‘issue…in teaching’ section, the relationship between foreign cultures and Chinese culture was interpreted further:

**Extract 15:**

1. Establishing the View of English Language Education in Line with the Spirit of Suzhi Education

   English teaching should be based on the development of students and focus on cultivating students’ spirit and practical abilities so that they can acquire the basic knowledge and skills of English needed to adapt to the learning society. ELE should provide students with healthy and interesting language materials and design language contexts that are as realistic as possible, educate students on ideology and morality, cultivate students’ thinking ability, develop students’ ability to obtain and process information in English and cultivate students’ good mental health and lifelong learning ability in English language learning. Teaching should help students
to understand and respect the cultures of other countries, guide them to love and promote the culture of the motherland, develop students’ personalities and cultivate their spirit of cooperation and social awareness. (PEP, 2000, in PEP, 2001, p. 475-476)

This extract parallels respect for foreign cultures and love of national culture. The division of foreign culture and national culture still showed the Self and Other logic, following an essentialist view of culture. However, associated with ‘cross-cultural awareness’ in the ‘teaching requirements’ part of the syllabus, the idea of cultural education in this syllabus encouraged cross-cultural mediation between foreign and national cultures. The syllabus encouraged respect and tolerance for foreign cultures, echoing Byram’s (2003, 2008b) ideas of encouraging language learners to act as mediators to analyse how underlying values, beliefs and attitudes direct the behaviours of the cultural Other, enabling learners to demonstrate flexibility and tolerance towards otherness.

Dasli (2019) argues that tolerance hides an asymmetric power relationship between the tolerator and the tolerated, so when the 2000 syllabus encouraged students to respect and tolerate foreign cultures, it constructed a power relationship between foreign and Chinese cultures. Taking the position of tolerator, the 2000 syllabus indicated that Chinese culture could be the stronger party that chooses not to interfere with the disapproved behaviours of foreign cultures (ibid.). Instead of being the mediator between foreign and national cultures, ELE learners under the syllabus were constructed as members of the imagined national community who received cultural education to promote the ‘culture of the motherland’ and national development. The political concepts were removed from this syllabus, but the opposition between Other and Self conveyed by the cultural education in ELE still made cultural education more like Sixiang education, rather than improving cross-cultural awareness.

Another feature of Sixiang education in this syllabus was social and emotional education, which was introduced in the ‘preface’ of the 1992 syllabus, claiming that ELE was good for conducting ‘Sixiang (ideological) and emotional education’ (PEP, 1992, in PEP, 2001, p. 252). However, there was no explanation of what emotional education means in the 1992 syllabus. In the 2000 syllabus, emotional education was developed into social and emotional education and interpreted in different parts of the syllabuses as a process of learning to recognise and manage emotions, care about
others, make good decisions, behave ethically and responsibly, develop positive relationships and avoid negative behaviours (Elias et al., 2008).

In the ‘preface’, social and emotional education referred to improving students’ ethnic thoughts and behaviour. Then, in the ‘teaching objectivities’, it was presented as helping students ‘build confidence, develop their practical social ability, and improve their observation, memory, thinking and creative abilities through ELE’ (PEP, 2000, in PEP, 2001, p. 472-473). Extract 15 echoes these interpretations of social and emotional education in other sections by summarising that students should develop well-developed personalities, a spirit of cooperation and social awareness. The descriptions of different abilities besides English language abilities and cultural awareness all belong to social and emotional education in this extract.

Social and emotional education appears to encourage students to develop multiple abilities through ELE. However, Zins et al. (2004) point out that social and emotional learning (SEL) is crucial in improving students’ academic performance and lifelong learning as well as enhancing social-emotional development. They believe that SEL facilitates students’ learning and ultimate success in school, making it important to students’ long-term development because it is linked to behaviour that could educate students to become responsible, contributing citizens. SEL is therefore a strategy for regulating students’ academic performance, lifelong learning abilities and behaviour as good citizens. It is still a form of Sixiang education that aims to cultivate students for the nation’s social, economic and technological development oriented toward modernisation, the world and the future through ELE. Meanwhile, academic performance refers to accountability in the neoliberal evaluation system. Lifelong learning is an embodiment of neoliberalism that turns individuals into subjects with symbolic capital. A good citizen is a subjectivity created for individuals to align with to achieve the neoliberal governance of individuals. Therefore, SEL, as a part of Sixiang Education, is designed to improve students’ social and emotional competence in school and social life. Ultimately, it is also a discursive strategy of neoliberalism, turning students into ready subjects waiting to be manipulated by the neoliberal education system.

In summary, influenced by the 1989 students’ movement, the need to improve Sixiang education can be traced in the 1992 syllabus and in the 2000 syllabus, since it advocates the well-developed and well-behaved citizens. At the same time, the
educational reform to promote Suzhi (quality) education asks for students’ autonomy and multiple practical skills. ELE syllabuses in this period therefore adopted different concepts, such as culture, cross-cultural awareness and social and emotional education, to mitigate the political intentions of the ELE syllabuses. However, it still presents a contradiction in ELE syllabuses between insistence on socialist propaganda and reliance on neoliberal ideology for economic development and the governance of individuals. Looking back to the modernisation and Suzhi (quality) education in this period, globalisation, joining the WTO and the increasing international exchanges in different fields of life caused the ELE syllabuses to slide inevitably into the neoliberalised education system. Different subjectivities related to good or bad students, well-rounded development and well-behaved citizens under neoliberal ideologies kept (re)producing inequalities covertly.

5.4 English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education (2001 - 2022)

In 2001, the programmatic education policies formulated by the government to guide ELE at the basic school stage in China were renamed English Curriculum Standards. This was seen as an innovative change in policy following the Decision on the Reform and Development of Basic Education (MOE, 2001) to strengthen quality education. According to Gu (2021), the syllabuses were more like general plans for educational practice in schools across China, lacking flexibility in different contexts and for participants. Rather than setting specific requirements for educational practice, curriculum standards provide general descriptions of educational objectives, encouraging flexible designs based on different educational situations. According to Wu (2009), the curriculum standards were greatly expanded in the ELE field in content and functionality. The change from syllabuses to curriculum standards showed that ELE was moving from focusing on language teaching strategies to improving language skills by equipping individuals with language knowledge and the well-rounded personal qualities required by Suzhi education. The curriculum standards in this period changed greatly in terms of structure and content.

The first two versions of ELE curriculum standards shared a similar structure, including preface, course objectives, content standards, implementation suggestions and
appendices. Like previous syllabuses, the 2011 curriculum standards was a revised edition of the 2001 version. Although the 2022 version was a revised edition of the 2011 standards, it formed a ‘comprehensive improvement in educational ideas and instructions for cultivating language talents’ (Mao et al., 2022, p. 25). The 2022 version had a new structure and new contents, including preface, course nature, course philosophy, course objectivities, course contents, academic quality, curriculum Implementation and appendices. As I explained in the introduction of this chapter, an analysis of the 2001 and 2011 curriculum standards came before the 2022 version. To interpret the 2001 and 2011 curriculum standards descriptively and representatively, this analysis still focuses on the structure, main contents, characteristic language and other forms of discourse in the policies based on the original documents. For the social and deconstructive interpretation of both versions of curriculum standards, referring to previous analysis of ELE syllabuses and social-political changes in this period, this section introduces two further themes: instrumentalism and humanism. Interpretations of the 2022 curriculum standards are presented in comparison with the 2001 & 2011 versions at the end of the section to highlight similarities and differences and the possible future of ELE based on the 2022 ELE curriculum standards.

5.4.1 Descriptive and Representative Interpretation of 2001 & 2011 ELE Standards

In 2001, the national English language education syllabus was changed to the English curriculum standards, covering compulsory education and senior secondary education. The standards were formulated by the MOE and published by Beijing Normal University Publishing House (BNUPH). This was the first time an important language educational guidance document had not been published by PEP, the official educational institution in the CPC system (www.pep.com.cn). Unlike PEP, BNUPH belongs to the Beijing Normal University, one of China’s leading universities for training educators. Since Beijing Normal University is famous for academic studies in education and has many outstanding scholars in ELE, many of the 2001 curriculum standards editors came from academia (Chen et al., 2002). The change in publishing institution reflected the new curriculum standards’ requirements for professional academic instruction in formulating and implementing educational policies.
According to BNUPH (2001), the curriculum standard was new in terms of objectives, requirements and structure, and was seen as a teaching syllabus with very rich content in a new sense. The main parts of the standards, related to what and how to manage English courses with descriptive suggestions, showed that standards were formulated to guide the development of textbooks and teachers’ teaching practices with general instructions rather than specific rules. According to Gu (2013), the curriculum standards were a radical reform of old ELE ideas and were designed for educators to explore how to cultivate students’ language skills and reflect what teachers’ roles should be in practice.

Compared with the previous syllabuses, the preface of the 2011 standards is much longer and is divided into three subsections following a general introduction explaining why ELE is important for the ‘citizens’ Sužhi (quality) education’ (BNUPH, 2001, p. 1). The first subsection presented the ‘characteristics of the English course’, while the second listed six ‘basic educational beliefs in formulating standards’, such as ‘emphasise the learning process and pay attention to the practicality and application of language learning’ (BNUPH, 2001, p. 3). The third subsection explained that the rationale for designing the standards was the Scientific Outlook on Development and advanced theories of foreign language education. However, it did not explain what theories it refers to.

In the third subsection, ‘rationale for the design’, a nine-level structure of objectives for the English language course was provided to explain which level students should achieve at the end of elementary, junior and senior secondary education respectively (Figure 5.1). Students were required to finish the level 2 objectives by the end of elementary education, the level 5 objectives at the end of junior secondary school, and the level 8 objectives when graduating from senior secondary school. The specific objectives of each level were listed in the second part of the standards from the five dimensions shown in the pie chart (Figure 5.2).

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5 The Scientific Outlook on Development was a guiding socio-economic principle of the CPC proposed by former CPC leader Hu Jintao and his administration. It integrated ‘Marxism with the reality of contemporary China and with the underlying features of the new times, and it fully embodies the Marxist worldview on and methodology for development’ (Xinhua News Agency, 2012). The ideology was ratified into the CPC’s constitution at the 17th Party Congress in October 2007.
The 2011 edition of English curriculum standards was a revised version of the 2001 standards. Wu (2013) regards this edition as reflecting the 2001 standards based on ten years of practice and exploration in ELE. This edition is also split into five parts, from the ‘preface’ to ‘implementation suggestions’ and ‘appendices.’ The main content of each part was not changed significantly. Unlike the 2001 standards, this version does not include the curriculum standards for all school stages in basic education, but focuses on the compulsory education stage. The preface re-emphasised the instrumental characteristic of English and its role in improving China’s international competitiveness, cultivating cross-cultural communication talents and developing Suzhi (quality) citizens. The main feature of English in compulsory education was clearly defined as ‘the dual nature of instrumentality and humanism’ in the ‘preface’ (BNUPH, 2011, p. 2). Wu (2013) considered this the biggest breakthrough of the 2011 standards because ‘the dual nature of instrumentality and humanism’ constructed the requirements and content of ELE in the new era.
In line with highlighting the characteristics of ELE in the ‘preface’, the subsections of this section have been revised. The second subsection changed from ‘basic educational beliefs in formulating the standards’ to ‘basic educational beliefs in formulating courses’, and the sequence the basic beliefs was adjusted. ‘Focus on quality education and reflect the value of language learning for student development’ was moved to the head of this edition.

The concepts were ‘Face all students but pay attention to the different characteristics and individual differences of language learners’, ‘Design overall objectives with full consideration for the gradual and continuous nature of language learning’, ‘Emphasise the learning process, and emphasise the practicality and application of language learning’, ‘Optimise evaluation methods, focus on evaluating students’ comprehensive language ability’ and ‘Enrich curriculum resources and develop English learning methods’ (BNUPH, 2011, p. 2-4). Gu (2013) thinks that compared with the 2001 version, the six basic tenets of this version were expressed more clearly, the structure was more compact and coherent, and the characteristics of English language education were expressed more explicitly.

The third subsection in the preface, ‘rationale for designing the standards’ (BNUPH, 2001, p. 3), was changed to ‘rationale for designing courses’ (BNUPH, 2011, p. 5). However, the rationale was still ‘President Hu’s Scientific Outlook on Development and advanced theories of foreign language education’ (BNUPH, 2011, p. 5). The nine-level structure was again adopted in the 2011 standards, but the required levels for the graduates in different education stages were modified (Figure 5.3). The 2011 standards were designed specifically for the compulsory education stage, so the remaining standards only focus on levels 1 to 5. Meanwhile, ‘according to local conditions and needs, appropriately adjust the objectives of the English course for the corresponding semester’ (BNUPH, 2001, p. 4) in the rationale was replaced by ‘Each region can determine the completion level of the English course for the corresponding semester according to local conditions and needs’ (BNUPH, 2011, p. 7).

In terms of ‘course objectives’, the 2011 edition continued to describe the overall objectives and sub-objectives through five dimensions: language skills, language knowledge, emotional attitudes, learning strategies and cultural awareness. The content was adjusted and revised slightly, but the overall requirements of each level remained unchanged. An introduction was added to the ‘implementation suggestions’
section, and more specific requirements for teachers to implement the curriculum standards in their teaching practice were developed. ‘Teaching examples’ and ‘evaluation examples’ in the implementation suggestions section were moved to the list of appendices.

**Figure 5.3: Nine-Level Objectives for English Language Education (BNUPH, 2011, p. 6)**

The 2001 and 2011 curriculum standards had three features in common. Firstly, the content in ‘characteristics of the English course’ was similar to the preface in previous syllabuses. The ‘basic educational beliefs in formulating standards/course’ sections were adapted from ‘teaching requirements’ and ‘issues…in teaching’. Although each level’s course objectives and standards were designed from five new dimensions, they were still closely related to the teaching requirements of previous syllabuses. Wang (2010) claims that the five-dimensional requirements in the curriculum standards represent the enrichment and refinement of requirements in previous syllabuses and set out more detailed and accurate requirements for developing ELE in the new century. Therefore, although the structure and content changed in the 2001 and 2011 standards, they still inherited many features from the previous syllabuses.

Secondly, the two versions of curriculum standards shared the same nine-level structure to explain the requirements students must meet at the end of each educational stage. The nine-level structure was designed to provide teachers with more flexible decisions for organising their courses (Chen et al. 2012). In the 2001 standards, ELE came back to the primary education stage. Both versions of standards in this period advocated ELE from the third year of primary school. Wu (2013) believes that the nine-level structure benefited schools in disadvantaged areas because
language teachers could adjust objectives based on local conditions throughout the education stage. In specific terms, as long as students could achieve the requirements of Level 5 at the end of the compulsory education stage, schools in disadvantaged areas could start language courses from any school grade, and teachers could decide which level of objectives their students in each grade should achieve ‘according to local conditions and needs’ (BNUPH, 2011, p. 7). It appeared that the two-level requirements for different linguistic proficiencies of students in different areas, which led to unequal access to ELE in the previous syllabuses, had been abolished. However, certain requirements for entering the next school stage remained, although adjusting teaching practices within disadvantaged groups did not reduce unequal marketised social capital allocations and acquisitions between students in different areas.

Thirdly, according to Chen et al. (2002 and 2012), the core edits of the standards state that to achieve comprehensive language ability, students need to acquire all the abilities listed in the chart. Wu (2009) believes that the five-dimensional requirements represent the function of ELE in improving students’ knowledge and skills, processes and methods and emotional attitudes and values. Liu and Zheng (2018), Wu (2009), Wu (2013) and Yi (2010) agree that this new set of requirements represents a new understanding of ELE in language education policies as a union of instrumentality and humanism, which were adopted as two analytical themes in the social and deconstructive interpretation of these two versions of curriculum standards. A comparison of these with the themes of previous groups of syllabuses was conducted throughout the interpretation. At the same time, the standards adopt the principles proposed by the leader of the CPC and repeatedly stress confidence in the national culture and love for the motherland in competition with other countries (Zhang, 2020). The analysis of political intentions and the promotion of nationalism in these standards therefore parallels the analysis of the two themes.

5.4.2 Social and Deconstructive Interpretation of 2001 & 2011 ELE Standards

Firstly, because both versions of the curricula advocate the instrumentality of ELE, the meaning of this instrumentality needs to be interpreted. Yi (2010) believes that the instrumentality of the ELE in the 2000s included two features, namely international
communication and national and individual development. The following extract shows how the 2001 standards explained the instrumentality of ELE at the beginning of the 21st century:

Extract 16:
The informatisation of social life and the globalisation of the economy make the importance of English increasingly prominent. As one of the most important information carriers, English has become the most widely used language in all fields of human life. Many countries have taken English education as an important part of citizens’ ‘Suzhi’ (quality) education in their basic education development strategies and placed it in a prominent position. Since the Reform and Opening-up, the scale of English education in our country has been continuously expanded, and remarkable achievements have been made in English learning and teaching. However, the current situation of English education still does not meet the needs of our country’s economic construction and social development, and there is still a gap in the requirements of the development of the new century. (BNUPH, 2001, p. 1)

This extract echoes Yi’s (2010) interpretation of instrumentality in ELE. The English language is portrayed as a carrier that can deliver information in all fields of human life in an era of informatisation and globalisation. This sees English as a communication tool in a globalised context. In the syllabuses of the first group from 1978 to 1990, ELE was already considered an important tool for international information and communication. As I discussed in Section 5.2.2, treating English as a tool or instrument embodies the concept of linguistic instrumentalism, especially when it was envisaged as a skill for achieving utilitarian goals. In the syllabuses of the second group from 1988 to 2000, ELE was presented as a skill for achieving utilitarian goals, and syllabuses in this group described English as the booster that could promote the nation’s development through modernisation and globalisation. This can also be traced in Extract 16, which indicates that ELE development in China could not meet national development needs. In 2001, China officially joined the WTO, and the era reflected a new century in which China sought to enlarge its share in the international market, deepen domestic economic reform and promote socialist modernisation (Zhang, 2008). Although the extract does not explain how ELE could contribute to national development, connecting national development with ‘globalisation of the economy’ helps us understand that ELE would contribute to national development by providing a communication instrument in economic exchanges in the international market.
The extract also shows the other aspect of instrumentality in the 2001 standards, namely the instrument for individual development. The previous syllabuses also stressed the importance of ELE for individuals, and descriptions in the syllabuses suggest that learning English is part of becoming a socialist citizen. In other words, individual development is closely related to national development. The extract takes a similar line to previous ELE syllabuses, pointing out that ELE is in a prominent position to promote quality education in many countries. The instrumentality in ELE conveyed by the 2001 standards combines the way ELE was described in previous syllabuses as a tool or instrument. The 2011 standards strengthen the description of these two features of instrumentality in ELE, as the following extract shows:

**Extract 17:**

Today’s world is in a period of great development and adjustment, showing development trends of global multi-polarisation, economic globalisation and informatisation…The establishment of English classes in the compulsory education stage can lay the foundation for improving China’s overall national quality…and improving the international competitiveness of the country and the international communication ability of its people…The establishment of English courses in the compulsory education stage is of great significance to the future development of young people. . . Learning English also provides them with more opportunities for education and career development to lay the foundation for better adaptation to world multi-polarisation, economic globalisation and informatisation in the future.

(BNUPH, 2011, p. 1)

The first sentence stresses the changing international situation of the period. The 2011 standards were designed after the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games and the 2008 international financial crisis. The 2008 Beijing Olympic Games also marked the thirtieth anniversary of the implementation of the Reform and Opening-up, and China’s economic development has entered a new period. Su (2008) believes that the Olympics provided an opportunity for China to show its culture and its social and economic development. However, China’s foreign trade growth had been based on quantitative and extensive expansion for a long time, but export products and companies lacked core technologies, brands and international channels. Gao and Yan (2022) believe that transformations from relying on quantity to developing technology would streamline the development of the economy, and human resources that could adapt to this transformation were needed, with education designed to improve the quality of employees and cultivate interdisciplinary human resources familiar with professional knowledge and the international market. The **Outline of the National**
Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development Plan (2010-2020) was launched in 2010, emphasising people-oriented policies and emphasising the importance of individual development and Suzhi education. Compared with the 2001 standards, the 2011 version therefore pays more attention to instrumentality in ELE for individual development.

Instead of explaining English learning for individual development and contributing to national development, as the other syllabuses and the 2001 standards did, the 2011 standards claimed that national development could benefit individual development. The extract shows that the 2011 standards introduced the instrumentality of ELE as an international communication tool, then mentioned that adding this linguistic capital could improve the country’s international competitiveness in the global market. For individuals, the extract links ELE with students’ future careers and education. It then indicates that further employment and education are impacted by the world’s multipolarisation, economic globalisation, and informatisation. Once China gained competitiveness in the global market under complex worldwide social, economic and political conditions, it could provide future opportunities for individual development. The 2011 standards portrayed a mutually constructive relationship between national and individual development by emphasising the instrumentality of ELE.

Based on the analysis of previous syllabuses and the review of literature on neoliberalism in Chapter 2, it is evident that in the 2001 and 2011 standards, instrumentality was influenced by neoliberal ideas of linguistic commodification. Linking ELE to individual and national development revealed that emphasising instrumentality could help the country achieve the governance of individuals. If individuals believed in instrumentality, they could invest in ELE to develop and align themselves with the subjectivities created by neoliberalism for China’s development. In summary, the curriculum standards – especially the 2011 version – inherited and developed the portrayal of ELE as an instrument for national modernisation under globalisation by building instrumentality, which in turn reinforced neoliberal influences on ELE.

Secondly, the curriculum standards were seen as unifying instrumentality and humanism (Chen et al., 2012). Humanism, a Western concept dating back to the Renaissance, refers in this context to an emphasis on students’ choice and control in the courses, their emotional concerns and their self-evaluation and their relationship
with other participants in language education (Khatib et al., 2013). According to Yi (2010), the 2001 and 2011 curriculum standards, applied humanism to the concept of renaissance, taking the development of people as the essential objective of ELE. However, there is another connotation of humanism in the curriculum standards.

Wang (2018) summarises research on humanism in curriculum standards, arguing that humanism (Renwen in Chinese) contains two important elements. Ren (human) refers to knowledge of how people examine and recognise the world as well as the activities involved in people’s enlightenment, transformation and reorganisation of human activities. Wen (culture) includes the results of human activities, such as ways of thinking, historical philosophy, literature and art, religious beliefs, spiritual totems, local customs, lifestyles, aesthetic tastes and values. The comprehensive language ability constituted by the five-dimensional requirements described above can be used to assess humanism in the 2001 and 2011 standards:

**Extract 18:** (Translation of the five-dimensional objectivities)

*Language skills:* listening, speaking, reading and writing

*Language knowledge:* phonetics, vocabulary, grammar, functions, topics

*Emotional attitude:* motivation and interest, self-confidence, will, spirit of cooperation, consciousness of the motherland, international vision

*Learning strategies:* cognitive strategies, control strategies, communication strategies, resource strategies

*Cultural awareness:* cultural knowledge, cultural understanding, intercultural communication, awareness and competence

Objectives of ‘emotional attitude’ and ‘learning strategies’ belong to the Ren, and relate to how people learn the English language. The objectives of ‘language skills, language knowledge, and culture awareness’ belong to the Wen that includes the results produced by learning the English language. The *Decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council on Deepening Education Reform and Comprehensively Promoting Suzhi Education*, issued by the MOE in 1999, proposed to comprehensively promote Suzhi education and cultivate new socialist citizens who could meet the needs of modernisation in the twenty-first century. The *Decision on the Reform and Development of Basic Education* (MOE, 2001) sees the formation of the basic education curriculum system met the requirements of contemporary development as one of the main goals of deepening the reform of basic education and achieving results in Suzhi education. To promote Suzhi education in an
all-round way, these policies advocated that education must include all students, create corresponding conditions for their comprehensive development, protect the basic rights of school-age children and adolescents in accordance with the law, respect the characteristics of students’ physical and mental development and educational principles and encourage students to develop in a lively and proactive way. The Decision policies also ask for a deepening of educational reform to create conditions for implementing Suzhi education. This new curriculum standard focused on Suzhi education and students’ individual development by emphasising humanism in ELE.

In terms of standards, instead of seeing humanism as a part of Suzhi education, Yi (2010) claims that humanism should represent the essential feature of ELE because it reveals the nature of language, which conveys a combination of social values and different cultural phenomena and beliefs. The ‘emotional attitude’ and ‘learning strategies’ echo the SEL presented and discussed in Section 5.3.2 related to social values. Meanwhile, ‘language skills, language knowledge and cultural awareness’ refer to the development of intercultural communication competence (ICC) in cultural phenomena and beliefs.

The contents of cultural awareness in the syllabus include ‘cultural knowledge, cultural understanding, intercultural communication, awareness and competence’, which echo Byram’s (1997) five ‘savoirs’ in ICC, including knowledge of cultures of Self and Other, knowing how to understand, knowing how to interact, attitudes involved in relativising the self and valuing the other, and competence in developing critical cultural awareness. As discussed in Section 5.3.2, although Byram advocates critical awareness in ICC, the ICC model is still derived from an essentialist view of culture, which believes that cultural interaction and communication occur between members of different national groups. The idea of ‘cultural awareness’ in the 2000 syllabus, as a part of humanism, still conveys the dualism of Self and Other, and could be adopted to develop nationalist ideas in the syllabus. In the 2011 standards, humanism was interpreted more clearly to include nationalism, as shown in the following extract:

**Extract 19:**

English courses take on the task of improving students’ comprehensive humanistic qualities. That is to say, students can broaden their horizons, enrich their life experiences, form intercultural awareness, enhance patriotism, develop innovative
abilities and form a good character and a correct outlook on life and values through English courses.

(BNUPH, 2011, p. 2)

Compared with the ICC in ‘cultural awareness’ of the 2001 standards, improving students’ comprehensive humanistic qualities in the 2011 extract could be related to Kramsch’s (2006) notion of symbolic competence in intercultural education. Kramsch (2006, 2011) believes that language contains ‘symbolic power’ which could represent people and objects in the world, and their perspectives, attitudes and values could be constructed by adopting different symbolic forms and systems. Compared to ICC, symbolic competence reflects the ability of:

‘...social actors in multilingual settings ... [to] play with various linguistic codes and with the various spatial and temporal resonances of these codes ... [in order to] shape the very context in which the language is learned and used’ (Kramsch & Whiteside, 2008, p. 664).

This indicates that language learners with symbolic competence can negotiate different subject positions in multilingual settings. Kramsch (2009) describes symbolic competence as ‘the way in which the subject presents and represents itself discursively, psychologically, socially, and culturally using symbolic systems’ (Kramsch, 2009 p. 20). In Extract 19, humanistic quality is described as a way of developing abilities and forming a good character and a correct outlook on life and values through learning language, showing that ELE contains symbolic power and can reframe ways of seeing events and influence the formation of subjects’ attitudes and values.

A problematic point in the extract is the link between ELE and ‘good’ character, ‘correct’ outlook and values, which indicates that the character, outlook, and values conveyed by ELE are ‘good’ and ‘correct’. Without evaluating any standards of ‘good’ and ‘correct’, this description indicates that the symbolic system behind ELE could construct ‘good’ subjects through ELE. This reveals the symbolic dominance of the English language. In the preface to the 2011 standards, the valued goal of ELE is described as developing ‘the ability to communicate with others and ‘obtaining the advanced scientific and cultural knowledge’. Phillipson (2011) claims that English is used as a lingua franca that leads to the prevalence of British and American cultures. Block (2017) believes that this prevalence characterises these cultures as successful
and advanced. These ideas are match Said’s (1978) *Orientalism* and Pennycook’s cultural colonialism discussed in Section 5.3.2. English language education could therefore make students believe that the symbolic system attached to the English language is superior and then put themselves in a colonised position through ELE. As I discussed in Chapter 2, ELE has been neoliberalised as a way of (re)producing symbolic capital that can be exchanged in the global market (Bourdieu, 1991, 1998) and as a governance institute in which individuals are controlled through alignment with created neoliberal subjectivities (Foucault, 1988).

However, the emphasis on enhancing patriotism in this extract to some extent shows a resistance to the influence of prevailing British and American cultures, indicating a continuing conflict and struggles in ELE policies in China between adopting Western/foreign ideas and nationalism. So although humanism in ELE focuses on well-developed people and cultural awareness, it still contains the characteristics of Sixiang education like the discourses in previous ELE syllabuses, thus contradicting their original discursive meanings.

In summary, instrumentality in ELE indicates the use of learning English for sustaining economic development as a society and for social mobility as individuals. Wee (2003) sees this utilitarianism of language as linguistic instrumentalism. De Schutter and Robichaud (2017) believe that instrumentalism is closely related to economic rationality and market-oriented arguments. The linguistic instrumentalism characteristic in the standards represents the embodiment of neoliberalism in ELE policies in China. Referring to the previous ELE syllabuses, it is reasonable to assume that the influence of neoliberalism on ELE policies in China has increased since 1978. The humanism in ELE shows contradictions between economic, social and cultural development through ELE and the reinforcement of the socialist political system. Based on the discussion of the discursive resources used in the previous syllabuses and the analysis of humanism in the standards in this section, I argue that China’s government involves various concepts using neoliberal ideas in its ELE policies to build up subjectivities masked by nationalism to manage individuals in alignment with those subjectivities, thus contributing to the development of the country. The next section analyses the 2022 English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education. I conducted my fieldwork before the implementation of this version of standards, so this
analysis is comparatively short and only aims to show the direction of ELE after 2022, which will contribute to the discussion at the end of this study.

5.4.3 Interpretation of the 2022 ELE Standards

The 2022 *English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education* shares the same name as the 2001 and 2011 standards but has its own structure, comprising eight parts. According to Cheng (2022), the 2022 standards still define the nature of compulsory English education as a union of instrumentality and humanism. Cheng, as one of the chief editors of the new standards, believes that the new standards offer new interpretations in concept, content, objectives and methods. Cheng argues that this version shows the philosophy of developing students’ core competencies related to language learning, sets ELE objectives based on the requirements of students’ competencies, optimises the content and teaching requirements of English courses and re-organises the implementation of English courses in China’s compulsory education. The following analysis discusses the characteristics of the 2022 standards as summarised by Cheng.

In the new standards, while the nature of the English course is still defined as a union of instrumentality and humanism, three new characteristics are added along with the nature of ELE in the ‘course nature’ section of the standards that includes fundamentality, practicality and comprehensiveness (BNUPH, 2022). The ‘course philosophy’ section focuses on students’ core competencies, and improving students’ core competencies is described as the way to follow:

‘the guide of Chairman Xi Jinping’s thought on socialism with Chinese characteristics in the new era, fully implement the CPC’s educational policy, and the fundamental educational task of cultivating morality, and nurture new generation with three qualities (lofty ideals, multiple talents, and sense of responsibility)’ (BNUPH, 2022, p. 2).

The core competencies of ELE are listed in the ‘course objectivities’ section as linguistic competence, cultural awareness, thinking quality and learning ability. The 2022 standards explain that thinking quality shows students’ ability to understand, analyse, compare, infer, critically evaluate and create, while learning ability stresses students’ learning strategies. Based on the requirements of developing core competencies, the main contents of compulsory ELE are illustrated in Figure 5.4.
The nine-year compulsory education system is divided into three levels (grades 3-4, grades 5-6, and grades 7-9), and the specific content for each level is listed in the standards. The evaluation and implementation sections introduce course design, activities within and outside the classroom and how to evaluate ELE performance based on the requirements and objectives of each level. The 2022 standards suggest that teachers in different areas could organise their courses according to their own circumstances – such as urban-rural differences or regional differences – within the two grades of each level as long as the corresponding level is reached at the end of the second grade of the level.

The 2022 standards were promulgated as part of the latest national educational formulation – China’s Education Modernisation 2035 (MOE, 2019) – which offers a comprehensive and systematic plan for the process of modernising education from 2020 to 2035. The 2035 formulation asks for a combination of education and Xi Jinping’s thoughts on socialism with Chinese characteristics for the period after 2020. This is also illustrated in the preface of the 2022 standards. The following extract shows the strong political tone of the 2022 extract:

**Extract 20:**

President Xi Jinping has emphasised many times that...the course materials must adhere to the guiding position of Marxism, reflect the latest achievements of Chinese Marxism with Chinese characteristics, reflect the spirit of China and the Chinese nation, reflect the party’s and the nation’s basic requirement of education, reflect the core values of the country and the people and reflect the accumulation of human cultural knowledge and innovation...Students should be encouraged to grow into socialist builders and successors with all-around development of morality, intelligence, physique, aesthetics and labour.

(BNUPH, 2022, p. 1-2)
This extract shows that compared to the previous standards, nationalism is clearly emphasised in the 2022 standards as the general guideline for ELE standards. Looking back to the pie chart in Figure 5.4, language and cultural knowledge are the core contents of ELE. Almost every part of the 2022 standards emphasises cultivating students’ intercultural competence and nurturing their national cultural confidence. The previous standards showed a conflict between promoting foreign culture and understanding Chinese culture. Based on China’s economic and political development, the 2022 standards use a strong political tone and repeated advocations of loyalty to Chinese culture to shift the priority from foreign to Chinese culture (Mei & Wang, 2022). However, as discussed in the previous sections, the division between foreign culture and Chinese culture follows an essentialist approach and does not contribute to communication between different cultures. Individuals’ alignment with the ‘imagined collectivist culture’ can only contribute to its collectivism (Holliday, 2019, p.40), and according to the extract, collectivism is portrayed as socialism and nationalism in the 2022 standards, advocating that students and other educational participants in ELE contribute to national socialist development. However, the other concepts in the standards – including the unity of instrumentality and humanism, cultivating morality, nurturing a new generation with three qualities and the three-level division – echo the previous syllabuses and standards, which all had neoliberal characteristics and could be organised and managed by market logic. It is therefore reasonable to say that although the 2022 standards advocate collectivism to promote nationalism and the development of socialism in ELE, the other strategies for improving ELE at the compulsory education stage still show the influence and control of neoliberalism. This represents the main contradiction in the ELE standards and policies from 1978 to the present in China, which produce different subjectivities under nationalism or neoliberalism.

5.5 Summary

In this Chapter, I analysed ten versions of ELE policies at the compulsory education stage in China from the 1978 English syllabus to the 2022 English language curriculum standards. The ten documents were organised into three groups based on the timing of their implementation and contents.
The first group of documents shows how ELE in China was instrumentalised. The analysis of Sixiang and Zhengzhi (ideological and political) education shows that the policies intended to resist neoliberal ideas by promoting socialist ideas in ELE. The discussion of local governments’ responsibility for students’ future in ELE in this group shows that the neoliberal strategy of governmentality came into use in the management of ELE practices in the 1980s.

The second group of documents, promulgated in the 1990s, adopted concepts of diminished political undertones, including citizenship education, social-emotional education, Suzhi education and cultural awareness, imbuing individuals with collective ideals while avoiding strong political tones. This suggests a tension in ELE policies as they shifted between constructing a socialist nation and relying on neoliberal ideologies for economic development. Constructing de facto collective nationalism serves to reconcile this contradiction, aligning individual development with national economic and political progress. The policies effectively manage individuals to meet neoliberal requirements for national development. The last group of documents presents the nature of ELE as a unity of instrumentality and humanism. The instrumentality clearly shows the neoliberal characteristics of ELE in China, while humanism attempts to mitigate the influence of neoliberal ideology through a combination of developing individual intercultural competence and nationalism.

In summary, the analysis clearly shows how neoliberalism influenced the formulation and implementation of ELE policies for compulsory education in China. It also reveals the political necessity of constituting nationalism for national development in the neoliberal global market. I argue that neoliberalism and nationalism both develop subjectivities for individuals in ELE to reduce their agency and govern them as subjects, which will be further discussed in Chapter 8. How these policies influence ELE practice is discussed in the following chapters based on my findings from ethnographic observation and interviews.
Chapter 6: Findings and Discussion — Teachers’ Interviews

6.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings that emerged from a thematic analysis of the interviews conducted with the rural and urban English language teachers. It is important to explain that the teacher interviews data were collected from one teacher in the rural school and two teachers from the urban school. The initial plan was to interview two teachers from each school: the English teacher of the observed class and the head of the English language department. However, during my participation in the daily practices at the rural school, I discovered that the English teacher of the observed class was the only English teacher of the last-year grade and also served as the head of the department. Due to the ethnographic focus on immersing oneself in observing and describing real practices and interactions, I decided to interview only this teacher based on the actual circumstances of the rural school.

The analysis of the findings is informed by the theoretical literature and empirical studies reviewed in Chapters 2 and 3 to identify themes and guide ensuing discussions. The discussion also draws on the analysis of ELE policies in Chapter 4 to explore how these policies affected teachers’ ideas about English language teaching in their respective schools. Where relevant, classroom observation data are also presented to examine the relationship between teachers’ ideas and their practices. Key themes emerged from the thematic analysis of interview data, dividing the chapter into four sections:

1. New managerialism in English language education
2. Autonomous and controlled motivations for being an English language teacher
3. Teachers’ perspectives on English curriculum standards
4. Teachers’ ideal classroom and classroom in practice

The first theme focuses on ways in which teachers are managed, surveilled, organised and measured using neoliberal requirements. Findings reveal how teachers become
neoliberal technicians rather than intellectual educators through performance and accountability. The second theme examines what shapes teachers’ motivations in the context of ELE in China, showing how these motivations align with the objectives and requirements of neoliberal policies. The third theme provides an overview of English language teachers’ support for and criticism of national English curriculum standards and explains how policies influence teachers’ ideas in rural and urban schools. These findings present the hegemony of neoliberal ideas and standards and teachers’ reflections of the impact they have on them. The fourth theme examines the conflicts between teachers’ ideal and actual classroom practices, describing how neoliberal ideas in ELE policies reflect educational practices and whether teachers’ ideas influence or are influenced by practice. Each section compares and contrasts rural and urban contexts, discussing the similarities and differences that exist between the teachers and their practices.

6.2 New Managerialism in ELE

This theme addresses teachers’ thoughts about their daily educational practices and the ways in which these practices are related or unrelated to the language teaching profession. The concept of new managerialism (NM) comes from Lynch et al. (2012). As discussed in Section 2.3.2, it involves quantifiable and measurable outcomes, audits or inspections to manage and control practices in the public sector.

In the interviews, teachers from rural and urban schools highlighted how the predetermined objectives and outcomes of ELE were manifested as class rankings by grade or average class scores in the SSSEE. This is a typical NM characteristic whereby teaching results are transformed into quantitative data. This process of holding teachers accountable, termed ‘accountability’ by Lynch (2015), turns teachers into assessable entities tasked with achieving measurable goals. The first subtheme, accountability, explains how teachers articulate English language teaching outcomes and identifies neoliberal governance in ELE.

Teachers from urban and rural settings often noted how their teaching practices and personal evaluations were impacted by the SSSEE and other administrative tasks unrelated to teaching. They explained that students’ exam performance and the completion of administrative duties influenced the assessment of their work,
compelling them to consider their performance based on this evaluation. This performance management is described as performativity, as discussed in Section 2.3.2. This subtheme explores teachers’ performativity and examines its relationship with accountability.

### 6.2.1 Accountability

Biesta (2004) claims that accountability is a management strategy based on data on performance in all aspects of education. This requirement for data appears in interviews with all three teachers. Teachers in both rural and urban schools also discussed the school management’s call to increase senior secondary school enrolment. Feng Jun, the English language teacher and department head in the rural school, talked about the difficulty his school faced because of the previous year’s (2020) student enrolment data. He indicated that improving the enrolment rate may be the only way to ‘save the reputation of the school’. Quantitative goals were set for him this year:

> Our overall requirements are definitely in place. Firstly, we have to achieve a certain score in SSSEE. Secondly, we have to achieve a certain ranking in our district. Students who can go to urban schools won’t choose our school. We only have two classes left in the ninth grade this year. The scores and rankings are related to the number of students who will be at our school next year. If the number of students is not enough, the junior secondary school may not be able to stay open.

Feng Jun (rural school)

The SSSEEes are considered a high-stakes test, holding significance for student grade promotion or graduation, teacher accountability and the overall reputation of schools (Stevenson & Wood, 2013, p. 2). In the rural context, Feng Jun did not mention the impact of the SSSEE on students. Instead, the consequences of the SSSEE results were intricately linked to the survival of the school. Teachers’ accountability in the SSSEEes was explicitly tied to the school’s appeal to students, highlighting the expectation or requirement for teachers and schools to be accountable in ensuring students’ graduation and future education.

When conducting my observations, I found the rural school’s document, the 2021 SSSEE Preparation Plan, which was distributed to every teacher in the graduation grade to clarify teaching focus during the final year of junior secondary school. The
document asked teachers to pay more attention to students at the borderline of the admission score. ‘These students can maintain personal progress, and for the school, they can improve the overall pass rate for regular senior secondary school, directly influencing our school’s ranking in the district education bureau’s quality assessment.’ (see Figure 6.1).

**Figure 6.1:** School-level Requirements

This extract concurs with Feng Jun’s description and indicates a reliance on data by the higher administrative department. There are external pressures on the school from society and the administrative department which have led to the school’s concentration on quantitative evidence to prove that it is qualified to provide junior secondary education. Meanwhile, identifying the students who need more attention is decided by how their exam results will benefit the school’s enrolment rate, so teaching practice is organised and managed according to accountability and NM influences the rural school and teachers in it via accountability. This kind of influence is associated with neoliberalism because it turns the quality of the school and the teaching into quantitative data and rankings that can be measured and evaluated by society and the government.

The same situation was found in the urban school, where Jasmine, the head of the English department, also talked about her school’s requirements for a higher of enrolment rate:

Each class will have a plan before the high school entrance examination, and so will the school. The school will collect statistics. Based on the percentage of success last year, they will predict how many students will go on to senior public secondary school this year. The school will calculate the admission ratio. They will not set targets too high, telling you what you must achieve this year, but such requirements are part of their plan. The school doesn’t say that each class has a
Jasmine’s account suggests that her school does not want to boast about its accountability requirements, possibly because the ranking and comparison of students’ grades are now forbidden by MOE. All she says is that the school does not ‘set too high a target’. However, the extract shows that Jasmine believes the required enrolment rate in the school’s plan was available to teachers. Another reason why the school does not give very hard standards of accountability is maybe because teachers have already assumed that this will be part of their responsibility.

I stayed in the English language office with seven English language teachers from the graduation grade during my observation. Each of them had an account of an online school application which showed every student’s and every class’s average score and ranking in every exam. The application provided horizontal and vertical comparison charts and an analysis of every student’s and every class’s performance. Only teachers and the school’s administrative team can access this information, which is used by teachers to write monthly class management reports and by the administrative team to discuss class management with teachers. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that accountability for urban teachers has already become the default option in their teaching practice. Teachers have accepted this kind of administrative action without considering that it may be problematic. Feifei is an English language teacher in the urban school, and when asked about the goals she set for the students, her answer supported my observation:

I have two classes, and there are about 10 students’ scores in the lowest group of the school. I definitely hope that I can reduce that number to 5, and that some of the underachievers can get a 60% pass mark. The number of underachievers in my second class is a little higher, and my goal is to improve the rank of this class. They now rank ninth, I hope I can get them up to eighth.

Feifei (urban school)

Feifei’s comments show that accountability works efficiently in the school. She knew how many students were in the lowest group and all her goals are related to accountability. Constant exams and abundant statistics have led Feifei to think in number, so instead of concrete teaching objectives, she uses data to define what she wants to achieve in her classes.
The internalisation of accountability by teachers may occur because accountability is related to other resources that benefit teachers. Through observation, I discovered that this urban school is part of the most renowned junior secondary school in the city. The educational resources available to them from the main campus and society depend on their success, measured by SSSEE results statistics. Teachers’ accountability plays an essential role in determining whether they achieve intermediate or advanced professional qualifications which are closely tied to their salary levels. Drawing upon Bourdieu’s (1986) theory of forms of capital accountability in the urban context is perceived as social capital, exchangeable on a par with economic capital. The school’s accountability influences the attention it receives from higher administrative departments and society, potentially leading to increased social and economic support. This support contributes significantly to the school’s overall success.

The urban school is influenced by accountability in a more veiled way than the rural school, but in a more economics-related way. The relationship between Feifei and teaching have become transactional and product-led. Students’ outcomes are the products of her teaching, and they can be transacted with qualifications and salary. The simplicity of accountability through numbers deflects attention from professional development, which could develop students more effectively. As discussed above, accountability at the collective level, such as grades and the school, shows its power to generate individual accountability by articulating it to career and economic benefits and by practising it repetitively in that application. According to Hall (1986), this is the method by which ideologies achieve hegemony, through its articulation into different social forces. Accountability has therefore become the collective goal of the urban school’s teachers, and can be used by the school or higher administrative departments to manage teachers and their outcomes.

Accountability about enrolment rates and other aspects influences teachers in the rural and the urban schools by endorsing the surveillance of teachers’ teaching practices that are paralleled with reflexive surveillance of the self. Teachers transform what and who they choose to teach, who they try to be and how they think about themselves in teaching through accountability. Schools, society and higher administrative departments have diminished the meaning of professional teaching skills and knowledge by measuring teachers or schools through accountability. The objective
character of the numbers conceals their political importance as a further consequence
of the market-driven agenda of the government and schools. As my analysis of
education policies suggests (Section 3.3.2), open or formally announced rankings of
students are forbidden by government policies, but in practice, the requirements for
accountability still exist, and significantly influence teachers’ practices.

6.2.2 Performativity

My observations in both schools revealed that the main task of the teachers was to
deliver language knowledge and skills in the classroom. This helps students do well in
SSSEEs. Teachers also conduct administrative tasks outside class, such as writing
monthly class management reports and regularly investigating students’ physical and
mental welfare. As I suggested above, their performance is related to neoliberal NM,
which encourages the adoption of performativity, a managerial mode that makes
teachers’ performance measurable and easier to control. This subtheme focuses on
teachers’ performances to explain how they become measurable and manageable.

When asked what he thought were the most important and most difficult aspects of his
teaching design, Feng Jun said:

Our English class must be designed according to the teaching objectives. We will
mainly consider the difficulties of the exams, especially of the SSSEE. Some exam
points are very simple, and students will understand them when they attend class.
Some are difficult or beyond the students’ ability. Those points are the most
important in my teaching plan.

Feng Jun (rural school)

The indicates that SSSEE requirements have forced language teachers to consider
examination requirements when designing their lessons, so instead of teaching points
of language, Feng Jun’s teaching design is aimed to help students succeed in the
exams so that he can pass the assessment. As discussed in Section 6.2.1,
accountability is crucial to the rural school. Feng Jun’s emphasis on exams reflects his
attention to accountability, as his primary concerns revolve around gaining higher
scores. It appears that the government and the school transfer accountability onto
teachers, absolving themselves of blame. However, a covert form of control over
teachers occurs through the imposition of accountability. Feng Jun’s performance
highlights that as a rural English language teacher, he was influenced by performativity, reflecting a form of management through performance expectations.

Feng Jun also mentioned that there used to be an outline for SSSEE, which emphasised specific areas of focus. However, this outline was recently abolished. According to Feng Jun, the current SSSEE now resembles an exam for teachers, as they are required to analyse and anticipate exam contents, suggesting a shift from developing professional skills to the ability to predict exam questions. According to Biesta (2004), an overemphasis on performativity in education creates a culture where means become ends in themselves, and targets and indicators of quality are mistaken for quality itself. In the rural context, this shift is evident as teaching is replaced by a focus on technical targets.

The same situation was identified in the urban school, where teachers had a similar understanding of foci and difficulties in teaching design. Jasmine talked about what English language teachers have to know:

As a good English teacher, you must know the important and difficult points in SSSEE. This is very important in the ninth grade. If there is a difficult point, but it is not a test point, you don’t need to explain it in detail, and there is no need to get entangled with this point.

Jasmine (urban school)

Jasmine suggested that the criteria for assessing the abilities of teachers are linked to their understanding of the focal points and challenges in the SSSEE. She pointed out that knowledge not deemed important in the SSSEE is not worth teaching, emphasising the significance of focusing on what contributes to students’ exam success. As head of the English language department, Jasmine’s criteria for evaluating teachers mirrors how the school assesses its teaching staff. Jasmine’s accounts show that in the urban school, teachers are evaluated by their students’ success in the SSSEE. This is also considered a component of accountability that has been shifted onto teachers in the urban context. The urban school is therefore also subject to the managerial mode of performativity, with each teacher’s performance monitored by the school through the assessment of their accountability. Walsh (2006) criticises performativity for generating strategically manipulated evidence and outcomes as ends in themselves. Teachers’ performance in both the
rural and urban contexts has been strategically manipulated by the requirements of students’ grades in SSSEE.

Feifei, the urban school’s English language teacher, discussed how she prepares her lessons every week, saying that her lesson plans come from lesson design meetings with other English language teachers in the graduation grade every week. I attended these meetings during the observation phase of my study. At the beginning of the term, the textbook was divided into different units, and every English language teacher designed different units. In the meeting, teachers first discussed what the foci and difficulties in their unit were. Then, the teachers who designed the teaching plan would explain their design step by step. After their presentation, the other teachers would ask questions, make comments and offer recommendations for modification. Finally, a unified version of the teaching design would be adopted by every teacher for their lessons in the next week. Feifei said that this teaching preparation model was fixed. She believed it would take too much time for teachers to prepare every lesson by themselves. Now, she needed to review the unified teaching plan on Sundays, which gave her time to track students’ performance after class. Considering how this model benefited her teaching practices, Feifei said:

I think it’s efficient! If we really want to prepare a class all by ourselves, we have to put too much time in it. Moreover, there are many deficiencies that we can’t find ourselves, and others can point them out and save time. It benefits all of us, no matter who is designing the lesson.

Feifei (urban school)

Feifei’s description of the efficient and productive teaching preparation model in the urban school reminds me of Flynn’s (1998) argument that NM is associated with routine administrative procedures in which deliberate and systematic managerial strategies are used to de-professionalise expert labour and bureaucratic monitoring and performance evaluations are adopted. Teachers’ lesson design meetings could be seen as part of an administrative procedure in which lesson contents are decided and monitored and performativity’s ‘demand for efficiency and accountability’ are enhanced (Maguire, 2011, p. 32). Teachers are changed from creative professionals into productive educational labourers who deliver a unified version of knowledge to meet the requirements of exams and administrative demands.
Jasmine thought this practice was helpful, suggesting that it was created to help teachers become more efficient and meet SSSEE teaching targets together by following a series of carefully designed steps. Every teacher in this grade kept the teaching progress and basic content the same, revealing that developing teachers’ exam-oriented performance requires the homogenisation of their practice. The school operates and manages teachers’ practices by constituting the normality of performativity which calls for a unified plan consistent with the demands of performativity. Ball (1998) argues that performativity is a principle of governance that establishes strictly functional relations between an institution and the people within it. In the urban context, the teachers are governed by the functional teaching preparation procedure which contributes to performativity.

Olssen (2006) believes that teachers are turned into meaningful subjects in bureaucratic systems by focusing on performativity. Compared to rural teachers, urban teachers show more features of being meaningful subjects and docile objects. Both Feifei and Jasmine complement their teaching design system, while Feng Jun’s pursuit of performativity seems more forced. Feng Jun used ‘have to’ to express his feeling of reluctance to analyse the SSSEEs, while teachers in urban schools had more procedural autonomy by discussing what to teach in their meetings. However, because their choices are actually limited by what the exams demand, they are regulated and unconsciously regulate themselves based on performativity. At the same time, the urban school uses the functional procedure of discussion to make teachers responsible for their performance and for the performance of others, while school management and higher administrative departments become more invisible. Neoliberalism thus achieves its management objectives in the urban school without being noticed. However, regardless of what strategies are used to achieve management, teachers in rural and urban schools are deeply influenced by neoliberal NM. The next theme presents how NM affects teachers’ motivations.

6.3 Autonomous and Controlled Motivations for Being an English Language Teacher

In my interviews with teachers, I noticed changes in their professional and developmental motivations. By reviewing existing literature on self-determination
theory (SDT), Roth (2014) summarises two types of motivation, autonomous and controlled, which are widely used in educational research to explore teachers’ professional motivation. Autonomous motivation is demonstrated by behaviour performed voluntarily and by choice, and includes intrinsic motivation and internalised forms of extrinsic motivation. Controlled motivation refers to an external or internal sense of compulsion, and includes poorly internalised forms of extrinsic motivation (Roth, 2014; Roth et al., 2009).

The analysis of accountability and performativity in Section 6.2, showed that teachers’ performance is governed by NM. Proudfoot (2018) believes that teachers’ intrinsic motivation is vulnerable and easily undermined by neoliberal performativity because the emphasis on high-stakes testing and external regulation tends to foster passive individuals who conform to certain behaviours driven by reward or punishment. Carr (2015) and Ryan and Weinstein (2009) argue that once teachers’ practices align with performativity, their motivational constructs should be considered through SDT in order to understand the consequences of neoliberal performativity. In this section, the autonomous and controlled motivations of teachers will be examined to assess how neoliberal ideology incentivises teachers’ changes in the process of being an English language teacher. Given that the participants in my study are English language teachers, their accounts regarding motivations for developing professional English language proficiency will also be explored.

6.3.1 Autonomous Motivation

As explained above, autonomous motivation includes intrinsic motivation and internalised forms of extrinsic motivation. Teachers’ responses suggest that their intrinsic motivations for being an English language teacher derive primarily from interest in English. Feng Jun holds the unique position of being the sole English language teacher for the graduation grade, the head of the English department and the head teacher of a class in the rural school, which has only two classes in this grade. He said that his interest in English dates back to the beginning of junior secondary school. He spent plenty of time learning English, achieved a good performance, and started dreaming of being an English language teacher. He proudly told me how he became an English language teacher:
Before I graduated from the teacher vocational school, I had already passed the national self-study higher education examination and earned a college diploma in English education. I was the only outstanding graduate that year, and I was transferred to the largest junior secondary school in town right after graduation. In my first twenty years of work, I taught one grade by myself.

Feng Jun (rural school)

Feng Jun’s efforts and performance in English language learning were motivated by his early interest in the language, and his primary motivation to become an English language teacher was driven by intrinsic factors, or autonomous motivation. Ryan and Deci (2000) claim that intrinsic motivations lead to activities that develop competence and long-term persistence. Feng Jun shared his experiences of learning English and pursuing a career as a teacher from junior secondary school to college. His intrinsic motivation helped him strive to learn English and teaching skills in that period of his life. When he described his experiences in college and the workplace, it became obvious that his intrinsic, autonomous motivation not only fuelled his dedication but also brought him a sense of satisfaction.

Jasmine, the Head of the English department in the urban school, expressed similar feelings about learning and teaching English. She suggested that her interest in English was innate, and that she discovered her love for English in the first year of her junior secondary school in the mid-1980s.

My first English language teacher was the first and only professional English language teacher in our town. Her pronunciation was so perfect. I fell in love with this musical language as soon as I heard her pronunciation.

Jasmine (urban school)

Jasmine’s love of English had a lasting impact on her career goal of becoming an English language teacher. She told me that she chose to study English at college after senior secondary school and became an English teacher without any hesitation after graduation. Jasmine’s motivation to become an English language teacher also came from her intrinsic and autonomous choice. She described teaching English as her ‘mission in life’ because she devoted her time and love to learning and teaching this language.

According to Kunter and Holzberger (2014), love and passion for work provide teachers with a sense of meaning and act as motivators for engaged behaviours. Jasmine’s long-lasting interest and passion for ELE can be traced by her continuing
engagement with professional English language training. While working, she completed undergraduate and postgraduate education and obtained a bachelor’s degree and a master’s degree in ELE. She went to the UK to study for four months. Jasmine said: ‘It was my desire for better professional knowledge that prompted me to make a continual effort.’ Her description clearly showed her autonomy in becoming an English teacher and developing professionally.

Although Feng Jun and Jasmine come from schools in different areas, they shared a common interest in English when they were in junior secondary school, and being an English language teacher was their first career choice. From their conversations, their interest, enjoyment and accomplishment in learning English motivated them to become English language teachers. As I explained in Chapter 5, English was a compulsory subject in junior secondary school, and teachers were professionally trained in most schools from the 1980s onwards. Both Feng Jun and Jasmine started their junior secondary school in the 1980s, when the English language was described as an important instrument for China to modernise and conduct international communication. Their common feelings about the English language and ELE may be due to their similarity in age. They experienced the era in which English was publicised as a valuable multipurpose tool for individuals and the country. Their interest in the English language may therefore have been echoed by the social-political background that demanded the rapid development of ELE to promote China’s economic and technological development.

Unlike Feng Jun and Jasmine, Feifei’s motivations are different, possibly because this urban school teacher is much younger than her senior colleagues, and grew up in a different socio-political context. Her responses did not show intrinsic motivation, and it was extrinsic regulations that motivated her to become an English language teacher. Feifei was born in the 1990s and went to junior secondary school in the 2000s. She said that studying English language as her major in the university was a practical choice.

I chose English as my major at university because it seemed practical for students who were not good at science. I could work in a foreign company, a bank, or anywhere a person who can speak English was needed. In my first year of university, I chose business English instead of English education. I think business English is more practical nowadays in the job market.

Feifei (urban school)
Feifei’s feelings about English show that ELE has become common and has been formalised into a career-related subject through the imposition of social and practical meaning. English was instrumentalised as a stepping stone to a business-related job. Feifei suggested that learning English would help her find a job more easily as professional English skills were widely needed, especially in business areas. She identified the importance of English language skills, so she autonomously chose English language as her major.

When Feifei started to learn English, ELE had already been widely introduced in China, and the aim of related policies had changed from rebuilding ELE to cultivating professional English language talents for international competition. As discussed in Section 2.4, the need for foreign language talents for international competition led to the capitalisation of language and people. English language ability was seen as linguistic capital which could be added to individuals’ social capital to help them become valuable in the job market and acquire more economic capital. Feifei’s identification of the importance of English shows that the neoliberal concept of seeing the English language as exchangeable capital was successfully represented and interpreted in material circumstances by policies. Althusser (1984) points out that ideology produces individuals as ‘always-ready subjects’ through their interactions with ‘repressive state apparatuses’ (governmental institutions) and ‘ideological state apparatuses’ (sociocultural institutions) (p. 50). Feifei appears to have accepted the neoliberal ideas of the English language as an unconscious always-ready subject that interacts with publicly available educational documents and the job market. The difference between her motivation and those of more senior teachers shows that neoliberal concepts of English have become hegemonic in the Chinese educational context, legitimising the belief that learning English will lead to better employment prospects.

Although Feifei did not choose to teach English at first, she explained what finally motivated her to be a teacher:

I did an internship in a bank for a while and found that the job required too many skills. I felt it was too complicated for me. Then I chose to work as a teacher in a private English education institution for a while and found that teaching came quite easily to me. Being an English teacher is a suitable job for me. The working environment is simple, and the income is good. I came to this public school three
years ago. Working here is more stable and is ‘an iron rice bowl’\(^6\). It is suitable for people like me, who are married and have children, who want to be ‘salted fish’\(^7\).

Feifei (Urban School)

Feifei views English language teaching as an easy, comfortable job with a good income for her and her family. These are the extrinsic motives, encompassing job satisfaction, salary and career status, which align with Proudfoot’s (2018) belief that extrinsic motivations reflect personal values. Feifei interlinks her motivations with values centred around work, income and family. Her perspective suggests a belief in English language teaching as a comparatively easy, well-paid and stable job. By doing this, she incorporates a profit-oriented idea into her motivation for being an English language teacher.

Intrinsic motivation reveals teachers’ interest and enjoyment at being an English language teacher, while Roth (2014) links well internalised forms of extrinsic motivation with identified regulation and integrated regulation. Identified regulation means that teachers have identified that an activity is important, so they perform the activity autonomously. Feifei chose to learn English at university because she realised that English language ability could benefit her in job market. Integrated regulation shows that an activity is perceived as deeply internalised and autonomous because it has been assimilated with other aspects of teachers’ selves. Feifei was motivated to become an English language teacher because the job had been assimilated by her other life requirements.

The autonomous motivations of the two senior teachers of the same age are intrinsic and generated by an interest in and passion for ELE, while Feifei’s motivations for being an English language teacher are well-internalised forms of extrinsic motivation. By analysing the autonomous motivations of these three teachers, it is evident that although their autonomous motivation came from different sources, they were all influenced by neoliberal ideas relating to the English language.

\(^6\) A Chinese idiom which means a stable, life-long job
\(^7\) Chinese internet language which is usually used in a self-deprecating sense. It refers to people who have no goals, are lazy and do not want to work hard.
6.3.2 Controlled Motivation

When discussing their daily teaching practices and the development of their professional English language teaching skills, changes in motivation were observed in all three teachers. They described the external and introjected regulations that influenced their motivations regarding their teaching practices.

This year (2021) is Feng Jun’s 30th year as a teacher in a rural area. I asked him whether he had thought about switching to an urban school, and he told me why he did not want to do this:

At present, the wage gap between urban and rural teachers is not large, and there are subsidies for teachers in disadvantaged areas like ours. With the subsidies, our wages may be more than those of urban teachers. To help the development of education in disadvantaged areas, the state stipulates that teachers in rural areas who have taught for more than 30 years do not need to submit academic publications in the evaluation of their professional qualifications. More opportunities to obtain advanced qualifications are available from the government in rural areas than in urban areas. I will be an advanced level English teacher this year, and my income will increase with the title.

Feng Jun (rural school)

This shows that external factors have been added to being an English language teacher in a rural context. Extra money is given to teachers in disadvantaged areas, and they have more opportunities for gaining senior titles. The external factors described by Feng Jun were related to economic benefits. Interpreting this through the lens of Bourdieu’s (1993) theory, we can assume that economic capital is added to Feng Jun’s job to retain professional teachers (social capital) in disadvantaged areas. The reward of the job is seen as the external regulations that lead to controlled motivation (Roth, 2014). In the rural context, this controlled motivation is regulated by the allocation of economic capital under neoliberal logic. Once this economic capital is added to a position, the market’s need for profit will attract social capital to that position to be exchanged for economic capital, thus enhancing teachers’ controlled motivation. This practice reflects the external regulation of teachers through rewards, aligning with Sheldon and Biddle’s (1998) argument. However, such regulations carry negative implications for teachers’ autonomous motivation which may lead to a perpetual focus on economic performance over professional development at the price of genuine teaching and learning.
During my observation of the class led by Feng Jun, I noted that his autonomous motivation was diminished, restricting his professional development. He always followed the presentation of slides in the lessons, but there were times when he seemed unfamiliar with the content, forgetting details about the next slide or neglecting to prepare accompanying listening materials. I discovered the names of other schools on his slides, prompting me to inquire about his lesson preparation methods. He admitted that he downloaded slides from the internet, learned from presentations by famous teachers and followed their lesson organisation. Feng Jun’s experience underscores how he has become regulated and controlled by neoliberal market logic, showing the impact of external regulations on his motivation and professional development.

From my observations, I found that English language teachers in the urban school were busy with their teaching and lesson-designs every day inside and outside the classroom. They engaged in group discussions about teaching design every Monday afternoon. Jasmine, the head of the English department, told me that she did not have time to take good care of her own son because her life was filled with teaching tasks, students’ homework, moral education tasks and group teaching research. She was always the first person into the office and the last to leave. She explained why she spent so much time at work.

Nowadays, school and parents prioritise exams too much, pay too much attention to grades and demand too much of teachers. This is society’s fault. Society has requirements for schools, and schools have requirements for teachers. Teachers have no choice but to make sure the children do well in exams and successfully complete the entire educational practice.

Jasmine (urban school)

Jasmine’s extract shows that she was controlled by the introjected regulations, which are externally expected behavioural values and regulations that are not accepted by individuals as their own. For Jasmine, the school, parents and society over-prioritised exams and grades, expecting teachers to improve students’ performance in exams. As discussed in Section 6.2, this echoes the call for accountability and performativity in teachers. Jasmine was motivated by the requirements of neoliberal accountability and performativity, devoting almost all her time to work and aligning with external values promoted by socio-political contexts.
In the urban school, I observed Feifei’s class. She was not a ‘salted fish’, as she described herself in the interview. She arrived at the school before 7:30 a.m. every day and always had her classes prepared one week before. Feifei expressed a similar opinion to Jasmine.

   We are all busy with exams. After finishing this exam, the next exam will come. Basically, students have to take exams every week. I don’t know if the exams are meaningful, but now it seems that only exams can encourage them to study. For the students, we can only continue to be so busy.

   Feifei (urban school)

Feifei claimed that students and teachers were too busy with exams. However, she claimed that only exams could ‘encourage’ students to study. Like Jasmine, Feifei is motivated by the neoliberal focus on performativity and accountability through exams, although she did not think exams were ‘meaningful’. Teachers in the urban school were more influenced by introjected regulations rather than the external regulations that motivated the rural teacher. However, in all three cases the regulation of controlled motivations was decided and managed in accordance with neoliberal performativity in the schools.

Jasmine said teaching English is her ‘mission of life.’ I asked her whether she was satisfied with her job, and she said that she still thought that being a language teacher was a good job for her, but she was afraid of being too busy all the time. She was concerned about her professional improvement. ‘If I continue to teach this way, I will only have the knowledge for the SSSEE.’ This shows that the introjected regulations of accountability and performativity were de-professionalising teachers like Jasmine. In Fraser’s (2017) words, teachers are being de-skilled by the rise in bureaucratic demands associated with systematic managerial strategies. Meanwhile, Jasmine’s intrinsic love for her job was also being challenged by different tasks related to introjected regulations. The change from autonomous motivation to controlled motivation restricts teachers’ autonomy and competence in their profession, which represents a negative effect of neoliberal performativity on the urban context, revealing the hegemony of neoliberal ideology in education practices.

The findings suggest that neoliberal ideas influence autonomous and controlled motivations for being an English language teacher, and the analysis of teachers’ motivation shows how neoliberalism shapes these motivations. Different generations
of teachers may have different experiences, with the younger generation facing more governance from neoliberal policies, indicating an increasing influence in neoliberal ideas over time. Feng Jun’s response underscores the efficacy of incorporating economic capital to motivate rural teachers, while teachers in urban schools are more strongly influenced by introjected regulations tied to individual ideas and values. Both external and introjected regulations underline the hegemony of dominant ideology in educational practices. According to Gramsci (1971/1999), neoliberal requirements have permeated wider society, and Hall (1986) suggests that challenging this hegemony requires linking social-political subjects to new ideas. However, the examination of controlled motivations shows that currently, neoliberal ideology utilises popular thinking around performativity and accountability to govern teachers’ practices. The hegemonic neoliberal idea appears hard to shake.

6.4 Teachers’ Perspectives on English Curriculum Standards

Section 6.2 showed how neoliberal NM led to accountability and performativity in rural and urban schools, while Section 6.3 revealed the influence of NM on teachers’ motivation. This section presents my findings regarding teachers’ perspectives on the national English curriculum standards issued by MOE.

Section 6.4.1 examined teachers’ support for the dual nature of instrumentality and humanism in ELE. According to the CDA presented in Chapter 5, balancing the dual nature of instrumentality and humanism is the key objective in the latest national English curriculum standards, and this theme explores how teachers understand the dual nature of ELE and why they support it. Section 6.4.2 discusses the shortcomings of the standards and textbooks, as pointed out by the teachers, showing how neoliberalist ideas in standards influence teachers’ understanding of English and ELE.

6.4.1 Support for Instrumentality and Humanism

Teachers from both rural and urban schools said that they supported the objective of achieving the dual nature of ELE in English language classes. Jasmine talked about
her understanding of instrumentality and humanism when asked about her impression of the latest standards.

Cross-cultural communication skills and the ultimate unity of instrumentality and humanism; these are the words I respect most in the standards. As far as our national conditions are concerned, instrumentality means that learning English is a form of communication with the world. Using English as a tool for input and output is a kind of instrumentality. As for humanism, you must use English to achieve the goal of educating people. You must let others understand China through it, and China must also understand the world. We use humanism as the ladder to improve students’ cultural awareness and competitiveness.

Jasmine (urban school)

Jasmine relates instrumentality and humanism with cross-cultural communication, and expressed her appreciation of instrumentality and humanism in the standards. As I discussed in Section 5.4, the 2011 standards showed that cross-cultural awareness is one of the most important features of humanism, and could help students develop their cultural literacy by critically understanding foreign cultures and values. Jasmine’s interpretation of instrumentality and humanism generally seemed to echo the clauses in the standards. She describes English as a tool for communicating with the world, suggesting that this is instrumentality. Meanwhile, her understanding of humanism as a ‘ladder’ to improve ‘cultural awareness and competitiveness’ also indicates the instrumental value of English in promoting Chinese culture. The distinction between Instrumentality and humanism was not clear from her perspective.

In the interview, she also said that in practice, students focused on exams instead of the dual nature of ELE. I asked whether she thought the dual nature of ELE was more important than exams, and she said that she thought it was. But she was still unable to clearly define humanism.

The main discoveries in social science and science all happen abroad. If we wait for others to translate these cutting-edge academic findings into Chinese and then study then, I don’t know how long that would take. The things that need to be learned in the world must be in English, showing that English should be a tool to unify instrumentality and humanism, like the standards say.

Jasmine (urban school)

Her comments highlight two points. Firstly, Jasmine was not very clear on the difference between the dual nature of ELE, especially in terms of what humanism was in this context. Secondly, her focus of ELE is on instrumentality, to use English as a tool for acquiring foreign knowledge. Her last comment made me think about the power.
behind the standards. Although Jasmine thought that ELE was only a tool, she tended to use the clauses in the standards to make her answer sound more credible.

This reminded me of Foucault’s criticism of governmentality. Foucault (1979/2008) believes that neoliberal governmentality makes use of other types of power, which leads to an unconscious impact on individuals. The standards, as a form of power, may have made Jasmine believe that instrumentality and humanism in ELE are the ‘formative truth and power’ (Gane, 2008) without explaining what instrumentality and humanism actually are.

As well as being a tool for language exchange, Jasmine’s comments also refer to the dominance of English in the academic sphere, showing that English was more than just a language. The instrumentality of English has been strengthened by combining it with a wider sense – in Jasmine’s example, this is academic knowledge. Based on Bourdieu (1985, 1990, 1996), cultural capital comprises knowledge that is consciously acquired through the socialisation of culture and tradition. Linguistic cultural capital is a form of embodied cultural capital that could be added to a person’s cultural capital to reproduce other forms of capital. In Jasmine’s first comment, she thinks that humanism could improve students’ competitiveness, which suggests that she to some extent regards English as a form of cultural capital that could be accumulated to improve students’ cultural competitiveness in the international system of cultural exchange. This indicates that the market theory of exchange and competition has been rationalised by the standards and has influenced teachers’ methods of English language teaching.

My interview with Feifei, the English language teacher in the urban school, reflected this influence further. Feifei also showed her agreement with the humanism of ELE. She saw how humanism worked in the cultural exchange system and how it would benefit students and Chinese culture. She believed that the current standards paid more attention to the information behind language – such as politeness and habits – than before, allowing students to consider the cultural implications when they talk in English instead of word-by-word translation. Feifei believed this cultural implication was related to humanism. When asked why learning the information behind the language was good, Feifei responded:

> Only by understanding the information behind the language can you be objective when you face so many different cultures in the world. I am concerned about this
because before our country’s transition to the current stage of rapid economic
development, some people overemphasised foreign countries and thought they
were superior. In fact, we must have full awareness to protect our own culture and
ideas. Those people need to look at China and foreign countries more objectively
to gain a real understanding of foreign countries’ operations through their cultures.
Only in this way can we become stronger and more confident.

Feifei (urban school)

Feifei’s comments indicate that she relates ELE to a country’s global status and power. This echoes what Barker (2000) says about cultural capital, in that it can confer social status and power. Feifei’s answer suggests that humanism should be emphasised in ELE to create a way for students to realise and resist the superiority of ‘foreign countries’ and to be more confident about Chinese culture. Hall’s (1986) theory of articulation claims that ideology can be articulated through different social forces such as education and culture by subjects to achieve its dominance. Subjects can also undermine the hegemony of dominant ideology by articulating themselves using new thoughts. Adopting the theory of articulation to analyse Feifei’s interpretation of humanism, it is reasonable to assume that Feifei means that foreign/Western cultures had achieved dominance by articulating their cultural ideas to their economic forces. As soon as China has fulfilled its potential for economic development, it should also articulate its cultural ideas to pursue its status and power in the world, in Feifei’s words, to pursue ‘confidence and strength’.

During my observation in Feifei’s class, I found that she used her call for Chinese confidence in her teaching practice. In a lesson talking about life now and in the past, Feifei provided slides with pictures which showed the differences between modern life and historical contexts in China (Figure 6.2). She also asked students to describe changes in family, work, education and other aspects of life based on their own experiences. She encouraged students to be proud of China’s development.

Figure 6.2: Sample of Urban Teacher’s Slides
For Feifei, the concentration on humanism in ELE seems to be a way of defending Chinese culture and extending China’s soft power by introducing Chinese traditions, stories and development in English to foreign countries. This may be a resistance to the cultural imperialism of English. However, associating Chinese culture with economic advantages still reflects neoliberal logic. Teachers and students are still the controlled subjects organised by a belief in economic development for national improvement.

The rural English language teacher, Feng Jun, also talked about the humanism and instrumentality of ELE in the interview when asked what impressed him most about the 2011 edition standards:

I think this set of standards pays more attention to humanism, which requires us (teachers) to introduce foreign customs frequently. We teachers should pay more attention to cultural differences. Focusing on differences allows students to understand the advanced science and culture of foreign countries and also to learn what should be passed on to foreigners about our culture. I think the standards expect that English becomes a skill, a quality and an ability for all Chinese people. Only in this way can we truly use English as a tool for humanistic communication.

Feng Jun (rural school)

Like the urban teachers, Feng Jun believed that humanism was closely related to culture. He had the same ideas of cultural exchange and delivering Chinese culture in English as Feifei. He also believed that English was a tool for communication, and that humanism was a form of communication. However, he mentioned his understanding of the ultimate goal of ELE based on the standards, which is that English should become a skill, a quality and an ability of people.

In Section 2.4.2, I discussed Said’s (1978) postcolonialist argument of Western countries, especially the UK and the USA, promoting their Western-centrism. English, the native language of these two countries, has become a globally defined linguistic capital that people would like to acquire to exchange economic, social and cultural capital. As Feng Jun said, English has become a skill, a quality, and an ability that can be acquired to accumulate capital for personal and national purposes. This shows that Feng Jun’s understanding of humanism reveals the global dominance of the English language and Western culture.

Gough (2002) analyses how socialisation practices neoliberalism, and indicates that adding value to the community through the use of knowledge is a way of internalising
neoliberal social ideologies into individuals’ minds. Changing English into a skill, a quality and an ability of the Chinese people seems to be a form of internalisation which adds value to language knowledge so that the community who possess this knowledge becomes more valuable. In Bourdieu’s (1991) words, this action changes linguistic and cultural capital into economic capital. Feng Jun’s understanding of humanism therefore suggests that the dual nature of English makes it possible for individuals or nations to achieve different forms of capital exchange in the world market.

6.4.2 Shortcomings of Standards and Textbooks

The teachers I interviewed argued that the standards had limitations and should be revised. All three teachers thought that the standards were unrealistic. The two urban teachers claimed that the requirements for extracurricular reading could not be achieved by students. Jasmine discussed the basic problem they face about extracurricular reading:

I feel that the curriculum standards are unrealistic in some specific requirements. For example, in reading, if all the cloze and reading comprehension exercises that a child has done in junior secondary school are counted as reading text, then his extracurricular reading definitely meets the requirement, which is 150,000 words. But if there is such a large amount of reading, why is the students’ English proficiency not very high? This proves that it is almost impossible to improve English literacy by doing tons of exercises. So, in our current situation, excluding the exercises, the junior secondary school students here cannot meet the extracurricular reading standards.

Jasmine (urban school)

Jasmine’s comments suggest that students’ reading ability can be quantified in the standards. Kelly (2009) argues that planning the curriculum with quantitative targets is an attempt to reduce education to a scientific activity and an industrial process industry, and that by adopting an industrial model for education, the behaviour of educational participants can be modified in certain ways. In other words, planning a curriculum with quantitative targets will change educational participants into measurable products. Once the curriculum makes human beings measurable, they can be valued, judged and exchanged under economic rules. Graeber (2012) thinks that fostering a quantified image of human productivity further intensifies indebtedness, leading to a sense of permanent inadequacy. This may explain why the number of words in the requirements is so big that it exceeds what students can achieve.
Moore and Robinson (2016) believe that creating anxious and precarious individuals may make them passive objects whose minds can be controlled. This is seen as a neoliberal measure that could be used to regulate, recalibrate, manage and govern students, teachers and even educational institutions, which explains why students who have achieved the reading requirement by doing exercises have still not improved their English proficiency. Instead of improving learning abilities, the purpose of doing reading exercises switches to reaching a quantified goal. Once that goal has been achieved – or in Ball’s (2003) words, once productivity targets have been reached – the achievement can only be assessed by performance indicators rather than qualitative English language knowledge. This once again reveals the influence of accountability and performativity on ELE in China.

Jasmine’s concern about the impractical reading requirement was echoed by Feifei, who claimed that the requirements for extracurricular reading were ‘impractical’. She believed that although the requirements for vocabulary were also hard to achieve, ‘students could solve this problem by continuous recitation’. However, she said, ‘most students have no way of meeting the requirements for reading’ because they still have lots of tasks in other school subjects. This shows Feifei’s opinions on the standards. She has realised the control the standards exert on students, claiming that students could use recitation to reach their vocabulary requirements, which indicates that to achieve the goal set by the standards, students have to ‘raise their own productivity in order to survive’ (Levidow, 2002, p. 3). Feifei questioned the standards’ requirements because she found it impossible for students to increase their productivity because they still have other school subjects to learn.

Feifei also put forward her suggestions for revising the standards:

> English is very important, especially now in an era of internationalisation, but some students may just not be good at learning languages. I think the standards need to be more flexible. There should not be only one evaluation standard, and standards should be adjusted according to the different levels and preferences of students. English could be turned into an elective course, and students should be able to choose to learn what they like.

Feifei (urban school)

Feifei claimed that students were already affected by differences in their abilities to engage with learning when they first came to school. If they were evaluated by the unified standards, they may not be able to develop their other capabilities. According
to Fitzsimons (2002), students lose their autonomy under the curriculum principles, because what does and does not constitute a skill or knowledge is defined by political powers. As discussed in Chapter 5, English was chosen as a major subject to achieve modernisation and economic development for China, which means ELE changes from learning for knowledge to a political act for utilitarian outcomes. Students, teachers and even educational institutions are controlled by the pursuit of national political and economic benefit.

Feifei’s comments reveal the neoliberal rationalism that underlies ELE policies. Firstly, the standards change students from subjects of learning into productive ‘individual enterprises’ (Cooper, 2014). Secondly, they frame students’ capabilities using political powers and limit their development with utilitarian goals. It is reasonable to assume that Feifei is arguing that neoliberal ideas in the standards tend to act upon students with specific goals by trying to govern them. Feifei hoped that the standards could be made more flexible so that students could choose to learn their preferences, which shows a call for students’ agentic selves. Billett (2011) states that the agentic self can resist strong social pressures by locating a position and role within social practice that is consistent only with their own subjective willingness. This echoes Apple’s (2015) ideas about the relationship between structure and agency based on Hall’s (1988) articulation theory. Social structures could be produced and reproduced by agents through their actions. Feifei’s suggestion could be one way of reclaiming ELE from neoliberalism, focusing on education as the development of individuals’ interests that do not accord with economic imperatives.

Unlike the urban teachers, who focussed on the requirements of the standards, Feng Jun, the rural teacher, criticised the content of examinations in the standards. When asked where the standards should be improved, he said:

I think we need to change the contents of the examination. The tests are said to have been changed, but in fact they haven’t. There has never been an inspection of spoken English ability in our exams. If you don’t take the speaking test, the students will believe it’s not important. They will only recite words and do practice questions instead of practising oral English.

Feng Jun (rural school)

This indicates that Feng Jun has realised that the examination system decides what students learn and don’t learn. Once something becomes subject to an examination, it will become important and worth learning for students, so the exam system controls
teaching and learning practice. Students only recite words and do practice questions because these can help them perform well in exams. This reveals students’ pursuit of performativity. Like teachers being directed and organised by what the examinations require, students’ choices and decisions also accord with the demands of high-stakes tests, rendering them controlled and managed.

Students’ attitudes and actions to a knowledge of English under the influence of examinations seem like evaluating and choosing the most productive or profitable product in a market. Students felt that what would is not examined is therefore less valuable (oral English), so they only put effort into what helps them earn higher examinations scores (reciting words). Savage (2017) criticises the way curricula influence students by persuading them to follow profitable neoliberal ideas in education. They believe that the new generation of students is losing the ability to think critically and be creative. Exam-oriented education turns English language professional skills into a process of quantitative scoring, and the most profitable approach for students is to practice what could help them gain more scores. In other words, students have become docile bodies governed by scores. Only when oral tests are added to the exams and worth high marks will students devote themselves to practising oral English.

The shortcomings of the curriculum standards cannot therefore be summarised as the absence of an oral test. The shortcomings of the curriculum standards could be their reliance on high-stakes tests and their emphasis on accountability and performativity in ELE. Teachers’ perspectives on the standards were presented in this section by analysing the dual nature of ELE and the shortcomings of curriculum standards. For rural and urban English language teachers, their understanding of English and culture is influenced by neoliberal ideas, while shortcomings in the standards are caused by the advocacy of measurable evaluation in ELE.

6.5 Teachers’ Ideal Classrooms and Classrooms in Practice

This section examines my findings concerning teachers’ ideal and actual classroom practices. While the previous section analysed their perspectives on the standards, this section aims to discuss how they would like to conduct themselves and how they act in the classroom under the influence of different educational curriculum standards.
and social-political backgrounds. Section 6.5.1 looks at the ideal classrooms of the three participants, revealing the relationship between their perspectives on the standards and their ideas about classroom design. The next section analyses participants’ actual classrooms through their descriptions and my classroom observations, presenting the differences between the ideal classrooms and classrooms in practice and what causes these differences.

6.5.1 Ideal Classrooms

My interviewees described their ideal classrooms, in which they had different goals to achieve. Their ideal classrooms were related to their understanding or reflection on previous teaching practices, the objectives of the curriculum standards and their expectations of students. Analysing teachers’ ideal classrooms is helpful in identifying the difficulties they face in the classroom and tracing the source of their behaviours in teaching practices. Feng Jun, the rural teacher, mainly discussed his expectations of students when asked what he wanted to achieve in the classroom:

The things to be learned and the tasks to be completed in class should have different requirements for different students. Let them all have something to do. I want students at different levels to have different tasks to complete. This may give them all a sense of accomplishment in the class. Every student would have something to gain from that class. I would also like to design group activities for them so that they can speak freely as they participate in them. I would like to use smart digital advice to add background knowledge when teaching reading. I still want to increase their interest.

Feng Jun (rural school)

Fen Jun’s comments highlight his concerns about improving students’ motivation and sense of achievement in the class. He believes that students’ sense of achievement in class was related to tasks they were able to complete. He would like to use classroom activities and teaching materials to help them complete tasks at different levels to gain a sense of achievement in class. Voelkl (1995) discusses the sense of achievement through students’ participation in class, claiming that students’ participation has a prominent and crucial influence on their achievements. From my classroom observation, I noticed that students in Feng Jun’s class remained silent throughout, and even when they were called for questions they barely talked. Feng Jun’s ideal classroom indicates that he has noticed students’ lack of participation
because he talked about class activities that are recommended by the standards to enhance the students’ participation.

He expressed his preference for group activities and smart digital advice (an electronic application with learning games). In the standards, group activities are recommended to cultivate students’ team spirit, and electronic resources are recommended as an innovative way of self-learning (BNUPH, 2011). Therefore, Feng Jun’s ideal classroom could be seen as a combination of his reflection on the teaching practices and his understanding of the standards. This underscores his conviction and connection with the curriculum standards.

Unlike Feng Jun, Jasmine felt that her students always enjoyed her classes because she always endeavoured to create a ‘relaxed atmosphere’. She claimed that only when the teacher can face the students in a relaxed way will the students become active and willing to participate: ‘It depends on how you position yourself in the classroom. I wish I could be at the same age as my students in my classroom.’ Jasmine’s ideal self in the classroom shows that she would like to establish an image equal to the students to help her communicate with them. To Freire (1970/2014), students and teachers are both subjects in the educational process. Supporting equality between students and teachers could empower students to control the educational process alongside teachers. In Feng Jun’s ideal classroom, he is still a manager who has the power to conduct the teaching and learning process.

As well as the ideal self in the classroom, Jasmine also expressed her expectations of students:

I hope that students will gain thinking ability and culture in my class. These are the two most important points for me in teaching languages. Because when you learn a language, you must learn a part of the culture, otherwise you cannot understand the language. Now this is more valued in the curriculum standards. The reason why China is to a certain extent inferior to foreign countries is because Chinese people lack critical thinking. Children are unwilling to challenge and break through their comfort zone. Doing what teachers tell them and learning tasks that are arduous but very simple limits their creativity. So my ideal classroom would encourage students to gain an understanding of critical thinking and culture.

Jasmine (urban school)

For her students, Jasmine wished that they could learn critical thinking skills and cultural awareness of foreign countries through English language learning. This idea, as she says, came from the curriculum standards, which encourage cultural
awareness, emotional attitudes and learning strategies in language education. These aspects, as the standards suggest, are ‘conducive to develop students’ critical thinking skills and comprehensively improve their understanding of the nature of humanism in ELE’ (BNUPH, 2011, p. 8). I explained the nature of humanism in Sections 5.4.2 and 6.4.1 as something that encourages critical thinking and an understanding of foreign cultures and values.

Critical thinking skills would help students to be creative, and exploring culture would help them develop themselves. However, Jasmine believed that students became unwilling to challenge and think because doing what the teachers said is easier than thinking creatively. It seems that in Jasmine’s context, ELE has cultivated students as passive objects that are willing to obey teachers instead of making students critically thinking citizens (Giroux, 2018). Jasmine’s ideal classroom indicates that she has noticed that students’ growth of critical awareness is restricted in her context. She would be willing to frame a classroom that encouraged students to develop their critical thinking skills.

However, Jasmine related critical thinking skills with competition between China and foreign countries, claiming that foreign countries were superior to China because foreign people have critical thinking skills. It seems reasonable to assume that Jasmine has been influenced by the policies I analysed in Chapter 5, which indicated that learning English is designed to improve China’s international competitiveness (BNUPH, 2011). Her belief that ‘China is inferior to the foreign countries’ could be seen as a consequence of Western-centrism, a biased view that favours Western civilisations over non-Western ones. Jasmine’s description of her ideal classroom shows her reflection on teaching practices and reveals the influence of political ideology on her.

Feifei’s ideal classroom showed her desire for a relaxing teaching atmosphere and the participation of students in class. Feifei realised that the standards restricted the development of students’ capabilities. In her answer about the ideal classroom, she offered more specific advice:

Do not stick to the textbook, use the textbook as the foundation, but not stick to it. Of course, this is the ideal state. I have always wanted to create a class where everyone can really want to learn, and learn easily, rather than what we have now. I really think it is necessary to relieve the pressure of students during normal teaching. This could be realised in the details of the classroom. For example, doing
activities they like with them, including projects where they can relax, listening to songs, watch movies, or chat, these kinds of activities.

Feifei (urban school)

Feifei’s comments suggest she is aware that her ideal classroom is hard to achieve. It also shows her resistance to current ELE practices in her comment ‘rather than what we have now’. In terms of escaping from current education practices, Feifei expresses her opinion from the perspective of students. She cares about their needs and desires to learn and wants to motivate students in ways they prefer. Feifei’s ideal classroom echoes Nunan’s (1986) learner-centred curriculum in second-language teaching. Nunan (1986) advocates collaborative effort between teachers and learners, and encourages learners to participate in the decision-making process. Feifei would like to conduct activities students enjoy in her class, which according to Nunan learners consider to be most urgently required in class. Feifei’s ideal classroom offers opportunities for students to develop their own learning skills rather than carrying out curriculum tasks to produce educational products through selected contents. This ideal classroom shows Feifei’s reflection of her teaching practice and also suggests resisting performativity.

In summary, compared with the rural teacher, the urban teachers’ ideal classrooms reflect ELE policies and the current educational practice but also provide critical suggestions for improving learning and teaching in class. Involving students’ preferences and power into dialogic interaction in the classroom may produce an open and equal environment to help students develop in class.

6.5.2 Classrooms in Practice

If the ideal classroom reflects teachers’ understanding of the educational process and other factors that affect this process, classrooms in practice reflect how their ideal classroom works in reality and what factors support or obstruct their ideals. Feng Jun’s description of his classroom in practice indicates the reasons that led to the loss of student participation.

Sometimes students find the contents of the textbook difficult, and they have problems understanding the text and grammar. I think that the teaching materials are not adapted to local conditions, and a lot of content is divorced from actual life in a rural setting. Meanwhile, the grammar points in the textbook are too dense.
Students cannot receive so much information all at once, making it more difficult for them to learn and practice. They become unwilling to learn or participate in the classroom. They are not interested in English class; they do not think, they just listen to the teacher. Some students even think that I am forcing them to study. Sometimes it feels like there is no communication with them in class.

Feng Jun (rural school)

Feng Jun suggests that textbook contents are too difficult for students to understand. Two reasons have led to this difficulty. One is that the content of the teaching materials is divorced from the rural setting, and the other is that the grammar points are too dense for students to take in. My classroom observation provided testimony to this. The textbook used in the rural context was the standard textbook from the People’s Education Press (PEP, 2013). It was developed based on the latest curriculum standards and approved by the MOE. I found that most of the dialogue and stories in the textbook happened in an urban context, while rural contexts are marginalised or absent. Some of the objects, places and even things discussed in textbooks never appear in rural students’ lives, so it is hard for students to feel any connection with the scenes in the dialogues and stories.

During my observation, there was a lesson about Fun Times Park, in which students were asked to predict how the character in the story would feel before she took a roller coaster ride (Figure 6.3). Few students could answer this question. One student said that he had never been to a theme park and did not know how people would feel on a roller coaster ride. Feng Jun asked how many students had taken a roller coaster before. It turned out that no one had.

**Figure 6.3:** Sample of Rural School Textbook
Rural contexts are absent from the textbook, and almost all activities and readings refer to stories that provide illustrations of urban contexts. It seems like there are only cities and urban people in the world according to this textbook. This may be the result of neoliberal urbanisation. According to Brenner and Theodore (2002), neoliberalism encourages the creation of urban spaces and advanced capital exchanges to maintain its existence because cities are strategically crucial arenas in which neoliberal initiatives are articulated. In other words, urbanisation is interiorised by neoliberalism in every sphere of social life. English language textbooks could therefore be seen as more than a kind of teaching material, and as another space where neoliberal concepts can be conveyed and dominate people’s ideas.

It is hard for the rural students to align themselves with English language learning through the textbook because of the marginalisation of the rural context. At the same time, it makes them feel that English language is something only people in the urban context need to learn. In this way, the hegemony of neoliberal urbanised English language learning and the inequality between rural and urban contexts are framed. Rural students under the hegemony of urbanisation have become passive recipients of English language knowledge in the classroom and have lost interest in participation.

Feng Jun also pointed out that the grammar aspect of the textbook is too dense for students, claiming that they cannot take in so much information at the same time. I do not agree with Feng Jun, because I believe that the grammar sections in the textbook are well organised. One grammar point is repeated many times in the same module using different forms including listening, dialogue and reading. However, during the observation, I found that Feng Jun still adopted the Grammar Translation Method (GTM) in his English language class. He presented grammar points in the same module together, explained the rules in Chinese, and then asked students to do practice questions (Figure 6.4).

I noticed in the observation that Feng Jun’s students were not willing to communicate with him because their oral skills had not been developed. Conti (2016) criticised GTM as void of communicative value and leading to a lack of oral skills. Feng Jun points out deficiencies in the curriculum standards and claims that students do not want to develop their oral English skills because the oral test was not included in the exam. However, his decision to use GTM in the classroom may be the cause of his students’ insufficient oral English ability. This also shows that Feng Jun lacks the motivation to
learn and practise new professional knowledge and skills. As discussed in Section 6.3.2, controlled motivation causes Feng Jun to be incentivised by economic performance rather than professional development.

**Figure 6.4:** Sample of Rural Teacher’s Teaching Slides

Compared with the rural teacher, urban teachers’ descriptions of their classrooms in practice mainly focus on their relationships with students. In Feifei’s ideal classroom, she could be described as a supporter in critically reflective role, and a resister to some extent. However, in her classroom in practice, she is the one who has to force students to complete learning tasks, such as asking them to recite and memorise vocabulary, reading notes and grammar exercises. She said:

> In my classroom, everyone obeys a unified model of language teaching and learning. And then slowly, we make things that are actually very interesting mandatory and rigid. We have English classes every day, and it is impossible to be as interesting in a new class every day. Some hard grammar and exercises are not interesting in themselves, but students have many other learning tasks. They have two extracurricular workbooks and a book full of lists of key English expressions to be done after class. It is inevitable that they rely on us to push them to do many tasks in class.

Feifei (urban school)

As Feifei described, her students had many learning tasks to complete throughout the school day. Their morning class starts every morning at 7:30 where they need to recite the vocabulary, reading notes and dialogues from the textbook. In the English language class, as well as the textbook, students’ homework will be corrected and explained. Sometimes, they will be required to write short essays in class. Exams are conducted once a month in the urban school. Feifei’s actual classroom is packed with endless learning tasks, and she has to force students to complete them as soon as possible.
Jasmine, the other urban teacher, said that her classes are also filled with learning tasks. Feifei felt she had to push students to do many tasks, so her ideal classroom could not be achieved. Jasmine explained why she could not realise her ideal classroom state:

They know that getting high scores in exams depends on a lot of practice questions, so they prefer doing practice questions rather than practising critical thinking skills. They treat exams as a priority. So, it is difficult for me to achieve the conditions I want in class.

Jasmine (urban school)

This suggests that Jasmine’s students have been managed and controlled by the exam-oriented educational system. They obey the hegemonic ideas of accountability and performativity in exams without questioning or resisting. Jasmine’s students believe that doing a lot of practice questions related to exams is an effective way to improve their performance in exams, so they would like to spend their time doing practice questions and knowledge that will benefit the exams.

In my observation, I found that teachers in the urban school designed a notebook full of English clauses, grammar points and collocations that will be examined in the SSSEEs for students. In the slides, there was a part called Key Points in SSSEE and practice questions to examine whether students have recited the notebook (Figure 6.5).

Figure 6.5: Sample of Urban Teacher’s Teaching Slides

This reminds me of Freire’s banking model of education (1970/2014). Instead of communicating, the teacher just needs to deposit knowledge into the students. As
passive objects, students receive, memorise and repeat what the teachers tell them and never question that knowledge. Aliakbari and Faraji (2011) suggest that this model mirrors the structure of an oppressive society in which people obey authority. In the context of this urban school, the requirements in the standards and the search for performativity in examinations are what oppresses students and turns them into passive objects that can be produced and measured. As discussed in Section 6.2, teachers are also oppressed by the accountability which comes from the pursuit of performativity in examinations. At the same time, teachers themselves perform according to the requirements of the neoliberal political system. Freire (1970/2014) sees education as a political practice in the control of language and consciousness as a condition for the subjection of individuals and groups by the hegemony. Students and teachers are passive objects controlled and governed by the rulers in the neoliberal educational system.

If urban teachers’ classrooms in practice show how the exam-oriented system under neoliberal background operates to oppress individuals, Feng Jun’s classroom in practice shows the consequences of giving up resistance to hegemonic ideas. Both Feifei and Jasmine reflect on the governance of accountability and performativity when talking about their ideal classrooms, expressing a critical attitude and ideas of resistance to the banking model of education. However, in the real context they still follow the management of these ideas. The difference between the real and the imagined indicates that it is hard for individuals to resist hegemonic ideas. As Apple (1998) claims, promoting counter-hegemonic ideologies in education will never be easy. It requires continuous collective critical descriptions of hegemonic ideologies to support reform.

6.6 Summary

This chapter presented my findings from interviews with English language teachers in rural and urban schools who teach students in the final year of compulsory education. I also drew on my classroom observation data to contextualise teachers’ responses. Sections 6.2 and 6.3 presented my findings of how teachers’ teaching practices and motivation are influenced by social contexts and administrative objectives. Sections 6.4 and 6.5 discussed how policies influenced teachers’ ideas and practices. The
similarities and differences between the rural and urban contexts were introduced and analysed. Further discussion of neoliberal governance in ELE on teachers will be conducted in Chapter 8. The analysis of students’ interviews will be presented in the next chapter to identify connections and contradictions between teachers and students under the influence of neoliberalism.
Chapter 7: Findings and Discussion — Students’ Interviews and Observations

7.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the findings from the thematic analysis of interviews with rural and urban school students. The theoretical literature reviewed in Chapter 2 guides the discussion in general. Where relevant, the discussion refers to the findings that emerged from my classroom observations and the teachers’ interviews to explore the interaction and mutual influence between ELE participants in practice. The analysis of ELE policies (presented in Chapter 5) is also drawn upon to illustrate their possible impact on participating students. There are four sections in this chapter:

1. Students’ Investment in English Language Learning
2. Students’ Perspectives on Their English Language Education Teachers and Teaching Practices
3. Students’ Perspectives on the 2011 English Curriculum Standards and Textbooks
4. Rural and Urban Students – Stratified Neoliberal Subjects

Section 7.2 discusses the influence of neoliberalism on students’ investment in ELE. Based on Darvin and Norton’s (2015) model of investment (discussed in Section 2.5.2), this section explores the relationship between students’ investment and their identities. The findings identify the differences between rural and urban school students’ identities, revealing unequal neoliberal capital allocation between rural and urban areas.

Section 7.3 examines the different perspectives on rural and urban school students on their English language teachers and teaching practices. The discussion presents rural students’ de-alliances and urban students’ alliances with their English teachers in the neoliberal educational system respectively. The section addresses how students position themselves in their English learning trajectories vis-à-vis their teachers to reveal the influence of neoliberalism on students’ self-configuration in ELE practices.

Section 7.4 presents the rural and urban school students’ different perspectives on ELE policies and textbooks, exploring rural school students’ disconnection and urban
students’ alignment with the ‘good’ student image encouraged by ELE policies. Facing neoliberal ELE policies and textbooks, the different positions taken by rural and urban school students show the various impacts of neoliberalism on students in their learning trajectories.

Section 7.5 explores the effects of neoliberal ideology on rural and urban school students’ future development, referring to the previous three sections. Based on the discussion of neoliberalism and capital theory (Section 2.3), I argue that prevailing neoliberal ideas within China’s education system turn rural students into marginalised neoliberal subjects, while neoliberal governance turns urban students into valuable neoliberal subjects by affecting their subjectivities. The impact of neoliberal education policies and practices on urban and rural students’ expectations of themselves is presented to identify the stratification of ELE in students’ ELE trajectories.

The comparison between rural and urban school students runs through this chapter to investigate the reasons that (re)produce disparities between rural and urban school students’ performances in ELE practices under the neoliberal education system.

### 7.2 Students’ Investment in English Language Learning

In the interviews, students were asked what they thought about English language learning, why they want to learn English and what they have been doing or will do to learn English. Urban and rural school students suggested that they learn English because they need to take exams, specifically SSSEEs, to gain admission to their target schools in the future. As presented in Section 2.5.2, Darvin and Norton (2015) developed a theory of investment that uses interactions between identity, capital, and ideology to explain why students want to invest in a second or foreign language. In response to the questions above, I identified two subthemes that explained rural school and urban school students’ current constitution of identity forced by exams: rural examinees for senior secondary school and urban examinees for model senior secondary schools. Relationships between students’ current constitution of identity and their investment in ELE for their future imagined identity will be identified.

Based on the discussion of Darvin and Norton (2015) and Norton (2015), rural and urban school students’ perceptions of their present and imagined identities and their
investment in ELE are mutually constituted. In their English learning trajectory, the way students identify themselves determines what they would like to invest in, and their investment determines whether they can achieve their future imagined identities. At the same time, the students’ quest for their imagined identities affects the efforts they make to invest in ELE. Meanwhile, rural and urban learners’ present and imagined identities can also unveil the types of capital they possess and invest in, as well as what types of capital they want to obtain.

Bourdieu (1989, 1991) argues that the ideology recognised and adopted by the authority of the state apparatus determines what capital can be transformed into symbolic capital. As such, examining what forms of capital are legitimate and are accepted by rural and urban learners could in turn identify what the recognised ideology of the state in education is and how it operates in the trajectory of English learners’ investment. The following two sub-sections address the different kinds of symbolic capital interviewees have and/or aspire to acquire in the process of investing in ELE to examine the influence of neoliberalism on ELE in rural and urban contexts.

7.2.1 Rural Examinees for Senior Secondary School

When asked to consider why they wanted to learn English, all rural and urban school students stressed the importance of English as a subject in exams, especially in SSSEEs. Most of the rural school students said that the only reason they wanted to learn English is because it plays a large part in the exams. LY’s and YCC’s answers reflect this view:

I am not interested in English at all. But we have to take SSSEEs. I think it must be very important for me to learn English because it is worth 120 points in the exam. It would be great if I could get 72 points (60% of the full score).

LY (rural school student)

I have no feelings about English; I neither like nor dislike it. I would be happy not to take English classes. I still listen to English classes and do my homework because I have to take the exam. I know the SSSEE is important to us.

YCC (rural school student)

These two rural school students expressed their disinterest in English language learning. Both of them use ‘have to’ in the extracts, indicating that they are obliged to
learn English for the SSSEE. LY points out that English, as a subject, is worth a great deal in the SSSEE. YCC says that the SSSEE is the reason why he is still learning English. Their answers show that it is the exam that forces them to learn English. They treat the language as an exam subject only, and do not learn it for its value beyond this. The importance of attending the class is not learning a language, it is to meet the examination system requirements. YCC implies that the only reason he invests in ELE is the exams. Instead of being English language learners, the rural school students position themselves as learners for exams. For these students, the worth of knowledge depends on its weight (scores) in the examination system. Taking this identity shows that rural school students learn English because they need to pass the exam, and have no other choice under the examination system, which makes it easy for rural students to be subconsciously controlled by this normative set of exams.

When they were asked to consider what they have been doing for ELE and the SSSEE, both rural school students claimed that reciting vocabulary and grammar rules and doing enough exercises were essential. Qi Yue, a rural school student, explained how she recited vocabulary and grammar rules and what exercises she regularly did:

Before the exams, our teacher will summarise the words and grammar points that will be tested in class. We need to take notes and recite them. The school has ordered a workbook that contains exercises on vocabulary and grammar for us to do after class. The more we can recite and do, the higher our SSSEE scores will be.

Qi Yue (rural school student)

This quote shows that the teacher and the school provide basic ELE resources for rural school students. None of the rural interviewees mentioned any other sources of learning materials. Ma Hao, who has the best scores in English exams in the rural school, said that all he did for ELE was to follow the teacher’s guidance and finish the workbook. Qi Yue and Ma Hao suggest that the only materials and resources the rural school students could approach come from the school, and these are limited. Secondly, according to the quotes, English language knowledge in rural areas is practised by vocabulary, grammar points and exercises to improve scores. Students believe that the only reason they learn English is to get higher scores in the SSSEE, and that giving correct answers to vocabulary and grammar exercises reflects the scores they need. Language abilities such as listening, speaking, reading and writing are neglected or replaced with accountable exercises that can be easily added, compared, and
examined in the SSSEEs. According to my discussion of teachers’ classroom practices in Section 6.5, GTM was used by the rural English teacher to deal with dense grammar practices for the SSSEE. The rural school students’ constitution of their examinee identities is reinforced through these vocabulary and grammar exercises.

When asked why the SSSEE is so important, rural school students said that only by getting a certain score in this exam can they become students in the senior public secondary schools they want to attend. According to Norton and Gao (2008), a desired community that offers possibilities for an enhanced range of identity options in the future can be seen as an imagined community for language learners that assumes learners’ imagined identity. Investing in English language learning helps rural learners achieve their imagined identity and become members of the imagined community as senior secondary school students. Most rural school students said that they wanted to go to public senior secondary schools. Le Qi told me:

> If my English can improve from the current 80 points to around 90 or 100 points, then I can almost go to a senior secondary school. I didn’t dream highly; for me, becoming a senior secondary school student is already the best thing I could achieve.

Le Qi (rural school student)

Le Qi’s answer is representative of rural school students, for whom investing in ELE means investing in the possibility of becoming a senior school student, which they accept as their imagined identity. This shows that their investment in ELE is to gain further education opportunities instead of becoming someone mastering a language. This once again demonstrated that ELE is just a part of China’s examination system, and is treated as a necessary hurdle to be overcome so that students can obtain their imagined identities.

The rural school students’ words indicate that in their English learning trajectory, ELE materials (vocabulary and grammar exercises) contribute to gaining higher scores in the SSSEE if they recite the relevant vocabulary and answer the exercises correctly. The balance between ELE materials and SSSEE scores suggests that English language knowledge is treated as an object ‘rendered available for conventional exchange’ in the examination system (Heller et al., 2014, p. 545). In the school, English language knowledge has been objectified into vocabulary and grammar exercises that can be recognised as linguistic capital based on Bourdieu (1991).
is added to students’ repertoire for conventional exchange, aligning with the neoliberal market ideas through the examination system. As discussed in Section 2.3.2, neoliberal logic can transform linguistic capital into symbolic capital, increasing students’ exchange value (Bourdieu, 1991). Here, linguistic capital is transformed into SSSEE scores, which become symbolic capital and entitle rural examinees to achieve their future imagined identities as senior secondary school students.

7.2.2 Urban Examinees for Model Senior Secondary Schools

Students from the urban school provided similar answers about learning English for taking exams. Most of them said that the primary reason they learn English language is the SSSEE. Hui, the English teacher’s student assistant in the urban school, said:

The main reason is that English is a subject, and together with mathematics and Chinese, they are the three main subjects in the curriculum. Its position in SSSEE is very important.

Hui (urban school student)

Hui’s classmate, Shi San, expressed a similar opinion:

I kind of like learning English. First, it is an important subject that the SSSEE requires. Second, of the three main subjects English is at least more interesting than Chinese, although I prefer mathematics.

Shi San (urban school student)

These urban students use the word ‘first’ to state the importance of the SSSEE in ELE. This demonstrates that ELE is not primarily seen as the opportunity for urban school students to learn a new language, but as a necessary part of the examination system. Like the rural students, urban students assume they are participants in the examination system who are preparing to be evaluated by the SSSEE. These two urban students also saw English as one of the curriculum’s main subjects, suggesting that they position themselves as a part of the school system, receiving whatever the curriculum plans. The identities as participants in the examination and school system also put urban school students in a passive position, which can be easily controlled and organised by the system. By also positioning themselves as examinees, the urban students consider reciting vocabulary and doing grammar exercises inside and outside school as the essential ways of improving their ELE. However, the urban school
students described taking these into account in their learning trajectory differently. WCY from the urban school discussed what vocabularies he would like to recite and what grammar exercises to do for ELE:

I think finishing what the teacher asks for is the most effective way for ELE. Our English language teacher always introduces new words and grammar points when she presents the textbooks. She reminds us of what is important for the SSSEEs, and we recite them. Normally, she will check whether we can recite the notes every morning. We also have five workbooks to use to practise the words and grammar points again and again.

WCY (urban school student)

WCY’s description resembles Qi Yue’s (rural student). Improving English language abilities in the urban school is simplified as increasing vocabulary knowledge and getting the right answers to grammar exercises for the SSSEE. But it is obvious that more learning resources are provided for urban school students’ ELE. They have five workbooks to use, while the rural school students only have one. Meanwhile, as presented in Section 6.5, the urban teachers have edited a specific grammar textbook for students to use to memorise grammar rules. As well as inside the school, more resources are added to the urban school students’ ELE outside it. GRJ, an urban student, said that vocabulary applications on smart devices helped him to recite new words. These applications have a corpus of SSSEE vocabularies, and he can recite them by playing games. Meanwhile, Linda thought that she also benefitted from extra-curricular English language tutorials:

I started to take extra-curricular English language tutorials in a private after-school tutoring institution in the fourth grade of elementary school, and this year is my sixth year. The extra tutorials focus on English grammar and vocabulary, which are a little more difficult than SSSEE requirements. After these tutorials, the schoolwork seems easier.

Linda (urban school student)

Of the ten urban student participants, seven had taken extra-curricular tutorials, and they all believed that tutorials were useful for improving their performance in exams. However, none of the rural school students had ELE tutorials after school. The money spent on smart devices and the long-term extra-curricular tutorials suggests that urban school students have greater economic capital.

The urban context also provides opportunities for students to listen to and talk in English directly. Six of my urban interviewees had face-to-face communication with
native English speakers, and two had friends who were native English speakers. The urban school organised summer study tours to the United States so that students were able to experience life in an English-speaking country for themselves. This communication and associated experiences are forms of cultural and social capital possessed only by the urban school students.

As well as investing in learning English in the school, urban school students also invest their economic, cultural and social capital to obtain linguistic capital outside the school and then try to transform that into symbolic capital as SSSEE scores. As well as learning from teachers, urban school students are exposed to the cultural and social capital of English. The urban context therefore offers the opportunity to accumulate cultural and social capital for students because the different kinds of resources that benefit ELE have been integrated into daily urban life. In Section 6.5.2, I discussed how the hegemony of neoliberalism creates an urbanised space in ELE and maintains it by providing more opportunities for capital exchanges in the urban area. Subsequently, inequality between rural and urban contexts is framed and enhanced through ELE. The differences in symbolic capital students can obtain inside and outside the school for ELE reflect the inequality between rural and urban school students under neoliberalism.

For rural school students, the types of capital they can invest in ELE and exchange for symbolic capital are significantly less than their urban counterparts. While rural school students can only obtain linguistic capital from the teacher and limited school materials, urban students talked about accumulating other types of capital and transforming them into linguistic capital to get symbolic capital (scores). Rural and urban school students see their present identities as subjects of the examination system. Their investment in ELE is quantified as language materials they obtain and measured by their SSSEE scores. Once the language materials and SSSEE results become organised and managed by the neoliberal market system, students’ investment in ELE will change, subsequently affecting their identity. In other words, although they all share the same identity of examinee at the present, the difference in capital owned by rural and urban school students under neoliberalism will lead to different identities in their future learning trajectories. Not only did they say that they wanted to become senior secondary school students, but the urban school students also pointed out the specific school they wanted to attend.
I am looking forward to X, X and X senior secondary schools. My current level means I can only go to schools that are at a slightly lower level. If I can improve by 5 points in the English SSSEE exam, I will be closer to realizing this dream. I will work harder to see if I can progress in English. It is not particularly difficult for me.

Nina (urban school student)

The schools Nina mentions are provincial model senior secondary schools in the urban area which are famous for high admission rates to the College Entrance Examination and advanced educational resources in the province. Nearly every urban school student chose these schools as their dream school. Like rural school students, their imagined identities are also as senior secondary school students, but they would like to be members of model schools. Although ELE in the urban school is also a part of the examination system, urban students’ investment in ELE is not only for their future opportunities but also for better education with better resources. This shows that they will have more options than rural students if they align themselves as future senior secondary school students.

The government website shows that there are 38 public secondary schools for 25,525 students in the urban area, but only 19 public secondary schools for 16,650 students in the rural area (tjj.ah.gov.cn, 2021). During the observation, I read the rural school’s 2021 SSSEE Preparation Plan, which shows that less than a third of rural students enter public senior secondary schools every year. Most of the students in rural schools I interviewed will not get the opportunity to achieve their imagined identities as senior secondary school students. Meanwhile, according to the Head of the English language department in the urban school, two thirds of urban school students will attend public secondary schools. The class I observed ranked middle among the twelve classes in the urban school, so based on what the head teacher suggested, we can assume that most students from the urban school will continue their education in public senior secondary schools. Although their imagined identities as members of model schools may not be guaranteed, their chances of achieving a place in higher education are still greater than rural school students. This data shows the unequal social resources and opportunities between rural and urban areas, and we can conclude that it will be easier for urban school students to align themselves with their imagined model senior secondary school student identities if they invest in ELE. As more educational
opportunities and advanced resources in model schools can be seen as exchangeable social capital, urban students would obtain more social capital in their future education, which exacerbates the ongoing inequality between rural and urban school students.

Generally, urban students possess more types of capital to construct their investment in ELE, and can obtain more symbolic capital from their investment. Compared with urban students, rural students’ investment is limited by their actual and perceived capital. Under neoliberalism, there is a significant disparity between rural and urban students’ investment in ELE. Urban students are more able to invest in ELE than their rural counterparts, which may be one reason why there is a disparity between rural and urban schools’ results in the SSSEE. Darvin and Norton’s (2015) concept of investment shows that the exchange of symbolic capital affects potential identity change. In fact, the interviews show that rural and urban school students have a repertoire of imagined identities. Students talked about what ELE means to them, how ELE will benefit them, and what they will do in the future with English. As well as future (model) senior secondary school student identities, there are descriptions of other imagined identities in the rural and urban students’ interviews. Those imagined identities reveal more about how students are governed by neoliberalism and how they are turned into different types of neoliberal subjects with an unequal distribution of capital. Different positioning of rural and urban students’ imagined identities in terms of their future personal development will be discussed in the final section to show how students are stratified by the neoliberal educational system. More discussions of students’ imagined identities will be presented later in this chapter.

7.3 Students’ Perspectives on Their English Language Education Teachers and Teachers’ Teaching Practices

By analysing students’ investment in ELE in rural and urban contexts, the last section discussed their current and imagined identities in their future education. I argued that the unequal distribution of capital leads to different identities for rural and urban students when they invest in ELE. For a fuller explanation of how students identify and position themselves in practices under the neoliberal educational system, this section and the next will examine about students’ perspectives on their ELE teachers’ practices and ELE policies in classrooms.
This section presents rural and urban school students’ trajectories when they interact with teachers and their practices in the classroom. By exploring students’ alliances and de-alliances with the teachers in the classroom, the workings of the governance of neoliberal ELE policies through teaching practices and why different identities are configured by students will be analysed. According to my interviews and classroom observation, I discovered that rural school students are unable to align themselves with their English language teachers’ practices, while urban English language teachers’ practices are widely accepted by urban students. This section will be divided into two parts. The first focuses on rural school students’ de-alliances with their teachers, while the second illustrates the urban school students’ alliances with their teachers.

7.3.1 Rural School Students’ De-alliance with Their Teacher

In my interviews with rural school students, their descriptions of interactions with their English language teacher did not appear positive. The teacher’s rigorous teaching style discouraged students from participating in classroom activities. In their English learning trajectory, the teacher’s rigorous teaching style served only to reduce the students’ self-confidence, making the students position themselves as incompetent English language learners. When I asked the students how they felt about taking English language classes, they openly admitted that they did not enjoy the classes because the teacher was too strict and might punish them if they did not perform well in classroom activities. Xiao Ai explained what happened in their English language classroom.

There is nothing about the English class that makes me happy. When you are not here, the English class is terrible and scary. The teacher asks us to answer questions, and if our answers are not good enough, he gets very angry. The English class itself is quite difficult. Many concepts the teacher introduces are hard to understand and I am often unsure of the answers to the questions. I am afraid that he will punish me if I answer it wrong, so I don’t take the initiative to answer.

Xiao Ai (rural school student)

Xiao Ai identifies two reasons for not wanting to participate in classroom activities. First, the atmosphere in the classroom was uncomfortable because of possible punishments from the teacher. This reveals the power relation of this classroom, and from Xiao Ai’s perspective, the English teacher is empowered. In terms of what or who empowered
the teacher, my observation and my interview with the teacher in the school can be
seen as a resource to explore this question. The English language teacher in the rural
school, as I mentioned in Chapter 6, is not only a teacher but also the headteacher of
the class who oversees everyday affairs in the class. He takes care of every student’s
daily life in school, including their safety and their meals. For the students, he is as
much a guardian as an English teacher. As one of the students, Star, said: ‘Although
he is very strict, he also cares about us as much as his own children.’ Students position
themselves as the teachers’ children in a relationship that reflects the wider Chinese
family discourse which emphasises the authority of parents. Just as Freire (1970/2014)
implies, this parental relationship is the result of the ‘banking’ model, and rural school
students are oppressed in the English classroom.

In Section 6.5 I discussed the rural teacher’s teaching practices based on my
observations by referring to Freire’s (1970/2014) banking model of education. The
rural teacher spent most of the time reading the slides and then asking students to
recite vocabulary and grammar. Freire believes that the ‘banking’ model constructs an
oppressive relationship between teachers and students. In the rural school’s
classroom, the teacher oppresses his students by asking them to recite like a strict
parent. Freire suggests that in this way, students will configure themselves with the
good and meek receiver image in the classroom and be easily organised.

In the rural ELE classroom, the students therefore position themselves as receivers
who are conducted and managed by the teacher rather than as active agents in the
classroom, and the teacher in the rural context has been influenced by neoliberal ideas
and accepted his role in managing neoliberal ELE policies to become a representative
of neoliberal discourse in practice. In the banking model of education, the teacher can
manage students through neoliberal ideas. However, the interviews with students
showed their resistance to the model, which could be seen as students’ de-alliance
with the teacher’s practices. The rural students’ disconnection from their teacher may
prevent them from aligning with the neoliberalised policies in ELE.

Xiao Ai also said that the English teacher was hard to understand, so answering
questions in class became difficult for her. This indicates that rural school students are
unsure whether their competence in English is good enough to handle classroom
activities. To explain their lack of confidence, Xiao Ai suggested that the teacher’s
practices in the classroom are not effective. I discussed the rural English language
teacher’s teaching practices based on my observation in Section 6.5, arguing that he adopted the GTM approach in his class to achieve one of his teaching aims, to make students remember as many grammar points as possible for exams. In my classroom observations, I did not find the information narrated by the teacher hard to follow because there were clear slides and other teaching materials to help students’ understanding. However, from the students’ point of view, they had trouble meeting the teacher’s expectations. I noticed that in Xiao Ai’s description, she said: ‘when you are not here ....’, which indicates that the classes might not be conducted in the way I observed in my absence. I asked Xiao Ai and other participants what the differences were between the English classes when I was there and the ones when I was not. Xiaozhao provided an answer summarising the English class without me and how students thought the teacher changed in different situations.

He is a two-faced man. When you are here, he is kind and always speaks English. He plays games and his class is lively. When you are away, he is very scary; he explains the grammar, lets us translate the text and answer his questions. If I could translate the text, I could understand what the texts are about and answer his questions. However, most of the time, I cannot fully translate the texts, and I do not know how to answer his questions. English classes are often passed without knowing things. I do not like English language classes; they are difficult for me, and I cannot understand them.

Xiaozhao (rural school student)

Xiaozhao’s criticism of the teacher as a ‘two-faced man’ sounds harsh, but her comment shows why his teaching practices are not effective. Xiaozhao told me that the English teacher’s class did not normally provide sufficient learning resources. The teacher did not speak English frequently, conducted limited classroom activities and was very strict with the students when I was not there. As discussed in Section 7.2, rural school students have comparatively limited resources in ELE, and the English language teacher seems to be the only one who could provide the necessary resources for their learning trajectory. Because of their dissatisfaction with the teacher’s practices, students cannot align themselves with his requirements. In students’ eyes, their teacher is not qualified and their disconnection with his teaching practices distances them from English language learning so that they always position themselves as incompetent learners.

It is worth noting that my presence may have established a new discursive space in the rural classroom. The English teacher tried to establish a more professional image
when I was in his class. He spoke English more often and conducted more classroom activities, which are recognised as ‘good’ classroom strategies under neoliberal ELE policies. However, I noticed that students were still unwilling to communicate with him in the class or to acknowledge his positioning. The teacher’s temporary positioning in my presence was not enough to encourage students to align with him, so although he tried to construct a new way of teaching, few students wanted to or would be able to participate due to their pre-established positions as marginalised incompetent learners. As Xiaozhao said, ‘it is difficult for me, I cannot understand.’ This situation was not changed when the teacher altered his teaching style to reconstruct his professional image in my presence.

At the end of Xiaozhao’s interview she asked me: ‘What do you think about Mr Feng’s English language competence?’ This showed her de-alliance with her teacher. I was positioned as a professional English language speaker by both the English teacher and the students. The teacher called me ‘Doctor’ and spoke English and conducted more activities when I was in his classes, and in my presence he tried to take up an image that was recognised by the ELE policies in front of a ‘doctor’. Students tried to justify the teacher’s practices through my comments, as they could not align themselves with him. My presence in some way stimulated the teacher’s reflexivity and proved the de-alliances between students and the teacher. My observation lasted for six months, but in that time the ELE practices in the classroom did not show any significant improvement. This may indicate that once the de-alliances have been constructed and adopted, it is difficult for the actors in the system to change.

On one hand, the teacher’s teaching practices did not offer sufficient learning resources in the daily English language classroom, which led to students’ de-alliances and then constructed their self-positioning as incompetent students in the neoliberal education system. On the other, students’ self-positioning made them unwilling and unable to participate in the teacher’s class even when the classes were conducted in a recognised way. Therefore, the rural school students’ positioning as incompetent students was established and enhanced by their de-alliances with English language teachers’ practices.
7.3.2 Urban School Students’ Alliances with Their Teacher

Unlike the rural school students, interviews with the urban school students showed that they were fully aligned with their teacher’s ELE practices. They believed that the teacher’s practices enhanced their English language competence. In their English learning trajectory, the teacher’s practices provided the students with what they needed in English language learning through the neoliberal examination system, which allowed the urban school students to position themselves as valid English language learners. This alliance constructed students’ acknowledgement of being valuable students under national ELE policies. When I asked the urban school students, they expressed their enjoyment of the English language classes. Allen, a boy in the urban school, illustrated why he enjoyed the English language classes.

I think whether I like English classes is very much related to how the teacher teaches. Our teacher uses a lot of interesting ways to teach us, rather than just delivering grammar and vocabulary, and uses small games and activities to let us master how to use grammar and vocabulary. This has increased my interest in learning English. Although there will be some fluctuations in these interests due to exams, in general, I enjoy English classes very much.

Allen (urban school student)

According to Allen, the English teacher offered various ways of helping students acquire and enhance their English language competence. In Chapter 5, I discussed the teaching methods suggested by national ELE policies, which encourage teachers to adopt a wide variety of teaching materials to support their practices. Allen and other urban school students told me that these teaching methods were successful in their classroom. This shows firstly that the urban school can access various resources that provide teachers and students with the materials – in other words different forms of social capital – to improve their teachers’ teaching practices. Meanwhile, the teacher has internalised ELE policies in her teaching approach to construct qualified English language learners recognised by ELE policies. Urban school students such as Allen used the word ‘interesting’ to describe their feelings about their English classes. This demonstrates their alliance with the teacher’s practices, which in a way also indicates that urban school students align themselves with the requirements of neoliberal ELE policies. Xiao Ming discussed the English language classes in detail in his interview, which offered a clearer perspective of how urban school students position themselves in the classroom:
In our English classes, we are divided into groups for competitions, such as a word memorisation game or a small quiz. I like this kind of competitive activity. Through these activities, we remember words and grammar knowledge more quickly, and they improve the classroom atmosphere. This makes teaching easier for teachers and classes more interesting for us. They also exercise our team spirit and cooperation ability.

Xiao Ming (urban school student)

This extract shows how ELE practices shape students’ self-configuration by helping them to assume the role of qualified students by investing in English language learning. Here, their alliance with the teachers and teaching practices in the classroom reveals the institutional support for their investment that constitutes their qualified positions and continuously enhances their identification. Xiao Ming said that classroom activities benefit teachers and students, which shows the alignment between them in the classroom. He also implied the social significance (competition and cooperation) of the classroom activities helps to cultivate ‘successful’ individuals. These factors are presented in China’s ELE policies and defined as quality education by the Ministry of Education (BNUPH, 2001, 2011), and I discussed their neoliberal characteristics in Section 5.4. Urban students have therefore positioned themselves as qualified, valuable students through interaction with teaching practices in their English trajectories. The ELE practices in the urban school mainly accomplished the requirements of neoliberal policies.

In his interview, Allen also mentioned ‘fluctuations in these interests due to exams’, which implies the effect of the neoliberal educational system on students. Exam results are seen as the main product of the educational system, as discussed in the teachers’ interviews (Section 6.2) which transform the performance of teachers and students in ELE into accountable numbers. Accountability links objective value with self-understanding to measure educational participants’ output, making it easier for the dominant ideology to manage individuals (Harvey & Ringrose, 2016). Here, Allen’s interview suggested an awareness of oppression through exams, which may reflect students’ agency in the English language learning trajectory. Similar statements can be seen in WCY’s interview. He told me that he would be influenced by English language exam results, but he did not believe that grades would reflect everything.
Failure to score high on the test will definitely make me sad for a few days. But I think that learning English is not just for high scores. The English classes are quite fun, the content is interesting, and the atmosphere is relaxed.

WCY (urban school student)

WCY’s sceptical impression of the importance of exams importance suggested that urban school students have started to become aware that the examination system may be problematic. However, he maintained his alliance with the ELE classroom. This means that alliances between students and teachers and the students’ self-identification under the neoliberal ELE policies are difficult to alter. Positioning themselves as qualified, valuable students, urban students can be cultivated, constructed and governed by the neoliberal educational regime in the classroom through teachers’ practices.

In general, this section examined de-alliances between rural school students and their English language teacher and alliances between urban school students and their language teacher. The rural school students position themselves as incompetent language learners in the classroom through their lack of interaction with the ELE teacher and his practices, establishing their self-positioning and de-alliances with their teacher in their learning trajectories. Meanwhile, the urban school students’ positioning in the neoliberal ELE classroom presents them as qualified valuable students who have been generated and constructed through the alliances with teachers in ELE practices. Although some of the students showed their awareness of the examination system, their agencies were restrained by the neoliberal educational system. It is difficult for educational actors to resist the dominance of neoliberal ideas in ELE. The next section will examine students’ perspectives on ELE policies in the classroom. A comprehensive discussion of the interaction between students and neoliberal ideas will be provided to illustrate the students’ English language learning trajectories in this research.

7.4 Students’ Perspectives on the 2011 English Curriculum Standards and Their Textbooks

In the previous section, by analysing students’ interactions with ELE teachers and their practices, rural school students’ de-alliances and urban school students’ alliances with
their teachers were examined. The previous section also explained how these de-alliances and alliances have led to different self-positioning of rural and urban school students. In Section 6.4, I discussed neoliberal ideas in the 2011 Standards that influenced teachers’ understanding of ELE and governed their classroom practices. I will now explore students’ understanding of ELE and whether their practices are influenced or managed by neoliberal policies. According to the document analysis in Chapter 5, I showed that ELE textbooks are based on the ELE policies and approved according to these policies. Students’ thoughts about the textbooks could therefore mirror their perspectives on the 2011 Standards and may even reflect the influence of neoliberal policies on the students themselves.

In my interviews with rural and urban school students, I asked them if they were familiar with the 2011 Standards, what impressed them and what they thought about their textbooks. In this section, their answers will be analysed and discussed to show their interaction with ELE policies in their learning trajectory. Drawing on classroom observations, I found that although rural school students partly accept and align themselves with policies, they still show a disconnection with the requirements for ‘good’ students set out in the polices. In contrast, urban school students believe in and practise the requirements of ELE policies in their learning trajectories, which points to a resonance between urban students and the neoliberal polices, through which their alignment with policies is established. This section will be presented under two headings: rural school students’ disconnection with ELE policies and urban school students’ alignment with ELE policies.

7.4.1 Rural School Students’ Disconnection with ELE Policies

Rural school students’ attitudes to ELE policies are demonstrated through their interviews. Most rural school students said that they knew little about the 2011 Standards and did not think the policies influenced their English learning. Only some parts of the textbook were interesting to them because they had no experience of others and could not understand what the textbooks presented. In the rural students’ English learning trajectories it was hard for them to identify their positions in the ELE policies represented by the 2011 Standards and the textbooks. Rural school student
Qi Yue’s answer to whether she knew about the 2011 Standards and what impressed her most about them summarised rural school students’ knowledge of the ELE policies.

I don’t know much about the 2011 Standards. I only know that English textbooks are formulated according to them. I don’t know much about the contents, so I don’t have any real impression of it. I think it is more useful to our English teacher, as it helps him to decide what to teach to improve our performance in the exams.

Qi Yue (rural school student)

The only thing Qi Yue knew about the 2011 Standards was that the textbook was formulated under the guidance of the policies. She thought that the teacher could deliver the policies and use them to guide his teaching practices and the students’ learning through understanding the policies. Qi Yue’s comment suggests that rural school students do not believe the policies are formulated for them, but represent standards for the teachers to refer to in their teaching practices.

Qi Yue’s answer again implies rural school students’ awareness of the teacher’s authority in their learning process. According to Qi Yue, the teacher’s authority can be associated with the ELE policies. Because the policies provide teaching standards for exams, they enable the teacher to direct the performance of his students. I discussed the rural school students’ de-alliance with their English language teacher in the previous section, so we can assume that this de-alliance has shaped their indifferent positioning with respect to the policies, showing that rural school students tend to put their English learning in a position that is not directly related to the ELE policies. In Section 5.4, I presented the core editors’ explanation of the 2011 Standards, showing that the Standards provided comprehensive language ability requirements for students to acquire (Chen et al., 2012). However, the rural school students were not informed of these requirements, so instead of linking themselves to the policies, they believe the policies were formulated for teachers and exams. The rural school students positioned themselves as second-hand recipients of ELE policies who are affected by the teacher’s authority. A discursive distance from the policies is established by the rural school students in their interviews.

The interview question about the students’ perspectives on their textbooks provides further information to explore rural school students’ interaction with the policies. Ma Hao, a rural school student, discussed his feeling about the textbooks.
As for the English textbooks, I can’t say I am very interested. When I get the textbooks at the beginning of a term, I flip through them. The most interesting texts to me are those describing Chinese culture because they are closer to life and can almost be understood.

Ma Hao (rural school student)

Ma Hao’s answer suggests that the rural school’s textbooks were adapted to the requirements of the 2011 Standards. The textbooks were edited by PEP, which belongs to the MOE and is mainly engaged in research, editing, publishing and distribution of basic education textbooks and other types of educational books. The textbook does not introduce the policies directly but discusses how to learn English from five dimensions in the preface. Chinese and international cultures are emphasised by introducing the advantages of learning culture. Ma Hao said that the most interesting texts in the textbooks are those that describe Chinese culture, which may reflect that the textbooks partly succeed in delivering the requirements of ELE policies. Ma Hao’s focus on Chinese culture in the textbooks can therefore be seen as partly accepting of ELE policies, although he did not refer to any other requirements in ELE policies in his interview.

In Section 5.4, I presented a chart showing five dimensions of comprehensive language abilities in the 2001 and 2011 Standards. The five dimensions listed in the textbooks are based on this chart. Consciousness of the motherland in the Emotional Attitude dimension is emphasised throughout the Standards, so it also plays an important role in the textbooks. Deng Xiaoping proposed that education in the Reform and Opening-up era should cultivate new socialist citizens with four qualities as ideal, ethical, educated and disciplined people. Zhao (2016) argues that these socialist citizens should be equipped with both Chinese culture and an international worldview. The 2011 Standards internalised the call for new socialist citizens for the development and modernisation of China in the twenty-first century (Section 5.4.2). To some extent, the 2011 Standards have created an image of ‘good’ students for English language learners with comprehensive language abilities, and the textbooks have reproduced this image. The Standards seek to cultivate cross-cultural talents equipped with a Chinese cultural consciousness and international communication abilities (BNUPH, 2011). The neoliberal characteristics this image embraces were discussed in Section 5.4, allowing us to conclude that students who meet these objectives tend to be positioned as ‘good’ students under neoliberal ELE policies.
It appears that the rural school students accept the consciousness of the motherland and feel alignment with the textbooks. But as a rural school student, Ma Hao can only feel alignment with the textbooks and the ELE policies when they talk about Chinese culture. This indicates that consciousness of Chinese culture comes not from learning English but rather from the students’ Chinese identity. In their English learning trajectory, textbooks did not play an essential role in connecting rural school students with the ELE policies. Ma Hao felt that the texts that describe Chinese culture were interesting because they were closer to life and could be more readily understood, implying that it was difficult for him to understand the other texts in the textbooks that are not part of his life. YCC, another boy from the rural school, said:

I am really indifferent to English. I would be happy if the English class was cancelled in the school curriculum. English textbooks are too difficult. I can’t understand what the texts are about when I read them. They are not easy to translate. Although I can understand the meaning of the words in the texts, I can’t understand the sentences or the questions before and after the texts. It feels like they have nothing to do with my life, so it’s hard to imagine how to answer them.

YCC (rural school student)

YCC’s lack of interest in English textbooks shows that the contents are divorced from his context. I have discussed the absence of rural context in the textbooks in the teachers’ interviews, and YCC’s answer suggests that rural school students also feel marginalised by the lack of rural context. I discussed my observations in the rural school in Section 6.5, showing that few students could answer the questions about the textbooks because none of them had the experiences described in the textbook. Students cannot connect themselves with English learning through the textbooks because the materials do not feature in their daily lives (for example, the Fun Times Park discussed in Section 6.5.1). The distance between the rural school students and the life presented in their textbooks forces rural school students to position themselves as learners who do not need English classes in their school curriculum.

The last question in my interviews with the students gave them a chance to ask me about anything. Most rural school students asked me about living abroad and whether the textbooks presented real information about the United Kingdom. The rural school students’ indifference to and distrust of the textbooks show that it is hard for them to align themselves with the English learning requirements in the ELE policies. As discussed in Chapter 5, the policies construct the neoliberal image of ‘good’
students/citizens. The rural school students’ disconnection with the policies suggests that they hardly align with all the requirements for being ‘good’ in ELE, except the ones about national culture. Whether their disconnection allows rural students to escape from the governance of neoliberal policies will be discussed in Section 7.5.

7.4.2 Urban School Students’ Alignment with ELE Policies

Unlike the rural students, most of the urban students were able to discuss their impressions of the 2011 Standards, and a similar understanding of the policies was found in the interviews. The urban students knew about the Standards and showed a close alignment with the policies. They also expressed their positive attitude towards their textbooks, which provide various materials for English learning. The urban students tend to position themselves as ‘good’ students in ELE through their interaction with textbooks. Hui, an urban school student, explained his understanding of the Standards:

I know the Standards. Although I am not very clear about some of the details, I know that our textbooks are formulated on them, as it is written in the preface. Our teacher said that what we need to learn, how we learn them, and the standards of examinations are all written down in the Standards. I remember that the textbooks expected us to develop and enhance our understanding of international cultures while mastering English language. That is what impressed me the most.

Hui (urban school student)

Hui’s answer showed a clear view of the Standards. He knew what the policies encouraged and how they affected students’ English learning. He pointed out that the policies aimed to cultivate students’ knowledge of international culture through English learning. Hui tells us that urban school students have noticed the close relationship between policies and textbooks because they learned about the 2011 Standards from their textbooks. The urban school’s textbooks were published by the Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, and the prefaces explain that the books are coedited by this press and the British company Macmillan, and were formulated under the instructions of the Standards. The comprehensive language abilities set out in the Standards is shown as a list at the end of the preface of the textbooks, in which expectations for learners are set out. In fact, the list establishes a specific imagination for English language learners which echoes the neoliberal requirements in the policies.
(Figures 7.1 and 7.2). According to Hui’s understanding of the standards, urban students are expected to align themselves with this neoliberal ‘good’ student image. Meanwhile, the textbooks’ co-editors have already shown the cross-cultural communication required by the policies. Hui’s focus on international cultures shows that urban students may wish to align themselves with the cross-cultural talents encouraged by the policies. From reading the preface of the textbooks, the urban school students’ alignment with learning international culture while mastering the English language starts to become constituted. The imagination of ‘good’ students and cross-cultural talents suggests that urban students can connect themselves with the policies by assuming imagined identities.

Figure 7.1: The five dimensions of comprehensive language ability (BNUPH, 2011)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The comprehensive language ability</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language knowledge: phonetics, vocabulary, grammar, functions, topics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional attitude: motivation and interest, self-confidence, spirit of cooperation, consciousness of the motherland, international vision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning strategies: cognitive strategies, control strategies, communication strategies, resource strategies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural awareness: cultural knowledge, cultural understanding, cross-cultural communication, awareness and ability</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 7.2: The list in the preface and the translation (FLTRP, 2012)

在修订过程中，我们依照《义务教育 英语课程标准（2011年版）》对初中阶段英语学习者提出的要求，从同学们英语学习的实际出发，补充设计了丰富而科学的学习内容和活动。教材遵循初中生认知发展的规律，由日常生活中涉及的语言开始，逐渐扩及安全与救护、通信、自然等话题。

通过对本套教材的学习，希望同学们能够：
1）形成对英语学习的积极态度和强烈兴趣；
2）掌握基本的英语知识和听、说、读、写技能，提升英语语言的运用能力；
3）形成有效的英语学习策略；
4）增强对世界文化的了解，培养自己的跨文化交流意识。

In the revision process, in accordance with the requirements of the ‘Compulsory Education English Curriculum Standards (2011 Edition)’ for junior secondary school English learners, we have supplemented the design of rich and scientific learning content and activities based on the actual English learning of the students. The textbook follows the law of cognitive development of junior high school students, starting from the language involved in daily life, and gradually expanding to topics such as safety and rescue, communication, and nature. (Language knowledge)

Through the study of this set of textbooks, I hope students can:
1) Form a positive attitude and strong interest in English learning. (Emotional Attitude)
2) Master basic English knowledge and listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills to improve English language thinking skills. (Language Skill)
3) Form effective English learning strategies. (Learning Strategies)
4) Enhance the understanding of international cultures and cultivate their own awareness of cross-cultural communication. (Cultural Awareness)
Hui’s answer also illustrates the urban school students’ understanding of their role in delivering the policies. While the rural school students implied that they are second-hand recipients of the policies via their ELE teacher, the urban students tend to position themselves as direct recipients of the policies. The rural school students saw the policies as standards formulated for teachers and offered them through the authority of ELE. However, Hui said that the teacher told them that the Standards were formulated to tell the students what to learn and how to learn it. In the urban context, the students have been put in the principal position of the policies. It seems that the teacher encouraged students to align themselves with the policies. The urban students take the initiative in their interaction with the policies. Whether students align themselves with their imagined identities and policies in learning process can be assessed by how they interact with the contents of their textbooks. Hui also talked about enjoying the textbooks:

I like English textbooks very much, and I read them at the beginning of every term as soon as I get them. The texts inside are very interesting, introducing many domestic and foreign subjects, just like short stories. Before the teacher’s teaching in the classroom, I have already finished reading the stories by myself.

Hui (urban school student)

Hui’s classmate, Allen, talked about why he thought the English textbook was good for English language learning:

Firstly, the English textbook introduces many aspects of knowledge in English, so I can explain many things in different subjects in English in the future. Secondly, the English textbook also teaches us to discuss China in English, which we can use when communicating with foreigners in the future. Thirdly, there is also information about the scenery and customs of foreign countries. As far as I am concerned, it is a good way to expand our horizons. After learning the Great Books module, I started to read *Jane Eyre* by myself.

Allen (urban school student)

Hui’s description summarised most of the urban student participants’ attitudes towards their textbooks. They considered the textbooks interesting, and enjoyed learning English through them. This indicates firstly that they would like to align themselves with the textbooks, and secondly that they understood what the textbooks talked about even without the teacher’s help. In Section 7.2, I discussed the disparity in cultural capital between rural and urban students. Most of the events discussed in the textbooks happen in the urban context, and urban school students have the
opportunity to communicate with foreigners and go abroad by themselves. Therefore, urban school students can connect themselves more easily with the scenes in the textbooks and can practise what they learn in their lives. Therefore they see textbooks as interesting learning materials. This suggests that urban students can align themselves with the textbooks.

Allen’s explanation captures every aspect of how his situated forms of alignment index the requirements of students in the preface of the textbooks and on ELE policies. His words show the characteristics of interdiscursivity. Silverstein (2005) argues that interdiscursivity manifests itself in the indexical relationships between a stretch of discourse that is experienced now and some other discourse to which the current discursive event points. In Allen’s words, ‘explain many different aspects of English’ refers to the requirement of language skills and knowledge of the ELE policies. He comments ‘Discuss China in English’ and ‘communicate with foreigners’ point to cultural awareness and the kind of emotional attitude required by the policies. Allen’s extract shows the indexical relationship between his understanding of English language learning and ELE policies. According to Pérez-Milans (2018), the link between language policy texts, communication events and practices can be detected through interdiscursivity, so the interdiscursivity in Allen’s interview reveals his alignment with policies in his language learning practices. By reading Jane Eyre, a classic English novel, Allen attempts to acquire the cultural knowledge required by ELE policies in his daily life. Therefore, according to Hui and Allen, the urban students enact identification with the persona created by the textbook and ELE policies, which enable them to position themselves as the neoliberal international talents in ELE throughout their English learning trajectories.

To summarise, urban school students tried to align with the imagined ‘good’ intercultural identity constituted by the policies in their English learning trajectory through interaction with the textbooks. Neoliberal ELE policies create specific images of students, the textbooks reproduce it through their discursive contents, and then the students align themselves to the images. In this way, specific neoliberal personas of language learners are (re)produced, and the urban school students’ alignment with the policies shows how individuals in ELE are neoliberalised. Meanwhile, the rural school students’ disconnection with policies shows that they may be excluded from the main ELE space. The final section of this chapter examines what types of
neoliberal subjects are formulated in the urban and rural schools so that the effects of alignment and disconnection on students in their English learning trajectory can be identified.

7.5 Rural and Urban School Students: Stratified Neoliberal Subjects

Section 7.2 discussed the unequal distribution of capital between China’s rural and urban regions. Rural and urban school students’ investment in ELE and the construction of different identities are revealed by discussing the capital they possess and can obtain. Section 2.3 looked at how neoliberalism engenders inequality by reviewing Block (2018d) and Harvey (2005). Block (2018d) believes that neoliberal policies and practices have led to a considerable increase in resource inequality and social stratification. Harvey (2005) suggests that this stratification has been realised through human capital theory, which capitalises human capacities and encourages the exchange between human and other forms of capital within the context of economic processes of investment, production and competition. Through the allocation of capital during these economic processes, individuals are stratified as labourers with different levels of human capital. The unequal allocation of capital between rural and urban contexts therefore also leads to the stratification of students.

Students’ interactions with teachers’ practices and ELE policies, discussed in Sections 7.3 and 7.4, present different self-positionings for rural and urban school students. Rural school students assume positions as incompetent language learners and are disconnected from the ELE policies, while urban school students take the position of qualified and valuable learners aligned with the policies. We can examine whether these different positions can be seen as the stratification of students by exploring what kind of subjects students have been transformed into. Based on Foucault (1988), the process of generating labourers with human capital can be seen as generating and formulating subjects. These subjects actively experience, respond and internalise power relations in a neoliberal economic society and are then self-configured with types of neoliberal identities as demanded by social structures. (Ball and Olmedo, 2013). In this section, the rural and urban students’ imaged identities in terms of their future development will be discussed to identify what subjects they are self-configured
as, and whether these subjects align with neoliberalism in their English learning trajectory. In this way, the stratification of students under the neoliberal educational system can be addressed.

Neoliberalism realises its governance of individuals by constructing subjects that follow market logic. Once individuals formulate their identities to ingratiate themselves with neoliberalist regulations, they start to become constituted as neoliberal subjects. So when individuals are constituted as different types of neoliberal subjects in society according to the necessities of neoliberalism, stratification will be constructed through capital allocation under market logic. By discussing the students’ descriptions of their imagined identities in interviews, this section illustrates how students in rural and urban schools are stratified into two types of neoliberal subjects – marginalised and valuable subjects. The discussion in previous sections will be drawn on because these sections reveal how rural and urban students are constituted into subjects in different times and spaces during their English learning practices.

7.5.1 Rural School Students - Marginalised Neoliberal Subjects in ELE

Previous sections presented rural school students’ identities as examinees and incompetent English language learners, suggesting that they have limited capital and fewer choices in their English language learning trajectory. These identities contribute to de-alliance with ELE practices and policies. In the interviews, rural students answered questions about plans for their future development. Their answers to this question show that their de-alliance with ELE practices and policies have constructed them as marginalised members of the community. According to Mowat (2015), marginalisation makes people feel they do not belong to the community, that they are not valuable members of the community and that they are unable to access the range of opportunities open to others. In their interviews, rural school students’ answers to the question about their future are similar, insofar as they realise that they lack resources and opportunities. Most of them do not have high ambitions. They cannot contribute to the community as much as urban students do, and they just want to enjoy a stable normal life. Lin, a rural student, provided a typical answer:

I do not have a dream. I just want to live a normal life here, to get married and have children, and to find a job that can pay for my family’s needs. For us, the rural
students, passing the exams is the only effective way of finding a job and achieving this normal life. Although we cannot achieve as much as urban students, at least we have the chance to control our own lives.

Lin (rural school student)

Lin suggests that urban and rural school students belong to different groups. He implies that there are fewer chances for rural school students compared with their urban counterparts, and passing exams is the ‘only’ effective way for them to achieve a ‘normal’ life in the future. For rural school students, their current identity as examinees gives them the opportunity to compete with urban school students and guarantee their future lives. This indicates the rural students have internalised the neoliberal examination system as part of their life and development, and they are trying to construct themselves as competitive subjects in the examination system by positioning themselves in a competitive place compared with urban students. Lin’s classmate Qi Yue said: ‘We can’t match them in other abilities, so we can only try our best to do better in exams.’

However, in Lin’s description, rural students can still gain advantages through the examination system. He believes that although they cannot do as well as urban school students, they can at least control their own destinies. The neoliberal examination system therefore not only governs rural students’ identity as examinees but also manages their future expectations and self-positioning by constructing them as competitive subjects. Neoliberal competitiveness rationalises rural students’ inferior position via the examination system by making them believe that if they cannot get better results in exams, they should accept their inferior position compared to their urban counterparts.

‘Normal’ life, in Lin’s words, refers to a family and a job that allows them to afford the needs of a family in the local context. According to Lin, the aim of education is simplified as a method for rural school students to achieve social capital (a job) and economic capital (afford family costs). In their learning trajectory, anything that helps them obtain these forms of capital must become important to rural school students. Wei, a rural student, said:

I don’t like English. Except for exams, I don’t use English at all in my life. In our rural area, I would say that the Chinese language is more useful, and writing and
speaking skills can be used in daily life. To afford a family and maybe contribute to our country, other skills are more important for me than English.

Wei (rural school student)

Two other rural students told me they liked mathematics the most since it is useful in daily life. Rural school students believe subjects such as Chinese language and mathematics will help them more in their lives or in finding jobs in the future. This shows that rural school students would like to develop capacities that will bring them more economic and social benefits. According to Becker’s Human Capital Theory (1964), individuals need to develop capacities that will bring them economic, social and cultural benefits to enhance their human capital. English language, compared with other school subjects, does not allow rural school students to add to their human capital and exchange it for other forms of capital in the future. According to De Dios Oyarzun (2018), developing individual lives is the most important aspect of neoliberal logic, so students should want to add other capacities to their repertoire to develop their life. This neoliberal logic causes ELE to lose its value in the competition for human capital in rural areas, consolidating rural students’ de-alliance with ELE practices and policies. This leads to the marginalisation of rural school students in the ELE because they do not feel the need to learn the English language. Instead, they align themselves more with economic development in the local context and believe that they can also contribute to the country without learning English.

Several students in the rural school said that they did not see the need to learn English, although they believed that ELE was important for China’s national development. Xiao Ai’s words can be seen as representative of rural school students:

ELE is very useful for the country. The country needs to communicate with the world and needs to make progress in the world. But there is no place in my life where I need to use English. Whether now or in the future, English is not important to me.

Xiao Ai (rural school student)

Xiao Ai believes that ELE is useful for national progress, which is written into the ELE policies, but she claims that she does not and will never use English in her life. She appears to separate her development from the international progress of the country. Based on Mowat’s theory of marginalisation (2015), it is reasonable to assume that rural students like Xiao Ai feel a sense of marginalisation because they do not position
themselves in that part of the community which could contribute to China’s international progress. In other words, they do not feel that they are valuable in terms of international development, so they cannot align with the requirements of that community, which include English language ability. This echoes what I discussed in Sections 7.3 and 7.4. Rural students position themselves as incompetent and disconnect themselves from requirements set out in the policies. Therefore, they do not think they can be part of the community that uses English language ability to help the country’s international development.

It seems that the rural students actively marginalise themselves through de-alliance with ELE practices and policies. However, I argue that this marginalisation is the consequence of neoliberal competitiveness within the education system. Neoliberalism firstly constructs rural school students as competitive examinees to make them take responsibility for their inferior position in the educational system. Secondly, it makes them feel that they actively choose what they would like to invest their human capital in to achieve economic, social and cultural benefits. However, the capital they possess and intend to obtain is organised by the neoliberal educational system that marginalised them in the first place. Thirdly, the neoliberalised educational system shapes them into neoliberal subjects who accept their marginalisation which is produced by the neoliberal capital allocation, then encourages them to reproduce that marginalisation. In other words, rural school students are constructed as marginalised neoliberal subjects in ELE and are manipulated to take responsibility for their marginalisation by the educational system, thus reproducing their marginalisation.

7.5.2 Urban School Students – Valuable Neoliberal Subjects

Rural students use the phrases like ‘our rural area’, ‘our life’ and ‘us, the rural students’ to distinguish themselves from urban students. However, in the interviews with urban students, no one mentioned the rural area. Meanwhile, unlike rural school students, nearly every urban school student I interviewed believed that ELE allowed them to contribute to the development of the country. As discussed in previous sections, this shows urban school students’ alliances with ELE practices and intercultural international requirements encouraged by ELE policies. Their responses to what they would like to do in future also help to index their alliances. They believed that English
is useful for the country’s economic, scientific and technical development, and they wanted to be valuable contributors to the development. Urban school students showed in the interviews their affiliation with the community that could contribute to the country. Song, a girl from an urban school, told me how ELE would help her in the future.

In the future, we can communicate with foreigners freely through ELE, and we can learn cultural and scientific knowledge from them. They have a more advanced culture and techniques that we can apply to make our country stronger and surpass them.

Song (urban school student)

This extract shows interdiscursivity. ‘Communicate with foreigners’ and ‘learn the cultural and scientific knowledge from them’ refers to ELE policies in the 2011 Standards. I presented the 2011 Standards in Section 5.4, which suggested that ELE plays an important role in learning from foreign thinkers, drawing on advanced foreign science and technology, improving China’s international competitiveness and enhancing mutual understanding between China and the world (PEP, 2011). I argue that this statement in the curriculum is influenced by neoliberalism because it treats English as linguistic capital that can be added to the country’s repertoire for exchanging economic and social benefits in the world market. At state level, ELE policies have helped to construct a neoliberal order that sees the country’s development as winning against economic, social and cultural competition in the global market. De Lissovoy and Cedillo (2016) argue that neoliberalism creates subjects that not only invest human capital in themselves but also share valuable skills and knowledge to gain collective benefits and improve levels of economic and social production. This echoes ELE policies that ask for contributions to the country’s neoliberal advancement. Thus, for individuals, ELE policies set the goal of fostering a particular type of subject, namely individuals who are responsible for the country’s development.

Students equip themselves with English to develop the country by constructing themselves as the aforementioned neoliberal subjects. In this way, students are constructed as valuable contributors by the neoliberal order and then become the subjects who are able to enhance and reproduce this neoliberal order. Urban school students like Song believe that English is worth learning because it is an international language, and foreign culture and technology can be accessed using it. By learning
foreign culture and technology, they can make a more valuable contribution to the country. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that urban school students have been constructed as valuable neoliberal subjects for the country through the implementation of neoliberal educational policies.

This conception of the English language in policies also reflects linguistic imperialism. Phillipson (2008) argues that the English language, as a form of linguistic capital, has become the legitimate global language under prevailing neoliberal economic and political conditions. English-speaking countries impose their cultural, political and economic power and values upon other countries by using English as a global language in social and cultural contexts to colonise periphery countries invisibly. The description of ELE’s benefits to China’s cultural, scientific and technical development shows that the ELE policies have been influenced by linguistic imperialism. By aligning themselves with the ELE policies, urban school students reproduce the neoliberal order carried by the English language itself and unconsciously construct themselves as valuable subjects for increasing linguistic imperialism.

It also appears that the urban school students believe that being these valuable neoliberal subjects are their own choices and will help their personal development in the future. Many urban school students talked about how English would benefit their future development. An urban school student, DYL, said:

‘I think English is a useful skill. With this skill, we can communicate with others in the world when we grow up.’

DYL (urban school student)

Xiaoming, another urban student, believes that English will help students achieve better education and better careers in the future.

   English is an international language, a basic skill that everyone should master...Learning English is also very good for our personal development in the future. For example, we all need good English language skills to study in prestigious universities abroad or to find a good job in an international company.

   Xiaoming (urban school student)

As DYL said, the English language is a useful skill, and useful skills lead to productivity and can be invested as human capital. Neoliberal ELE policies construct urban
students as valuable subjects by making them believe that ELE will produce human capital for them and make them more productive and successful in their personal development. De Dios Oyazun (2018) argues that the purpose of individuals’ investment in human capital is to obtain normative terms so that they can become productive entrepreneurs. Both the above extracts suggest that urban students look for personal development and success not only in their lives but also in their careers through ELE. The normative terms they would like to obtain are generated by neoliberal market orders, such as productivity (to produce human capital), responsibility (to contribute to the country) and individualism (for self-development).

Once the urban school students increase their human capital through ELE for their self-development, they in turn contribute to the requirements of ELE policies. The urban students’ investment in ELE contributes to personal development, economic growth and social progressives shaped by neoliberal logic, so it is reasonable to conclude that they have adopted the image of themselves as an enterprise. This implies that instead of choosing to be valuable neoliberal subjects, urban school students have been managed by neoliberal logic, since what is valuable for them and the country are decided by neoliberal policies. Urban school students are therefore governed and constructed as valuable neoliberal subjects by ELE policies and the neoliberal education system that underlies these policies.

As Ball (2003) said, education subjectifies students through the delivery of content and values. Neoliberal power therefore realises the governance of students through education by delivering its ideology in discursive educational spaces in students’ learning trajectories, as presented in both rural and urban contexts in this section. The construction of marginalised neoliberal subjects in ELE within the rural school has been realised because rural students are firstly marginalised by unequal neoliberal capital allocation, leading to their de-alliance from ELE, and then this de-alliance reproduces marginalisation in their learning trajectory. Positioning themselves outside the community that could contribute to China’s international competitiveness indicates that rural school students are deliberately constructed as marginalised neoliberal subjects in ELE. Meanwhile, urban students are constructed as valuable subjects for the development of the country by following the requirements of neoliberal educational policies. The human capital urban school students possess and can acquire is legitimatised and treated as valuable capital by the policies, and once urban students
align themselves with neoliberal policies, they are (re)constructed as valuable neoliberal subjects.

7.6 Summary

In rural schools, the marginalised neoliberal subjects perpetuate unalterable inequality in rural areas. The neoliberal education system forces rural school students to take responsibility for their marginalisation and stay in an unequal status. In urban schools, students are cultivated as productive and valuable contributors to the neoliberal educational system. The stratification, management and organisation of students is realised through the construction of different neoliberal subjects for different purposes. In the process, disparities in ELE between rural and urban schools are produced and reproduced.

To conclude, this chapter examined rural and urban school students’ investment in ELE and their perspectives on ELE teaching practices and policies. The chapter discussed the impact of neoliberal ELE practices and policies on students’ self-positioning in different times and spaces in their learning trajectories, arguing that rural and urban school students are constructed as different types of neoliberal subjects, thereby resulting in the (re)production of disparities between rural and urban contexts and the stratification of students in ELE. The next chapter concludes this study by providing a general discussion to answer the three research questions of the thesis and discussing the implications, limitations and contributions of my research.
Chapter 8: Discussion, Implications and Conclusion

8.1 Introduction

In Chapters 5, 6 and 7, I presented findings from my CDA of ELE policies and thematic analysis of ethnographic data in China. Document analysis showed similarities and differences in ELE policies over time, highlighting the neoliberal characteristics of language policies at the compulsory education stage. The interview findings and classroom observations demonstrated varying interpretations of these policies by students and teachers in rural and urban areas. My comparison of rural and urban schools uncovered differences in perspectives and practices under neoliberalised ELE policies showing how China’s neoliberalised institutional education system organises, regulates and governs individuals in different contexts through ELE. The first part of this chapter discusses connections and conflicts among policies, individuals and ELE practices in rural and urban China, addressing the research questions that guided this study:

1. How does neoliberalism impact the formulation of compulsory English language education policies in China?
2. How do neoliberal policies influence teachers and students at the compulsory education stage in rural and urban schools in China?
3. How are disparities in English language education between rural and urban schools embodied in teachers’ and students’ English language teaching and learning practices?

Section 8.2 of this chapter addresses these three research questions by exploring the impact of neoliberalism on ELE policies on teachers and students and on the disparity between rural and urban schools. The discussion reveals how neoliberalised policies shape individuals’ construction of neoliberal subjectivities and examines the reasons for the ongoing disparities in ELE and education in general. Section 8.3 suggests the need to formulate a critical ethnographic perspective in ELE policymaking by moving to a critical intercultural curriculum. This section provides practical implications for
teachers, students and schools through the lens of critical pedagogy and intercultural citizenship. Section 8.4 concludes the thesis by discussing the theoretical and methodological contributions of this study, acknowledging its limitations and providing suggestions for further studies.

8.2 Discussion of Neoliberalism’s Impact on Compulsory ELE in Rural and Urban Schools in China

This section discusses the findings from the CDA and thematic analysis of the data, providing answers to research questions. Section 8.2.1 examines the influence of neoliberalism on ELE policies. I argue that neoliberalism has a dual impact on compulsory ELE policies in China. Firstly, the instrumentalisation of the English language under neoliberalism constructs neoliberal subjectivities within the policies. Secondly, by forming personas using these policy related subjectivities enables ELE to organise and manage stakeholders as part of an institutional system.

Moving to the second research question, Section 8.2.2 discusses the impact of neoliberalism on individuals involved in teaching and learning. It discusses how neoliberalised policies have resulted in a dichotomy of interpretations of ELE among teachers and students in urban and rural schools based on findings from my ethnographic data. It also argues that rural and urban teachers and students transform and are transformed into neoliberal subjects through practising China’s teaching and learning policies, and how neoliberalised policies govern stakeholders’ actions in ELE by actively aligning them with constructed subjectivities.

Addressing the third research question, Section 8.2.3 explores disparities between rural and urban schools in English language classroom practices and student performance. The discussion shows that despite feeling disconnected from neoliberalised policies and teaching practices, rural students still comply with them in ELE. Meanwhile, urban students recognise the policies and teachers’ practices, positioning themselves as valued and valuable subjects. This contrast arises from neoliberal market logic-based management and restrictions imposed by ELE policies on rural and urban stakeholders that perpetuate existing inequalities, resulting in the continuing marginalisation of rural students. The following section discusses the construction of instrumentalised ELE and neoliberal subjectivities in policies.
8.2.1 Impact of Neoliberalism on Compulsory English Language Education Policies in China

This section summarises and discusses the findings from the CDA of compulsory ELE policies in China to explore the impact of neoliberalism on the formulation of these policies. Section 8.2.1.1 summarises how the policies, spanning more than 40 years since 1978, portray ELE as a mechanism designed to meet China’s changing economic and political development requirements in the neoliberal global market. The discussion suggests that instrumentalising the English language leads to hierarchical requirements for accountability and performativity, thereby enabling the management of individuals. Section 8.2.1.2 focuses on the formation of personas using policy-based neoliberal subjectivities. It examines the objectives and requirements for national and international contexts which construct different personas with neoliberal subjectivities for teachers and students. I argue that stakeholders are transformed into neoliberal subjects by actively taking up and internalising their constructed personas in English language teaching and learning practices. The following section begins with a summary of the instrumentalisation of ELE in policies.

8.2.1.1 Continuing Instrumentalisation of English Language in Policies

The CDA findings show that although changing social-political backgrounds and educational reforms bring about considerable reforms, China’s policies consistently set the primary goal of ELE as contributing to national development over time. All ten versions of ELE policies from 1978 to 2022 portray the English language as an instrument for achieving personal and national economic, cultural and social development. This instrumentalisation of the English language echoes Kubota’s (2011) study of linguistic instrumentalism in Japan, arguing that language is linked with different forms of capital and the concept of using human capital to achieve benefits in a neoliberal society. I discussed Bourdieu’s (1977, 1986, 1991, 1998a, 1998b) theory of capital in Section 2.3, pointing out that different forms of capital could be (re)produced, legitimised into symbolic capital and then exchanged in practice to obtain economic, social and cultural capital. In the neoliberal global market, the English language as a form of linguistic capital has been legitimised as symbolic capital to exchange with other forms of capital. The instrumentalisation of the English language in China’s education policies follows neoliberal market logic. Education is
required to produce linguistic capital for exchange, resulting in the instrumentalisation of ELE.

Okuda (2019), Robichaud and Schutter (2012), Wee (2003), and other researchers (Bae & Park, 2019; Park & Wee, 2013; Shin, 2016) discuss the instrumentalisation of the English language, related language programs and language policies in different countries. They argue that under neoliberalism, ELE is portrayed and works as an instrument of linguistic capital to help students gain employment and economic success. In China, students’ future development and careers are also related to ELE through the policies. However, my findings show that the objectives of ELE emphasise improving ‘national quality’ and ‘international competitiveness’ (BNUPH, 2011, p.1), and developing students to meet the needs of national development and international exchange (BNUPH, 2011). Learning English for individual success seems secondary to national requirements that contribute to the country’s economic, cultural and socio-political development under international competition. Through the instrumentalisation of ELE for national development, individual development is closely linked with national development. This finding echoes Liu (2015), who argues that English gradually gained dominance in foreign language education in China because the English language is seen as a tool for upward social mobility and individual development which go hand-in-hand with China’s economic development.

As discussed in Chapter 5, the significance of the English language to China’s political and economic development has been continuously strengthened over time by the country’s ELE policies. China’s propaganda describes socialism with Chinese characteristics to build the uniqueness of the Chinese nation, thus weakening the capitalist characteristics of its economic strategies. This concept is also present in various policies, such as ‘socialist modernisation’, ‘socialist citizens for the Chinese nation’, and ‘Chinese national culture’ (BNUPH, 2001), to mitigate (or conceal) the pursuit of economic and political benefits under neoliberal logic. Anderson (1983) states that the nation is an imagined national-level community with a homogeneous culture, while Calhoun (2016) argues that imagined communities produce nationalism that provides a sense of belonging that is a basic factor of investments in shared institutions and social welfare. My study shows that combining individual and national development corresponds with the need for individuals’ sense of belonging to the Chinese community that guides them to invest in national development in the
neoliberal global market. This echoes Harmes (2012), who argues that neoliberal policies are compatible with nationalist values by exploring how the government connects neoliberal values with specific policies of nationalist ideas to create national governance and international market competition. My findings suggest a form of compatibility in which nationalism governs individuals’ actions and contributes to neoliberal development.

China’s nationalist ideas are produced and reinforced by consistently (re)constructing the instrumentalisation of ELE in policies. This concurs with Bourdieu’s (1977, 1988) ideas of habitus and field, discussed in Chapter 2. As the structure in the field of ELE, neoliberalised policies try to (re)produce the habitus of combining self-interest with national development, thus influencing stakeholders’ actions. Once a habitus of nationalism has been built, the instrumentalisation of ELE invites individuals into the competitive neoliberal global market for national development. Bourdieu (1977) also points out that habitus is a subjective system that constitutes a precondition for the objectification of individuals, so individuals can be more easily objectified for national development if the instrumentalism promoted by ELE policies shapes their subjective perceptions. I therefore argue that neoliberal instrumentalism in policies, combined with nationalism, provides a foundation for turning stakeholders into manageable objects with neoliberal subjectivities. The following section summarises different neoliberal subjectivities constructed by the policies.

8.2.1.2 Different Personas with Neoliberal Subjectivities under ELE Objectives for National Economic and Cultural Development

If instrumentalism in ELE policies lays the foundation for transforming stakeholders into manageable objects with neoliberal subjectivities, these objects are constituted subjectively and not given objectively (Foucault, 2000). As Veyne and Davidson (1997) suggests, an object is something created only for the practice of objectification. This implies that an object describes the thing that undergoes objectification in practice as a tangible representation of ideal behaviours and thoughts influenced by power relations for subjects. Drawing from the discussion of Foucault’s self-forming subjects by Skinner (2013), objectification and subjectification are intertwined in the self-forming process. Objectification occurs when individuals are subjected to power relations and techniques that shape their behaviour, thoughts and bodies,
transforming them into subjects who internalise societal norms and actively participate in them. Subjectification involves the internalisation of power structures, leading individuals to discipline themselves and regulate their own behaviours to conform to societal expectations. Subjectivities are produced and shaped by the interplay of objectification and subjectification under power relations, allowing individuals to experience what ideal types of selves relate (Foucault, 2000).

In Section 2.2.5, I discussed subjectivity under neoliberalism based on Foucault (1988). I argued that individuals could become neoliberal subjects by actively internalising the expectations of neoliberal market logic and then configuring themselves according to subjectivities produced by power relations under neoliberalism, such as responsibility, accountability, performativity and consumption. Objects with neoliberal subjectivities represent the ideal personas of neoliberal subjects, embodying the ideal behaviours and thoughts that neoliberalism promotes. Foucault (1979/2008) perceives subjects produced by neoliberalism as entrepreneurs of themselves. Ideal personas with neoliberal subjectivities could therefore refer to their entrepreneurial selves in ELE. In this study, the CDA findings show three personas for entrepreneurial selves: teachers’ personas as responsible trainers, students’ personas as well-behaved socialist citizens and personas of intercultural and international talents. These personas are produced through constructing neoliberal instrumentalism and nationalism in ELE policies.

The descriptive and representative interpretation in Chapter 5 shows that policies set different levels of specific aims and objectives for different school grades at the compulsory education stage. Knowledge related to the English language, such as ‘language skills, language knowledge, emotional attitude, learning strategies and cultural awareness’ (BNUPH, 2001, p. 6), has been transformed into hierarchical aims and objectives which provide intended learning outcomes for stakeholders’ teaching and learning practices. Kelly (2004) sees this approach to curriculum planning as the ‘aims and objectives model’ (p. 58), arguing that this model shows education as instrumental by reducing the purposes of education to an instrument to promote quantifiable and measurable learning outcomes. Kelly (2004) points out that one of the problems of this model is its view of learning as a linear process. Based on China’s ELE policies, curriculum planning becomes a process of deriving precise statements of objectives for different school grades, which assumes that education must be
planned step-by-step to obtain the desired learning outcomes. Kelly (2004) calls this a ‘linear, step-by-step process’, arguing that it follows industrial productive logic rather than the developmental procedure of understanding. In other words, it measures levels of attainment in education in simple terms of the performance of achieving aims and objectives.

In China, as discussed in Chapter 5, policies from 1978 to the present provide elaborate lists of requirements and objectivities, teaching references, terms and examples for teaching and learning. English linguistic competence is assessed according to these lists of objectives, and national high-stakes examinations are designed based on them. Students’ linguistic abilities and teachers’ professional competence are examined based on how well they achieve these objectives and requirements, based in turn on students’ performance in examinations. The use of instrumentalism and the aims and objectives model in China’s policies indicates the measurement of individual performance, echoing the strategies of new managerialism – accountability and performativity – in ELE policies. According to the theoretical discussion in Section 2.3, new managerialism is led by neoliberalism and evaluate individuals’ educational performance through regimes of accountability (Ball, 2012; Lynch, 2015). Ball and Olmedo (2013) argue that performativity reflects the (re)configuration of obligations and duties to individuals in education, turning individuals into the embodiments of objectives in educational policies. The instrumentalism in the policies suggests that neoliberalism has been internalised in ELE and expects stakeholders to act according to accountability and performativity in educational institutions. Kelly (2004) claims that instrumentalism turns education into ‘training’ or ‘instruction’, transforming teachers into ‘industrial trainers’ of students’ performance (p. 67; 169). Therefore, the first persona for entrepreneurial selves constructed in the policies of neoliberal instrumentalised ELE is that of responsible trainers. This internalises neoliberal subjectivities of responsibility, accountability, and performativity to teachers by acknowledging the instrumentalisation of language and education in practice.

The aims and objectives model in ELE policies also implies the acknowledgement of a hierarchy of knowledge. The policies provide hierarchical lists of goals for students at different grades and every aspect of linguistic competence, showing that if they can perform their skills, thoughts and actions based on these lists in practice, it can be
claimed that the objectives of ELE have been achieved. As discussed in Section 8.2.1.1, the general aims and objectives of the policies stress neoliberal and national requirements. The deconstructive analysis of the policies in Chapter 5 shows that regardless of terminologies used, the ten policies spanning three different periods can be categorised into two main themes. The first revolves around the instrumental use of language for economic and political growth, while the second focuses on the so-called ‘humanist’ use of language to foster individuals’ national identity and intercultural understanding. As argued in Section 5.5, these themes are closely related to nationalism and neoliberalism, so the hierarchical lists of specific aims are also designed to neoliberal and national requirements. In the previous paragraph, I claimed that measuring individuals in terms of students’ performance transforms them into embodiments of objectives driven by accountability and performativity. Building on this, the inclusion of hierarchical aims in this paragraph suggests that the measurement of students in the linear learning process is also associated with the specific embodiments of the objectives into which they can be turned aligned with neoliberal and national purposes. Kelly (2004) conceptualised a hierarchical set of goals in relation to the economic needs of society and the interests of social control in the linear learning process, and pointed out that this hierarchy of learning practices would lead to elitism, inequality, disaffection and alienation among students. The hierarchical aims outlined in ELE policies allow for categorising learners based on the requirements they meet, be they neoliberal, national or both. Consequently, the policies construct a hierarchy of students, so neoliberal instrumentalised policies create two personas for entrepreneurial selves: well-behaved socialist citizens and intercultural international talents. These personas internalise neoliberal subjectivities in students.

The persona of well-behaved socialist citizens is expected to contribute to the national cultural, economic and political development through the linguistic skills acquired from ELE. From 1978 to the early 1990s, the policies emphasised the learning of English to mould students into citizens with socialist ideas and qualities – such as lofty ideals and a strong sense of discipline – for national development. Policies in this period began to construct the persona of the well-behaved socialist citizen. With the increasing need for international engagement and participation in global market competition, policies from the 1990s to the present see the nation as a collective community in the international context. Humanism and intercultural education in the
latest ELE policies guide students to ‘enhance patriotism’ and ‘reflect the nation’s core values’ through ELE in pursuit of the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation in international competition (BNUPH, 2011 & 2022). Wang and Wang (2018) argue that nationalism in language education discourse in China mainly emphasises patriotism and cultural nationalism, but also conveys other political or symbolic ideas. In the policies, the well-behaved socialist citizen persona relies on nationalist and patriotic education discourses but relates them to the neoliberal global context. The persona of intercultural international talents is expected to acquire symbolic capital for individuals and the nation through intercultural communication. As discussed in Chapter 5, policies encourage students to become intercultural citizens through the acquisition of intercultural competence to engage in international communications with critical cultural awareness that encourages individuals’ critical evaluation of others and their own ideologies (Byram, 1997, 2007). However, the policies also construct the essentialist view of Self and Other positions between foreign countries and China. The international talents are seen as those who develop a ‘good and correct’ perspective on foreign cultures and possess linguistic talents to (re)produce symbolic capital in international communication. This contradiction in policies suggests that the second persona focuses on international competition, but ultimately indicates responsibility for national economic, cultural and political development.

For students, these two personas include neoliberal and national characteristics, suggesting that neoliberal policies are compatible with nationalist values. As the responsible trainer persona tends to internalise neoliberal subjectivities to teachers, these two personas can instil neoliberal subjectivities of responsibility and competitiveness to students by fostering nationalism. According to Foucault (1988), this process of constructing entrepreneurial selves could be viewed as a process of generating and formulating subjects through governmentality. Through the linear process of policies, neoliberalism attempts to internalise subjectivities in stakeholders, and when these stakeholders align themselves with the produced personas in practice, they are controlled by policies and contribute to the construction of neoliberal governmentality. The constructed personas in ELE policies demonstrate that teachers’ and students’ freedom in education is restricted, since they are not required to play an active role in education but only to achieve fixed goals carried by these personas. I discussed false consciousness and governmentality in Chapter 2. Marx and Engels
claim that ideology is false consciousness that misleads the underclass to endorse the ideas of the ruling class voluntarily and puts the underclass into a position of powerless servitude beneath the ruling class (Marx and Engels, 1938; Little, 1986). Neoliberal governmentality constructs individuals in different spheres of social life as enterprises under free-market theory, while entrepreneurial individuals support and consolidate neoliberal economic theory by operating themselves according to the market logic (Cooper, 2014; Foucault, 1978/2007; Miller and Rose, 2008). While false consciousness focuses on one-way dominance over the underclass, the construction of entrepreneurial selves shows mutual construction between individuals and neoliberal governmentality. The three constructed personas indicate that neoliberalist policies work as a form of governmentality.

In summary, Section 8.2.1 addressed the first research question, exploring the influence of neoliberalism on the formulation of compulsory ELE policies in China. Neoliberalism impacts the policies through governmentality to construct three personas with neoliberal subjectivities for stakeholders by promoting instrumentalism and nationalism. As I argued in Section 2.2.5, individuals’ responses under neoliberalised structures need to be explored to observe how neoliberalism works in practice. In Section 8.2.2 I discuss the impact of neoliberalism on teachers and students in rural and urban schools based on interviews and classroom observation findings to see whether stakeholders internalise the neoliberal subjectivities and are transformed into neoliberal subjects.

8.2.2 Impact of Neoliberalism on Teachers and Students in Compulsory ELE in Rural and Urban Schools in China

Building on the discussion of ethnographic findings, this section addresses the second research question, which explores the impact of neoliberalism on teachers and students in compulsory ELE in China. Section 8.2.2.1 focuses on investigating the similarities and differences in understandings of ELE among teachers and students in rural and urban schools. Neoliberal ideas influence stakeholders’ understanding in both contexts, although attaining different forms of capital through ELE is comparatively easier for urban teachers and students. Consequently, neoliberalist ELE intensifies the marginalisation of rural teachers and students from international discourse. Drawing upon the three personas discussed above, Section 8.2.2.2
discusses the positioning of teachers and students within teaching and learning practices. It demonstrates their alignment with various neoliberal subjectivities constructed in the policies, thus transforming teachers and students into neoliberal subjects through ELE.

8.2.2.1 Similar and Different Understandings of ELE among Teachers and Students in Rural and Urban Schools

Two themes in findings from interviews with teachers – new managerialism and teachers' reflection on policies – suggest their understanding of ELE in China. Rural and urban teachers’ shared understanding is reflected in their views on national examinations and learning objectives in the policies. They all agree on the instrumentality of English and believe that the most important goal for students is to attain better exam scores. The essential responsibility of English language teachers is therefore to train students to deal with the requirements of exams. However, urban teachers find some requirements impractical and suggest more language learning options in the policies, while rural teachers believe that more requirements are needed in the policies to make exams more comprehensive so that students will invest more in English learning.

These similarities show that neoliberal ideas are embodied in rural and urban teachers’ agreements on instrumentality and new managerialism. Teachers from both areas agree that English is an instrument for capital exchange. They all mentioned the prevalence and dominant position of the English language, and believed that ELE could help students acquire different forms of capital worldwide for their future development. The teachers claimed that their agreement on the importance of the English language in economic, cultural and political communication comes from the ‘dual nature of instrumentality and humanism’ in the policies (BNUPH, 2011, p. 2). This shows that neoliberal ideas in policies, such as linguistic capital as a global communication instrument, have become internalised in teachers’ minds. Moreover, rural and urban teachers see exams, especially the high-stakes national SSEEEEs, as essential for ELE at the compulsory education stage. Their goals for students and the schools’ predetermined outcomes for English are related to exam scores. As discussed earlier, neoliberal accountability manages individuals in education by setting measurable goals (Lynch, 2015). Teachers in rural and urban schools believe
that ELE is important because English language exam scores determine whether the students, teachers and schools meet targets for accountability. Stevenson and Wood (2013) suggest that high-stakes examinations are pivotal to ensuring the neoliberal management of individuals in education. All the teachers in my study thought that a primary task for English language teachers is to master and successfully deliver the requirements of exams. Teachers see teaching as a technology that links effort, values, purposes and self-understanding with accountable performativity. Ball (2012, 2016) criticised this as undermining professionalism, but teachers’ consistent understanding of instrumentality, accountability and performativity reveals that neoliberal ideas control their understanding of ELE, while instrumentalism and new managerialism turn ELE into quantifiable goals in teachers’ minds, making teachers take responsibility for achieving goals.

The difference between rural and urban teachers’ understanding of ELE is in their interpretation of deficiencies in ELE policies. The rural teacher believed that students are unwilling to learn English speaking because the national exam does not test this competence. The rural teacher suggested that teaching and learning practices could be managed through the examination system. Following neoliberal new managerialism, the rural teacher tried to set measurable goals to assess students’ English-speaking competence, believing that would push students to learn. This matches Pérez-Milans (2013), who concluded that exams with state-defined goals and curricular contents in China are the usual standardised controls over schools and students. This shows that the power of the examination system has been internalised into the rural teacher’s mind so that he believes individual students’ performance in ELE depends on recognition through the examination system. The rural teacher put learning and teaching practices and individuals into a passive position against the education system. Meanwhile, urban school teachers thought that quantified goals set by policies are impractical for students, and that policies should provide flexible and alternative standards for students to choose from. This suggests that urban school teachers refuse to frame students’ English capabilities only by quantified goals and realise the limitation of students’ choices under the examination system. Giddens (1984) defines agency as the capacity for agents to be independent and make their own choices in activities and practices, so the urban teachers’ solution is to encourage
students’ agency in ELE by calling for more choices. However, in China’s neoliberal educational system these choices still need to be framed within ELE policies.

Regarding students’ views on ELE, rural and urban students’ understandings were reflected in their positioning of themselves in the learning process. All students believed that the most important goal of learning English was to achieve better exam scores and enter senior secondary schools. Analysing students’ investment in Chapter 7 revealed students’ positioning of themselves. According to Darvin and Norton (2015), language learners’ investment is based on the constitution of identities, the symbolic capital they possess and will acquire and the recognised ideology of the learning process. Rural and urban school students describe their current identities as examinees because getting higher exam scores will contribute to their general performance, echoing accountability and performativity under neoliberalism and the linear learning process. Acknowledging this identity shows that neoliberal subjectivity has been internalised into students’ minds, transforming their learning into measurable objectives. Neoliberal governance of students is achieved by constructing a competitive examination system via political policy. Rural and urban students’ descriptions of future imagined identities suggest their diverging views on ELE. Rural students only want to become students in normal public schools. In contrast, urban school students dream of becoming learners in better public schools and gaining more educational resources. They believe that better performance in ELE will contribute to their national exam performance, leading to better social, economic and political resources in better schools.

Section 8.2.1.1 discussed the idea that hierarchal goals in the aims and objectives model provide resources to the examination system and create a hierarchy of students by measuring their achieved goals. Different imagined identities suggest that exams based on hierarchal goals in ELE policies manage students through their performance, leading to stratification and inequality. Meanwhile, different imagined identities indicate that public schools as institutions are also stratified by the examination system. Rural students believe that better schools will bring them better access to capital, highlighting neoliberal management in education. As discussed in Section 7.2, rural and urban students experience an uneven distribution of capital under neoliberal market logic. Song (2018) argues that the value of English language competence is synergistic with other social advantages that depend on students’ economic
background. The results show how social conditions mediate the distribution and return of capital through a powerful neoliberal social order that drives people to pursue capital value at any cost. This means that students in disadvantaged positions with limited economic, social, and political capital will obtain less capital than students who process more capital initially. The different understanding of what identities can be achieved through exams demonstrates that ELE (re)produces inequalities, so neoliberal new managerialism changes language education into measurable goals, managing students with different requirements for further education through the examination system. Under this examination system, ELE (re)produces inequalities caused by neoliberal distribution, thereby stratifying students.

Unlike governmentality, which highlights the rationalities and underlying forms of governance to uncover the specific techniques and technologies of power, hegemony relates governance to underlying social relationships to emphasise how political projects are constructed in institutional contexts and influence the role of social and class forces (Joseph, 2014). Teachers’ and students’ alignment with performativity and accountability shows how neoliberalism governs individuals through examinations to categorise individuals within the institutional system. According to Joseph (2002), hegemony can be disguised as a legitimised and normalised project promoted by political institutions. The examination system is constructed and legitimised through political policies and implemented through political force. While all students and rural school teachers tend to reinforce the passive role of individuals, urban school teachers resist the examination system and encourage students to take on more active roles in the institutional context. Gramsci (1971/1999) believes that individuals have different ideas coexisting under the hegemony of dominant ideology, while Laclau and Mouffe (2014) argue that the hegemonic power of ideology derives from representational structures themselves rather than objective interests or social agency. The choice of active roles by urban teachers needs to be formulated as policies, so as long as they remain subject to the management of the education system, their agency remains controlled and cannot easily shake the hegemony of neoliberalism. Stakeholders’ understandings of ELE reflect the hegemony of constructed neoliberal political discourse and the (re)produced inequality and stratification under that hegemony, so when discussing how governance is constructed in political-institutional contexts and how it influences individuals’ understanding of contexts and political projects,
neoliberalism can be seen as a hegemonic ideology. Focusing on individuals in the ELE practice, the following section will discuss how teachers and students become neoliberal subjects under ELE policies.

8.2.2.2 Turning Teachers and Students into Neoliberal Subjects in Compulsory English Language Education

In Section 8.2.1.2, I discussed objectification and subjectification, arguing that individuals can transform into neoliberal subjects through being actively self-configurated with neoliberal subjectivities. The constructed personas for entrepreneurial selves in ELE policies are embodiments of neoliberal subjectivities, so once individuals align themselves with the neoliberal subjectivities of a persona and practice this persona in learning and teaching, they become neoliberal subjects. This section discusses stakeholders’ alignment and disconnection with constructed personas to examine their transformation into neoliberal subjects.

The change in teachers’ motivation from autonomous to controlled in their ELE teaching practice suggests that they are in the process of being constituted as neoliberal subjects. Senior teachers of similar age in rural and urban schools describe autonomous motivation as possessing similar characteristics. According to Section 5.2.1, they were attracted to the profession by their intrinsic autonomous motivation, which relates to teachers’ interest and enjoyment (Roth, 2014). When these teachers began to learn English, the language was in the process of becoming an important instrument for China’s economic and social development via political policies. Senior teachers’ interests in English show that political policies can influence individuals’ preferences and decisions in positioning themselves in education. However, the young urban school teacher’s position could be categorised as driven by a well-internalised extrinsic autonomous motivation. When the younger teacher was preparing to become an English language teacher, English had already become a major subject in China. Holborow (2015a) claims that neoliberalism makes English the economic language that (re)produces neoliberal ideology as the language of market preference worldwide. The young teacher realised that teaching English is important for acquiring economic and social capital and integrated teaching with her job, income and family values, showing the internalisation of neoliberal ideas in ELE. The younger urban teacher’s well-internalised extrinsic motivation confirms the influences of neoliberalism and
neoliberal policies on individuals' positions and choices. From the senior teacher to the younger one, the interest based on English as an instrument for economic development turned into an internalised belief that English could bring profits.

Controlled motivation, as presented in Section 2.5.1, refers to an external or internal sense of compulsion, and includes poorly internalised forms of extrinsic motivation including external reward or punishment and externally expected value and regulation of behaviour (Roth, 2014; Roth et al., 2009). I argue that the rural teacher’s autonomous motivation for being an English teacher became a controlled motivation in the teaching trajectory. The rural teacher is more incentivised to achieve economic performance rather than professional development, and focuses more strongly on students’ exam performances than their language ability after nearly 30 years’ teaching. The two urban teachers also showed a change in motivation from autonomous to controlled, believing that they are most highly motivated by students’ grades in exams, which are also related to teachers’ performance. Attention to exams from the school, parents and students makes teachers focus more on training examination skills than teaching language skills. This change from autonomous to controlled motivation indicates that performativity and accountability have been internalised through the examination system and are now actively practised in teaching. According to Foucault (1988), the process of creating a connection between individuals’ activities and neoliberal ideas reflects the process of generating and formulating subjects. Teachers actively experience, respond to and internalise power relations in a neoliberal economic society, then self-configure using neoliberal subjectivities. Teachers become self-configured and responsible trainers through the constructed persona of entrepreneurial self under neoliberalised policies.

The students' imagined future identities regarding educational and employment achievements show that rural and urban students are in the process of becoming different neoliberal subjects. In Section 8.2.2.1, I concluded that rural students position themselves with performativity and accountability in ELE via the examination system. Based on the analysis and discussion in Section 7.3, I argue that rural students feel disconnected from the international context in the policies and align themselves more with Chinese culture and socialist ideas, with the result that they cannot align themselves with the English language except when taking national exams. They believe they can contribute to national development by living in their local communities.
without a need for English language abilities. By distancing themselves from international communication and other capital exchanges through English, rural students actively choose marginalisation from ELE, internalising the neoliberal subjectivities of performativity and accountability by positioning themselves as examinees within the hegemonic institutional system. This starts their process of becoming neoliberal subjects. By actively aligning with the national context and disconnecting from the international context in learning practice, rural students adopt the persona of well-behaved socialist citizens.

Like rural students, urban students internalise the neoliberal subjectivities of performativity and accountability by positioning themselves as examinees. However, they align themselves not only with national socialist citizens but also with the persona of intercultural international talents by actively creating connections between their English learning practices and the neoliberal subjectivity of their competitiveness in the international market and their responsibility for national development. The discussion in Section 7.4.2 suggests that their investment in learning English relies on success in education and employment in the international context. In urban students’ discourse, national development is closely related to international competition. They believe English language ability will contribute to national development in international communication and competition and that they will become valuable contributors to development and intercultural communication by improving their English language ability. This in turn will benefit their personal development in the international education system and job market through their interest in becoming intercultural/global citizens. This will be discussed further in Section 8.2.3.

According to the previous section, ELE policies have reinforced the relationship between English and individual and national development in China. Stakeholders’ choice of teaching and learning English can be discussed based on Foucault’s (1978/2007) description of ‘tendency’ in achieving governmentality. The importance of ‘tendency’ was discussed in the theoretical framework, highlighting the difference between governmentality and hegemony. Tendency indicates that a certain economic theory works over other types of power to make individuals believe that they actively choose to follow policies created by economic theories in their social life. Neoliberalism is such an economic theory. Hegemonic neoliberalism imposes ideas on individuals through political power and systems, while governmentality emphasises linking
different types of power in society to regulate individuals' decisions using neoliberal ideas. In Section 8.2.2.1, I argued that neoliberalism needs to be seen as a hegemonic ideology based on its influence on stakeholders’ understanding of ELE in China. Changes in teachers’ motivation suggest that changing social conditions under neoliberal market logic regulates individuals’ decisions through hidden political power, while the different alignments of students show that individuals’ perception of economic, social and cultural capital under neoliberalist distribution regulates their choices. Their alignments with neoliberal personas suggest that neoliberal market logic is articulated through every sphere of social activities. Neoliberalism works as a form of governmentality in this practical process, influencing individuals in ELE.

To summarise, this section answers the second research question. Teachers and students in rural and urban schools are directly influenced by neoliberal policies at the compulsory education stage by how these policies portray and formulate ELE and how neoliberal ideas are practiced in teaching and learning. Neoliberalism acts as a hegemonic ideology that constructs the competitive examination system to ensure stakeholders internalise neoliberal subjectivities. In practice, neoliberalism also works as a form of governmentality that changes teachers and students into neoliberal subjects through their self-configuration as different personas of entrepreneurial selves produced by the policies. As Joseph (2002) argues, hegemony is better at relating governance to underlying social relations, and emphasises the longer-term strategic elements of governance projects, while governmentality is better at highlighting the rationalities underlying governance in practice. These two concepts can be combined to analyse the changing role of power and how governance is constructed. The hegemony in neoliberal ELE policies formulates stakeholders’ understanding of ELE to ensure that they align with national political and economic ideas for development. Neoliberalism controls stakeholders’ choices and development in ELE practice, turning individuals into neoliberal subjects who contribute to national political and economic development as a form of governmentality. The next section discusses how disparities between ELE in rural and urban schools are (re)produced by teachers’ and students’ performance as neoliberal subjects.
8.2.3 Disparity Between Compulsory English Language Education in Rural and Urban Schools

In this section, answering the third research question explores how disparities in ELE between rural and urban schools are embodied in stakeholders’ learning and teaching practices. It also demonstrates rural and urban students’ alignment or disconnection with neoliberalised policies. Based on the discussion of stakeholders’ learning and teaching practices, the section provides insights into rural and urban students’ compliance with or resistance to the ELE system. Section 8.2.3.1 explores the disconnection between rural students, teachers and policies in practice, showing how students conform to teachers and policies to align themselves with the persona of a well-behaved citizen. However, despite their compliance, rural students still experience marginalisation, as the historical inequality associated with rural students is perpetuated by the policies. Section 8.2.3.2 argues that urban students actively align themselves with the policies and their teachers in practice while simultaneously exhibiting resistance to the neoliberalised education system. Urban students become valuable subjects because they recognise that learning English enhances their linguistic capital and facilitates global mobility.

8.2.3.1 Rural Students’ Compliance in Teaching and Learning Practices and Marginalised Subjects of English Language Education

The discussion of my interview data and classroom observation showed that rural students are less willing to invest in ELE than their urban counterparts. In the rural classroom, the teacher noticed low student participation and addressed the problem by conducting more classroom activities, such as competitive group activities and digital presentations, to encourage students to interact. My observation showed that those activities were limited in the classroom. Instead, the teacher delivered grammar and other knowledge required for the exams most of the time, and the students had no contribution to building knowledge. Freire (1970/2009) argued that this approach follows the ‘banking’ model of education, which constructs an oppressive relationship between teachers and students. My interviews with rural students showed they were afraid to communicate with the teacher and considered themselves incompetent in the English classroom. The oppressive relationship in the classroom results in rural students’ de-alliance with the teacher and with classroom practice. Based on Norton’s
study of students’ investment, I concluded that rural students possessed limited capital to exchange for linguistic capital. The interviews showed that classroom instruction was the only resource they had to pass the exam and achieve their imagined identities. Outside school, there were no other forms of instruction to help students invest in ELE, but while the rural students showed de-alliance with the teaching model in the ELE classroom, they still positioned themselves as receivers conducted and managed by the teacher.

In Section 2.2.5, I discussed Althusser’s (1984) development of ideology, arguing that under his model of interpellation, ideology has already been represented and interpreted by the state apparatuses, and individuals recognise and accept their identity when the apparatuses transform them into subjects. Instead of becoming passive subjects under Gramsci’s hegemony, Althusser (1984) suggests that individuals are always ready to be transformed as subjects when interacting with apparatuses, and actively participate in constructing their own subjectivity. Rodin (2020) argues that Althusser’s ideology and ideas of governmentality demonstrate several parallels, mainly the focus on reproduction, mechanism of subjectivity and individualisation of power relations. Foucault (1978/2007) describes neoliberalism as a form of governmentality governing from a distance, and Althusser (1984) provides the structural grounding of governance using the ideas of ideological state apparatuses. Seeing neoliberalism as a form of governmentality could therefore reveal the power relationship between neoliberal ideas and stakeholders in ELE, showing how stakeholders are turned into subjects and contribute to neoliberalism through self-configuration with the subjectivities. Althusser’s ideology further explains how neoliberalism, stakeholders and structured ideological apparatuses such as the schools in this study, interact with each other in daily practices.

In the school context, the rural teacher followed the tendencies of neoliberalism by actively performing the persona of a responsible trainer in the ELE, thus accomplishing the self-construction of neoliberal subjectivities, allowing teachers as subjects to be dominated and managed to reproduce neoliberal ideas in teaching practice. In the rural school, the interaction between teachers and neoliberalised policies turns the teachers into ready subjects for the school system to hail. Once the teachers become subjects hailed by the school, their practice of neoliberal ideas in the classroom contributes to reinforcing the governance of students under the policies. As the
ideological apparatus, the school is where neoliberalism practises its ideas and stakeholders reproduce them. Neoliberal ideas, stakeholders and the school co-construct an organic system in which the governance of neoliberalism is consistently (re)produced. The rural students comply with the school’s teaching practices by adapting to the demands of the examination system, transforming themselves into neoliberal subjects. Students’ compliance embodies this (re)production. In the rural school, the teacher leads students to memorise the required EL knowledge to make them perform better in the neoliberalised examination system. Students configure themselves with the good and the meek in the classroom, and are easily organised. The rural students become neoliberal subjects as well-behaved learners managed by the neoliberalised education system, contributing to it through their performativity. According to Althusser (1984), neoliberal ideology turns rural students into neoliberal subjects through their interaction with neoliberalised teaching practices in the school.

The analysis of rural students’ interviews in Section 7.3.1 reveals rural students’ disconnection with ELE policies and textbooks in their learning practices. Rural students are distanced from the contents of ELE textbooks, mirroring my interview with the rural teacher and classroom observation which suggested an absence of rural context in ELE textbooks. Rural students believe they will not use English in the future. The absence of rural contexts in the textbooks indicates the marginalisation of rural spaces in neoliberalised ELE, leading to rural students’ disconnection and making them believe that the English language is unrelated to their future development. Despite this, rural students still show their compliance with ELE policies by aligning themselves with aspects of Chinese culture in the textbooks, which ELE policies encourage to cultivate socialist national cultural confidence (BNUPH, 2011). Rural students also believe that ELE is good for the country’s development in international competition, but my interviews suggest that rural students believe their urban counterparts will invest more in international competition through ELE. Wu (2016) discussed the educational governing of rural students’ subjectivities through overemphasising exams and classroom rituals in China, arguing that governance disciplines students and reduces their mobility. In general, rural students will invest in exams to gain and maintain a stable life within the local context. In other words, rural students comply with aspects of the ELE policies that relate to their development.
against a wider national background, aligning their future imagined identities as well-
behaved socialist citizens.

Based on Althusser’s (1984) interpellation in ideology, in the ideological apparatus
(school), rural students are hailed as subjects by practising their produced
subjectivities as well-behaved socialist citizens. Rehmann (2015) criticises Althusser’s
ideology for conceptualising the construction of ideological subjects and subjectivities
too mono-logically, disregarding contradictions as well as different forms of resistance
and subversion and showing that Althusser’s ideology theory may not fully explain
rural students’ disconnection from other subjectivities in neoliberalised policies. Vighi
and Feldner (2007) argue that for Althusser, individuals are invited into the
unconscious categories in which ideology turns them into subjects from the top down.
However, just as the rural context is missing in the ELE textbooks, the international
context of ELE policies is not in the repertoire of rural students. The influence of
neoliberal ideology on individuals and related practices is not a one-way process. I
have discussed the possibility of individuals’ resistance to ideology in Section 2.2.5,
arguing that Hall’s (1986, 1993) interpretation of ideology challenges Foucault and
Althusser.

Based on the discussion about Hall (1986) in Section 2.2.5, the theory of articulation
presents and explains how ideologies achieve dominance, and also informs how
individuals can articulate with different social forces to bring new or marginalised
thoughts to disrupt the hegemony. Hall believes that individuals could reproduce the
dominant ideology, transform, or even change it (Griffin, 2012). Zheng (2015) claims
that individuals always contradict the dominance of ideology. In this study, rural
students’ learning practices suggest their contradictions against the neoliberal
ideology, which is embodied in their compliance with and disconnection from learning
practices. Their de-alliances with teachers and the English language act as passive
resistance to the dominant neoliberal ideology. However, according to the analysis of
rural students’ investment and identities in Chapter 6, this resistance reinforces their
marginalisation in ELE. Hall (1986) explains that the theory of articulation shows how
an ideology discovers its subject rather than how the subject thinks the inevitable
thoughts belong to it. In the rural context, the dominant neoliberalist ideology has
already articulated itself with the English language, ELE and other spheres of students’
daily lives. It sees the rural students as subjects who articulate themselves with
neoliberal subjectivities in ELE policies, demonstrating neoliberal domination leading to compliance. Rural students' disconnection from international subjectivity in the neoliberal ELE policies shows their resistance, but they fail to articulate themselves with different social forces and instead bring their marginalised thoughts into the dominant discourse, thereby intensifying their marginalisation within the neoliberalised system.

As discussed in Section 6.4.1, the rural students were aware of their inferior and marginalised position compared with the urban students in ELE, and accepted this position. According to the human capital theory under neoliberalism (Becker, 1964), individuals need to develop their capacities to bring them economic, social and cultural benefits. Under the influence of neoliberalism, ELE in China is portrayed as the instrument of communication for international competition and national development, but in this context the English language cannot offer rural students any economic, social or cultural benefits they can use in their local context. As such, rural students distance themselves from ELE, especially because it produces international subjectivity. Neoliberalised ELE predetermines the marginalisation of the rural context through policies and textbooks, and rural students reproduce it through their disconnection from international subjectivity. From my interviews and observations, rural students share the rural habitus and restrict themselves in ELE learning, and cannot articulate themselves with different social forces other than those the ELE policies offer them in their rural context. Their disconnection and compliance are therefore both restricted within their marginalised context, reproducing and reinforcing marginalisation as subjects in neoliberalised ELE. Urban students also show a negotiated position against the neoliberalised ELE system in practice, and the following section discusses how their negotiated position transforms them into neoliberal subjects in ELE rather than fuelling their resistance.

8.2.3.2 Urban Students' Alignment in Teaching and Learning Practices and Valuable Subjects of English Language Education

The findings from classroom observations and interviews show that urban students' studies are packed with endless exam-oriented tasks and homework in and outside the classroom. Although urban teachers conduct their classes using different sources of knowledge about the English language and try to encourage a learner-centred
classroom, they still adopt the banking model most of the time. Using the banking model in class to improve students’ exam performances shows that urban teachers have become neoliberalised subjects, aligning themselves with performativity in practice. Freire (1970) sees education as a political practice in the control of language and consciousness as a form of subjection of individuals and groups by rulers, so while teachers in the model are oppressed by the political system, the system transforms them into oppressors of students. However, unlike rural students as silent recipients in ‘banking’ classrooms, urban students take an interest in English language classes and their textbooks, believing that lessons and the contents of textbooks provide them with various materials to support their learning practices. The most prominent goal for them in practice is better exam performance. Urban students recognise practicing for exams and invest more inside and outside the classroom to achieve their goal of better education resources and future development through the examination system, echoing Drew’s (2019) discussion of Freire and banking theory. Drew points out that some students enjoy the banking model because they align themselves with the structure behind banking in education. For example, the banking requirements of the exams help them achieve good exam scores. Freire (1970/2014) claims that education is a political practice, while the analysis and discussion in my study show that ELE is the political practice of neoliberal ELE policies. Urban students’ recognition of the banking model in learning practice shows that they willingly align themselves with the neoliberal political agenda of ELE.

In Section 2.2.5 I discussed the relationship between agency and structure, arguing that Hall’s (1986, 1993) understanding of ideology and subjects could be related to the duality of structure, which lies in the relationship agency has with structure. The urban students are agents in the ELE school structure, which relies on neoliberal ideology. Since they are hailed as the subjects in school and actively perform the subjectivity of examinees in the learning practice, their agency is constrained by the neoliberalised structure of ELE. As an ideology, neoliberalism therefore articulates itself with the English language, ELE policies and educational institutions to produce a neoliberal social and political structure. Subsequently neoliberalism dominates individuals as subjects to manage them and articulate their agency with neoliberal ideas in different structures, thus constraining their agency. Urban students’ recognition of the examination system and the banking mode in ELE teaching practice suggests that
their agency is constrained by neoliberalised ELE, and they can only make choices within the structure. In turn, their agency reproduces the structure and reinforces the ideology behind it.

Similarly, the agency of rural students is also limited by the neoliberalist structure of ELE, so they choose to align with well-behaved socialist citizens’ personas in learning practice formulated by policies of the structure using neoliberal ideas. In the previous section, I argued that rural students’ habitus influences this choice by making them believe that in the international context the English language has nothing to do with their local lives. However they are still controlled by what determines their habitus, leading to their marginalisation. Bourdieu (1977) sees habitus as the principles that generate and structure behaviours and beliefs, and as something that can be observed as consistent and shaped, even though people are not consciously shaped by specific rules. Neoliberalised ELE policies, as the dominant political structure, shape and have shaped rural and urban students’ habitus. I discussed the two sets of objectivities in ELE policies, as well as advocating education equity while erasing the rural context in recent policies and related textbooks. The structure constructed by neoliberalism in ELE has reproduced the differences and distances between urban and rural areas, shaping the habitus of rural and urban students. Bourdieu (1998) believes that social structures produce domination and inequalities, which can be reproduced by different habitus. Based on my interviews and observations, urban students’ habitus reproduces the dominant position of the urban context in policies, while rural students’ habitus reproduces the marginalised position of the rural context in ELE. Bourdieu (1988) argues that structures predetermine the capital that people possess or could obtain in practice, and capital (re)produces their habitus. Actors with different habitus struggle to transform or preserve their capital in structured social spaces, so even if economic capital is invested in rural schools to achieve equity in ELE, it will be ineffective because limited social and cultural capital related to ELE is accessible for economic capital to transform in the rural context. English language as a form of linguistic capital under neoliberalism cannot be added to rural students’ human capital because the agency of rural students to align with international personas in learning practice is constrained from the beginning by the neoliberal ELE structure. It could therefore be said that rural students seem to actively choose a well-behaved socialist
persona, but in fact the neoliberalist ELE policies predetermine their choices, and their choices consistently reproduce the inequalities of the ELE structure.

The situation was different for urban students, as they aligned themselves with national and international contexts in policies. From the analysis, it can be seen that neoliberalised ELE policies want students to meet five-dimensional requirements in practice, which embody the ‘instrumentality and humanism’ of the English language and cultivate language knowledge and cultural awareness (BNUPH, 2011). My analysis indicates that these requirements relate to the requirement for linguistic abilities or intercultural competence for international communication. Overall, the requirements are there to achieve the national development goals of neoliberalism. In the urban teachers’ description of their ideal and actual classrooms, they aligned their teaching practices most with the ‘instrumentality and humanism’ of the English language and designed classes according to these requirements. Urban teachers are therefore hailed subjects who practice neoliberal ideas in teaching practices. Their recognition and repeated expression of the policies show that their agency is constrained to actively delivering these ideas, reproducing the neoliberal structure in ELE for students.

The answer to the first research question shows that the national development goals in ELE policies have formulated two forms of subjectivities for students. Urban students who prefer the banking model receive their teachers’ structured neoliberal ideas of ELE, and while power dynamics vary among urban students, in this study they occupy the dominant context in comparison to rural students. As discussed in Section 8.2.2, they are exposed to more and different forms of capital, which can be invested in alignment with either the socialist persona or the international persona in learning practices. From my interviews with students, it is plausible that they possess the capital to align with the international contexts in and outside the classroom, which is afforded to them by their habitus. The urban students can observe consistencies in the international context between their habitus and what the education structure provided. Since their habitus also indicates the dominant position of urban contexts in ELE, urban students can easily align with subjectivities in ELE policies – especially international ones. Urban students therefore choose to invest in ELE for its neoliberal subjectivities to provide themselves with the social and political capital that they can later transform with their linguistic capital. As a result, urban students’ investment in
subjectivities consistently (re)produces capital for them. The students’ agency, influenced by their habitus and its structure, leads them to choose to align with subjectivities set by the structure, making them valuable in ELE while consolidating neoliberal hegemony.

According to Hall’s (1986) theory, urban teachers’ and students’ resistance to ideology needs more articulation with powers outside the structure of neoliberalism. The teachers’ critical views on the examination system and the banking model align with the requirements in policies. Urban students believe that examinations are not the only goal of ELE. They want to choose their learning methods and materials, but the ultimate goal is still to develop their linguistic skills to achieve the neoliberal goals of ELE policies. Their agency of resistance is also limited by the neoliberal structure. Rojo and Percio (2019) argue that this form of agency – which acts on individual advantages under governance and exerts diverse techniques of power on themselves – is the agency that contributes to neoliberalism. In comparison with emancipatory agency, which may change the structure, Rehmann (2015) calls this a dominant agency. According to Hall (1988), connecting with more social forces and articulating more marginalised ideas is necessary to resist structure and the ideology behind the structure, so in the urban context, instead of resisting the governance of neoliberalised ELE, stakeholders’ resistance reproduces it.

In summary, this section has discussed the relationship between students, teachers and policies in rural and urban schools with reference to classroom practices. Rural and urban students and their practice are controlled by neoliberalism through ELE policies, and while neoliberalism as a form of governmentality and an ideology makes them believe that they are active and free to choose, their choices and agency are actually managed from the start. Students’ relationships with teachers and policies indicate that what they choose and how they act are decided by their capital and habitus in their learning trajectory. Urban students appear to take advantage of neoliberalised ELE, while rural students are marginalised by it. Since neoliberalism articulates itself in every sphere of social activities and makes individuals (re)produce the dominant ideologies or even transform them, rural and urban students actually transform neoliberal ideas into different forms and reinforce them in daily practice. Under the neoliberal system, no one is a true beneficiary; rural and urban students are controlled subjects whose resistance can be managed. Students’ resistance to
neoliberalised institutions or systems – schools or examinations – shows that individuals have agency under the structure, but this agency is also controlled by neoliberal ideas because the different forms of capital they possess and pursue are all (re)produced through neoliberal market logic. The pre-set inequality in the neoliberal distribution of capital has been reinforced and reproduced, and disparities between rural and urban ELE cannot be resisted or changed as long as individuals need to live within the neoliberal structure of ELE. This section addressed the three research questions from the perspectives of policy, individual and education practice. The next section presents implications based on the discussion and reviewed theories.

8.3 Implications

This study focused on the influence of neoliberalised policies on teachers’ and students’ daily practices in rural and urban English language classrooms at the compulsory education stage in China. The previous section showed that alignment with and resistance to constructed neoliberal personas of entrepreneurial selves in policies and practices lead to inequality and marginalisation in ELE. Using a critical ethnographic methodology, this study is deeply engaged with the reimagining, problematising and questioning of power relations, injustice, inequity and marginalisation under neoliberal ideology. The implications of this study therefore centre on resisting neoliberalism in policymaking and practice to promote equity in education. The following sections suggest implications for policymaking, curriculum and practice. The first implication encourages collaboration between policymakers and critical ethnographic researchers. The second advocates a shift from the instrumentised exam-oriented curriculum to a critical intercultural approach for ELE. As discussed in Section 5.1, the curriculum in China represents a form of education policy. The curriculum emphasises the implications for the content of ELE policies, compared to the first implication of the policymaking process. The third section presents practical implications for teachers, students and schools based on frameworks of critical intercultural education, including critical pedagogy, intercultural citizenship and communicative action theory.
8.3.1 Implications for ELE Policymaking

The disparity and marginalisation presented in this study highlight the injustice and inequality brought about by policies and real educational practices. The CDA of policies and ethnographic observation showed that stakeholders’ practices in the context of language policy implementation result from the interplay between different social actors. Even if they align with the same hegemonic ideology and work towards the same goal, the impact of language policy on individuals varies. Detailed critical studies of the language practices and ideologies of social actors involved in ELE offered the potential to raise awareness of inequality or marginalisation, suggesting a need to change policies. Johnson (2009) concludes that the dynamic process of policymaking could extend across time, and that implementation could be a link in a chain that allows for agency and the acceptance, adaption or recasting of language policies. Instead of employing traditional policy formation and implementation from a top-down perspective, policy could be a dynamic process that enables stakeholders’ acceptance and resistance to provide adjustment resources to policymaking. The potential offered by this study shows that critical ethnographic studies could contribute to the dynamic process of policymaking, thus promoting equity in education. Advocating collaboration between policymakers and critical ethnographic researchers to help adjust policies to real-life educational practices and contexts is therefore the first implication of this study.

Critical ethnographic research allows policymakers to gain a more nuanced understanding of how policies operate in educational practice. In Section 3.3.2, I presented and analysed relevant policies on national educational planning and reforms at the compulsory education stage. Since the 2000s, these policies on the reform and development of basic education have shed light on rural areas by proposing a more balanced development of compulsory education to reduce disparities in education between rural and urban areas, relying mainly on economic strategies. In the 2010s, the MOE (2019) reported that education had improved in most rural areas, and that balanced development had largely been achieved. The new planning for compulsory education in the 2020s now aims at ‘high-quality, well-balanced, and integrated development of compulsory education’ in both urban and rural areas (China Daily, 2021). Policies are formulated based on the guidelines of national education planning and reforms. This study showed the gradual
disappearance of rural contexts in the policies and its marginalisation in practice. Analysing the policies demonstrated that the description of English education as a tool for bringing economic social, and cultural capital to personal and national development had caused regional disparities to be addressed through a collective goal of imagined communities. Critical ethnographic observations also showed that unlike the achieved balance mentioned in the policies, ELE in rural areas is still disadvantaged, and that rural students, in practice, aligned themselves with the subjectivity of well-behaved national builders constructed in the policies, thereby rationalising and enforcing their own marginalisation. This study underscored the problems arising from real practices guided by policies.

This study also showed that the operation of policies in practice is determined by how individuals align with them. Alignments are constructed through interactions between individuals and their lived reality. The discussion in Section 8.2.2.2 showed the alignment of teachers with the subjectivity of responsible trainers in policies, while the thematic analysis of ethnographic data traced the transformation of teachers’ motivation from autonomous to controlled in their teaching practices, as well as identifying the gap between their ideal classrooms and classrooms in practice. This illustrated how teachers’ agency is controlled and restricted in their real practices in order to achieve alignment with policies. Similarly, the analysis of students’ investment and interactions with teachers revealed the alliances and de-alliances of urban and rural students by exposing different subjectivities in their learning trajectories. The different self-positioning of rural and urban students against policies suggested that their agency was restricted and organised by their possessed and achievable economic, social and cultural capital. Their alignments with different subjectivities characterised their acceptance of and resistance to policies in practice. The critical ethnographic study provides an individual epistemology of policy implementation that allows policymakers to reflect on the impact of potential problems, power relations, in/justice and in/equity in policies on individuals and revise policies accordingly. Collaborating with ethnographic researchers could help policymakers adjust policies to reflect different conditions and resources that restrict or encourage agency in educational practices to promote the dynamic process of policymaking leading to more equity in education.
8.3.2 Implications for English Language Education Curriculum

The preceding implication pertains to raising awareness of problems in policymaking. It suggests that the theoretical and conceptual framework of future language education policies must involve a critical examination of the interplay between practices and conveyed ideologies in current language curriculum standards. The second implication of this study calls for a shift from the instrumentalised exam-oriented curriculum to a more critical intercultural curriculum in ELE. This implication proposes a specific direction for policy adjustment based on the critical analysis of the hegemonic ideology in the previous curriculum standards and its impact on stakeholders in practice.

Influenced by neoliberalism, current curriculum standards deliver instrumentalisation of the English language and essentialist views on culture governing stakeholders’ practices for national competition in the international market. According to current curriculum standards, the English language is seen as a union between ‘instrumentality and Humanism’ (BNUPH, 2011, 2022). My research findings suggest that the instrumentality of the English language converted English linguistic abilities into transformable linguistic capital. In practice, stakeholders were categorised as neoliberal subjects that can exchange different forms of capital with linguistic capital, contributing to national development under neoliberalism. The instrumentalism of language reinforces power imbalances and marginalises those who do not speak English or who do not conform to the linguistic standards associated with power and privilege.

This study also found that humanism in the English language curriculum standards emphasised the ability to learn and transmit cultural knowledge, indicating that intercultural communication competence is to be acquired through ELE. However, the description of the ‘Self and Other’ relationship between China and other countries and linking the English language with all cultures implies essentialist views on culture. In Section 5.3.2, I argued that the essentialist cultural perspective ignored the complexity and diversity of human life and identity, perpetuating stereotypes, discrimination and inequality and leading to the marginalisation or exclusion of specific groups of people (Holliday, 2010; Pennycook, 1998). The fundamental reason for adopting essentialist views was to lead stakeholders to join the imagined national community to control and allocate individuals for the realisation of national competition goals under neoliberalism.
Essentialist views on culture therefore still suggest the instrumentalisation of the English language and language education for national development.

Instrumentalised English language abilities and essentialised cultural communication competence were presented as graded objectives in the curriculum standards, which became the resources and tenets of the English language examinations. Standards in policies have constructed an instrumentalised exam-oriented curriculum under neoliberalism, and the analysis of teaching and learning practices showed that neoliberalised ideas were internalised by stakeholders through exam-oriented teaching and learning practices, resulting in the teacher-centred banking model in rural and urban English language classrooms. This banking model turned teachers into neoliberal subjects to oppress students for exam-oriented goals and subjectify them as examinees who are ready to be stratified. To raise awareness of the impact on individuals becoming neoliberal subjects, Giroux and Giroux (2006) argue that critical pedagogy is needed to provide the knowledge, skills and a spirit of inquiry for critical dialogue with reality, questioning hegemony and its effects and continuing to struggle with ongoing relations of power in the classroom.

Freire (1970/2014) developed critical pedagogy as a philosophy of education, arguing that dialogue and critical reflection are central to critical pedagogy and what he called a problem-posing education focusing on the student-teacher relationship, the learning context and the learning process. Freire (1970/2014) describes this process of dialogue and problematisation as the education of liberation to free people from the hegemonic oppression of banking and open their critical consciousness. Armitage (2013) argues that in the process, individuals could gain sufficient critical awareness to overcome oppression, reflect on the socio-cultural reality which shapes their lives and transform that reality collectively. Adopting critical pedagogy could therefore trigger reflections on stratification and marginalisation in neoliberalised ELE, guiding stakeholders to criticise exam-oriented teaching and learning practices.

According to Guilherme (2002b), critical pedagogy redefines the link between theory and practice. Theories derive from individuals’ practice, interrelate with it to inform and reform individuals’ practice and vice-versa. Giroux (2010) describes this mutually constitutive process suggested by critical pedagogy as a form of cultural production, as it empowers individuals to interact with different sociocultural factors to intervene with accepted ways of knowing and living. By encouraging students to critically
examine the relationship between self, others and the world and reflect on their lived reality, critical pedagogy prepares students for critical citizenship, which encourages students to become actively engaged in their communities’ social and political issues and advocate for social justice (Guilherme, 2002a). In other words, critical pedagogy enhances students’ agency to resist and even change the current inequalities in ELE. Grollios (2009) suggests that Freire’s educational goal of curriculum planning is the formation of critical citizenship deriving from the process of dialogue and problematisation. Giroux (2018) proposes that a curriculum following critical pedagogy can include student realities and the knowledge of communities to explore ways of reclaiming marginalised identities by interrogating power relations. Therefore, like the dynamic process of policymaking, the curriculum could also be a developing process that continuously constructs and reconstructs knowledge of reality based on constant dialogue and critical reflection. Instead of providing instrumentalised language knowledge and setting standardised objectives, the curriculum could consider stakeholders as producers of knowledge, emphasise individual participation in the teaching and learning processes and provide space for teachers and students to construct language knowledge grounded in their experiences and relevant to their communities.

The curriculum can be flexible, allowing authentic materials representing different perspectives and encouraging critical analysis and reflection in the learning process. The curriculum may also address issues of inequality and discrimination and support discussions of marginalised groups in and outside the classroom. Curricula may need to be revised often, and adjustments made based on stakeholders’ practices and reflections so that students can develop their understanding of English, build their own knowledge of the language and language learning processes and encourage a critical stance regarding the influence of ELE on themselves, others and society to resist hegemonic ideas. In other words, the curriculum may consider providing students with the ability to know what knowledge has been appropriated by the dominant ideologies, to reflect on the knowledge acquired through their daily experiences and to construct their own knowledge from critical practice. Specific implications for students’ learning practices will be discussed in the following section.

According to Costa et al. (2020), this kind of critical curriculum encourages interculturality in education by promoting knowledge construction based on dialogue
between different people and knowledge, meaning and practices to enhance interrelationships between people as well as equitable coexistence between different cultures. Interculturality involves recognising and valuing cultural diversity, promoting intercultural communication and creating inclusive environments for different cultures and practices (Dervin, 2016).

Byram and Phipps (2006) suggest that learning other languages is an essential condition for intercultural communication and the acceptance of cultural differences. According to Freire (1970/2014), all education is political. Guilherme (2006, 2002b) and Wagner and Byram (2017) see foreign language education as a political act that teaches students to identify with and become intercultural citizens. Intercultural citizenship therefore shows that language education needs to help learners acquire intercultural communicative competence (ICC) and critical citizenship. ICC requires learners’ knowledge of different cultures, open attitudes to different cultures, the development of necessary skills to interpret and interact with different cultures and critical awareness of the self’s and others’ cultural practices (Wagner & Byram, 2017). Critical citizenship also needs to encourage students to engage actively in social and political issues and challenge systems of oppression and inequality for social justice.

The essentialist view of culture in the current curriculum equates culture with country, describing different cultures as national and international differences to allow students to take responsibility for the development of the imagined nation. However, in addition to language knowledge and skills, ELE is also suggested to foster students’ critical reflection on language and culture, empower them to question dominant cultural narratives and recognise the complexity of linguistic and cultural identities. This would enable students, as intercultural citizens, to construct their own knowledge of cultural diversity based on individual experiences, practices and reflection, thereby resisting inequalities in teaching, learning and other contexts of language use, including intercultural practices.

The implication of adjusting the curriculum therefore calls for a critical intercultural change of direction. As well as the previous suggestions for a curriculum following critical pedagogy, developing students’ intercultural communicative competence might be considered as an important aspect of the curriculum, involving different activities to expose students to authentic cultural practices related to their contexts and real-life experiences. It could also provide opportunities for students to critically analyse
language use in different forms of discourse from different cultural backgrounds such as the analysis of literature and film from a critical perspective to enrich students’ critical literacy. Curriculum focusing on issues such as language discrimination and linguistic imperialism and encouraging critical reflection on the role of language in shaping real-world contexts might be considered. This would provide opportunities for students to engage with diverse communities and help develop partnerships among different groups. This offers the possibility of changing marginalised cultures and groups collectively. In terms of assessment, the curriculum could develop appropriate evaluation guidelines for language skills, knowledge and other aspects of intercultural communicative competence. Guidelines can be flexible, allowing different evaluation methods based on different contexts. In this way, the curriculum will be able to contribute to critical intercultural citizenship in language education practices. The following section provides specific practical implications for teachers, students and schools.

8.3.3 Practical Implications for Teachers, Students and Schools

The discussion of critical pedagogy and intercultural citizenship guides practical implications for teachers, students and schools. The results of this study show that neoliberalism turns teachers and students in ELE into neoliberal subjects. Teachers become responsible trainers who prioritise training students to pass standardised tests as the primary goal of their teaching. Meanwhile, urban students can align with the neoliberal subjectivity of intercultural international talents while rural students can only align themselves with the subjectivity of well-behaved socialist citizens. Neoliberalism constructs personas of entrepreneurial selves with different subjectivities through its policies, allowing stakeholders to consciously align themselves in practice, resulting in alienation, control and stratification. Based on Freire’s (1970/2014) theory of critical pedagogy and Guilherme’s (2002b) discussion of critical pedagogy to prepare critical intercultural citizens through foreign language education, developing critical reflection and dialogue in practice would be two main implications to help resist and even change inequalities and marginalisation. The implication for schools to provide a space for stakeholders’ reflection and dialogue is informed by Guilherme’s (2002b) argument on the role of schools in a democratic society.
The first practical implication for teachers and students in ELE is developing their reflexivity. As an indispensable tool for critical pedagogy, critical reflection is vital for the development of critical cultural awareness in both educational and intercultural contexts (Guilherme, 2002a). In Section 8.2.3, I used Hall’s (1993) theory of articulation to explain how stakeholders apply their agency to negotiate with the neoliberal structure in practice to answer the third research question. I argue that although they can realise oppression from the neoliberal hegemony and show a certain degree of resistance through their agency in practice, the form of resistance they adopt still aligns with neoliberal ideology. The purpose of resistance is still to achieve neoliberalised purposes – to obtain economic or social capital. In resisting, stakeholders do not need to take the opposing position, as Hall (1993) suggested, to find a different way. Hall’s view that agency can resist structure through interpretation and articulation echoes Giddens’ (1984) duality of structure, which points out that structure is the medium and outcome of agency, and that individuals can alter their positions in the social structure through agency. This echoes the finding of this study. Under the neoliberal structure, the agency of teachers and students can only find and use the space and opportunities offered by the structure, so their behaviour is still restricted and affected by the structure.

Archer (1982, 2004, 2007) criticised the conflational tendencies of Giddens’ structuration theory, believing that individuals can transform structures through reflexivity rather than being passively shaped by structures. Archer treats structure and agency as different entities, enabling structure and agency to be analysed separately in different social and cultural contexts, thus allowing reflexivity to explore the relationship between them in different contexts. She believes that reflexivity mediates between structure and agency, she regards reflexivity as the ability to enable individuals to take certain stances towards structure, producing active agents who can consciously choose their actions and enabling them to shape the structure. This aligns with critical pedagogy, which posits that constant reflection facilitates a reciprocal illumination between theory and action in various contexts, leading to changes in educational practice (Freire, 1970/2014; Guilherme, 2002b). Stakeholders reflect critically upon their own experiences, contexts and cultures to enable resistance and change in education.
Teachers and students need to be encouraged to reflect on their teaching and learning practices and consider how policies impact their actions. Teachers could also be aware of the impact of their own social-cultural backgrounds, experiences and values on their teaching practices – especially their thoughts and values on ELE – and need to reflect on how the structure of ELE influences their teaching methods and content. In this way, they can see how policies affect English language teaching and advocate for different approaches, such as alternatives to standardised exams. By constantly reflecting on their own position and practice in neoliberalised ELE, teachers can also identify the governance of students under neoliberal structures, guiding them to encourage students’ reflexivity. To develop students’ critical intercultural citizenship and help them become critical citizens in a diverse world, teachers can create opportunities for students to engage with different cultures through activities such as field trips and cultural exchanges, and by encouraging them to critically reflect on language use in different contexts during these activities. They can also encourage students to critically analyse cultural assumptions and biases embedded in language use that perpetuate stereotypes and discrimination. They can share or discuss with others – including students and colleagues – their reflections on the impact of policies and language use in practice, encouraging all involved to question dominant ideas and structure collectively.

Students could also reflect on how policies shape their learning practices under teachers’ instruction, and on their learning habits and methods to discover methods that best suit them. They might be suggested to remain aware of the influence of their social and cultural background on learning to reflect on their own cultural assumptions and biases and challenge them through critical analysis. Students can then explore how language is used to (re)produce marginalisation by working to become more aware of the social and cultural influences that shape their own perspectives. They may consider the role of ELE in their environment and reflect on how they could use their knowledge and skills to create positive change in the future.

The second implication for teachers and students is the need to create and engage in more collaborative dialogues. The re-establishment of dialogue in classrooms is one of the central ideas in Freire’s pedagogical theories, and constitutes a common ground for all critical pedagogy (Guilherme, 2002b). The banking model in rural and urban classrooms is a one-way process based mostly on pre-planned presentations from the
teacher to the students, reinforcing oppressive relations. Guilherme (2002b) argues that dialogue in critical pedagogy changes depending on political and social requirements, ranging from an effort to stimulate learning to validating dissent and encouraging ideological change. Giroux (2000) claims that critical pedagogy views dialogue as the attitude and process of articulating consensus and dissent by engaging in knowledge construction. Guilherme (2002b) also believes that preparing students to become active and responsible citizens involves fostering an interactive dialogic attitude, through which students can actively discuss the complexities of knowledge production and use new possibilities to link knowledge and experience. Dialogue in critical pedagogy is suggested to encourage differences and dissent, connect critical reflection with agency and advocate empowering teachers and students to problematise and challenge dominant ideology in ELE practices. Giroux and Giroux (2006) suggest that dialogue in critical pedagogy creates conditions of collaboration, enabling not only the individual but collective social agency to encourage resistance to hegemony in education practices.

Teachers can create a space for students to enjoy critical dialogues by encouraging questions, disagreement and discussion. They can encourage students to engage in dialogues about views from different cultures through literature, media and other resources. They can also provide opportunities for students to share their experiences and perspectives in and outside the classroom. Teachers might consider creating collaborative learning activities to help students engage in dialogues with each other in their own communities, enabling students to take collective action to address issues in these communities. In educational practice, teachers may also seek possibilities to help students to open dialogue with marginalised groups in and outside their communities. In the contexts of this study, both urban and rural teachers are suggested to guide the students to consider the absence of rural contexts in textbooks and other learning materials and encourage them to establish dialogue and collaborations between rural and urban communities. In this way, teachers can provide opportunities for rural students to gain awareness of their marginalisation and for urban students to reflect critically on their privilege. Dialogues with colleagues and administrators are also important for teachers. According to Giroux and Giroux (2006), dialogues create conditions for collaboration. Teachers can contribute to generating
collective social agency through dialogues to resist the hegemony of neoliberalism in practice.

Students can also actively engage in classroom discussions by sharing their own perspectives and experiences, listening to and questioning others’ viewpoints with teachers and peers. Students could then actively seek dialogues from diverse perspectives and experiences through reading, literature or engaging with people from different social and cultural backgrounds. These dialogues would involve developing partnerships and collaborations with people in and outside their communities, enabling critical reflection on the self and the other to constitute diverse identities and construct knowledge. Students could work with peers from different backgrounds to develop collective agency against the governing structures of ELE. They could also use what they have learned from intercultural communication to take action to promote social justice and equity, such as advocating for marginalised groups’ rights or engaging in community service.

The findings of this study show that rural and urban schools play the role of the political system – or in Althusser’s (1984) words, a ‘state apparatus’ – to carry neoliberal policies. This constrains the agency of teachers and students through systemic school management, allowing them to be dominated as neoliberal subjects. This implies that the role of schools in ELE policies must be changed to resist neoliberalised ELE policies and their negative impacts of disparity and marginalisation. Guilherme (2002a) considers schooling as a form of citizenship education, while Giroux (1983) sees schools as democratic public spheres dedicated to forms of self and social empowerment to realise a transformation and reconstruction of society through critical pedagogy. By adopting suggestions from Guilherme (2002) and Giroux, schools need to provide a space for stakeholders to advocate for policy reform, thereby promoting social justice and equity in ELE. They could do this by organising discussions and debates on reducing the emphasis on standardised assessments, privatisation and market-driven policies. Schools could involve all stakeholders in decision-making processes to promote discussion, debate and collaboration. This can include teachers, students, parents and other stakeholders who would like to participate in education practice, such as school policymaking, public teaching and learning activities. By involving all stakeholders, schools will ensure that policies and practices are more inclusive and responsive to the needs of every group, even marginalised ones. Urban
and rural schools may invite members to join each other’s discussions and collaborate with each other.

Meanwhile, schools can also provide professional development opportunities for teachers and administrators to learn about alternative approaches to ELE. This training could focus on a critical reflection of ELE policies, different views of language and culture, critical pedagogy and other approaches that prioritise social justice and equity. If possible, schools could create spaces for students to reflect and discuss their rights and responsibilities in ELE and school life by supporting student-led organisations, providing resources for student-led initiatives, and encouraging student participation in the discussion of school management and other related issues. Finally, schools may consider engaging with the community to build partnerships and support alternative approaches to ELE by organising community events, involving community members in decision-making processes and creating opportunities for community members to provide feedback on policies and school practices. This role of the school fits with the view of citizenship education, as it enables teachers and students to become empowered citizens who contribute to resistance and change in society through critical participation in community life and by building collaboration for the future (Guilherme, 2002b).

In summary, this study discussed the fact that the curriculum presented instrumentalised and essentialist views on the English language, culture and language education, suggesting the impact of neoliberalism on ELE policies in China. The study also critically analysed the impact of neoliberalised policies on stakeholders’ daily practices, leading to the subjectification, stratification and marginalisation of individuals in society, with their agency planned and restricted by the structure. The implications to policymaking, curriculum adjustment and stakeholders in practice suggest the importance of critical ethnographic studies and the possible potential of critical pedagogy and intercultural citizenship to encourage individual and collective agency, emancipate stakeholders and resist stubborn inequalities set in place by structure. The resistance to neoliberalism and its effects will be a long-term and gradual process, and only by articulating, communicating and cooperating with a wider community – particularly marginalised communities – can individuals become more powerful against long-standing structures. Although my research concerns policies and stakeholders in compulsory ELE, its implications could be articulated to wider
communities and contexts. The next section looks at contributions to knowledge, limitations and suggestions for future research.

8.4 Contributions to Knowledge, Limitations, and Future Research

This section concludes the thesis by presenting its theoretical and methodological contributions, reflecting on its limitations and suggesting opportunities for future research in this field.

8.4.1 Contributions to Knowledge

The first contribution of this study is contextual. This study fills a research gap in the study of ELE policies in rural contexts at the compulsory education stage in China. After reviewing the empirical studies on neoliberalism and education, language education and ELE worldwide in Chapter 3, I suggested that most studies focus on neoliberal policies’ influence on individual ideas. Such studies lack data and discussion about the practice of participants, their changing position in the neoliberalised education process, their interaction with each other in practice and the mutual influences between educational participants and systems under neoliberalism. Meanwhile, the study identified that cultural inequalities and marginalisation between languages and groups of people brought about by neoliberalised ELE also require more in-depth, critical, qualitative data-backed research, while research on neoliberalism in ELE in China is even rarer. Few studies on ELE and its policies in China involve rural and urban students and teachers to explore the differences between their daily practices under the influence of the policies. This study sought to fill the research gap in studying English language policy in rural contexts in China and highlight the effects of neoliberalist policies on social justice, inequality and the interaction between individuals and structure. It offered insights into current urban-rural disparities in ELE and presented the daily practices of stakeholders who experienced the disparity. The study revealed the ways in which rural students and teachers are marginalised within the education system and how they are excluded from the benefits of economic development under neoliberalism.
The second contribution is methodological. The study integrated critical ethnography with CDA and thematic analysis (TA). Following the critical analysis of political policies, I analysed and discussed data from the ethnographic field through TA. The combination of CDA and ethnography is particularly useful for revealing connections between the multiple layers of policy activity and oppression or interaction between top-down policymaking and implementation in practice. The combination of critical ethnography and TA provided a two-step process for systematically identifying shared phenomena among participants, as well as power relations, status-based hierarchies and larger ideologies. Using CDA and TA, my critical ethnographic study revealed the connections between policies, stakeholders and practices. Meanwhile, it also explored relationships between participants and how these relationships referred to neoliberalism in ELE, education and Chinese society. Critical ethnography encouraged the analysis of social phenomena through power relations, while CDA provided a deeper understanding of the discourse and language used in policy documents and their impact on social practices.

This study also contributes original findings. It offers findings that have not emerged from previous relevant studies, and which have therefore not been discussed. The data analysis and discussion of the policies in China uncovered evidence of neoliberal strategies associated with nationalism and showed how neoliberal policies combine national economic and political development goals with individual language competence and development. The study also showed how policies tried to change the stakeholders into different neoliberal subjects and arrange them in a way that is optimal for national development. By exploring inequalities in educational resources, processes, practices and results between rural and urban China, the study shows how policies try to use nationalism to cover up the fact that neoliberalised ELE marginalises rural groups in pursuit of maximising national economic and political benefits in the world market. Through ethnographic research, the study also discussed the ways in which these policies affected individuals and communities and how these policies are challenged. The implications of critical pedagogy can help stakeholders resist the structural oppression of neoliberalism in and outside the classroom. Intercultural citizenship offers a possible solution to the ongoing articulation between neoliberalism and nationalism by promoting understanding and respect for cultural differences. It also encourages people to see themselves and others with fluid diverse identities.
based on different social and cultural contexts, which could help people learn about other cultures and appreciate the diversity of human experience. Intercultural citizenship, could therefore enhance individual and collective agency, reduce discrimination and promote social justice.

In conclusion, this study offers a feasible research approach for education policy studies, fills a research gap in studying the policies and individual practices under neoliberalism in Chinese rural contexts, reveals a new manifestation of neoliberalism in relation to nationalism and provides specific guidelines on how to resist structure and gain agency through critical intercultural citizenship in ELE and wider educational settings. These contributions have significant implications for education policies and provide a valuable approach for researchers, policymakers, educators and students interested in promoting social justice and equality in education.

8.4.2 Limitations

Firstly, this critical ethnography examined teachers and students in two specific schools and two classes in one province in China, which may make it difficult to generalise the findings and conclusions of this study to other situations. However, following Guba and Lincoln’s (1994) recommendation, a qualitative study could comprehensively describe all the contextual factors that influenced the inquiry within the context and methodology sections to provide detailed and site-specific instructions for similar studies in other contexts. This study provided detailed information on contexts, data collection and data analysis, allowing readers and follow-up researchers to fully understand, compare and decide whether it could be modified and transplanted to other research contexts. Meanwhile, focusing on two schools allows for a more detailed and in-depth examination of the impact of neoliberal policies, providing valuable insights that may have been overlooked in studies containing wider contexts. Future research could build on this study to conduct similar analyses in other provinces or other disadvantaged areas in other countries to determine whether similar findings emerge across the country and the world and identify regional differences.

Secondly, this study has an uneven sample size of interviewed teachers, consisting of one teacher from a rural school and two from urban schools. A larger and more even teacher sample from rural schools could offer insights from multiple perspectives,
rather than relying on one individual’s viewpoint. Initially, the plan was to interview two teachers — the English language teacher of the observed class and the head of the English language department. However, given the ethnographic nature of the study, which emphasises participation in real practices, it became apparent that there was only one English teacher for the last-year compulsory education students in the rural school, who was also the head. Therefore, this circumstance of the rural school resulted in the inclusion of only one teacher and future studies could involve more rural teachers for more comprehensive data. Nevertheless, as an ethnography, the study allowed for a rich and detailed understanding of the participants’ experiences and perspectives, providing rich and reliable data. Moreover, this study did not recruit parents or education administrators from the school and government levels as participants. Future studies could involve them to gather more data about administrative perspectives and students’ social and cultural habitus in the family. Administrative data may provide a nuanced understanding of the education system, as administrators gain access to conditions in different schools. The parents’ data might allow researchers to investigate how students’ trajectories influence the interplay of agency and social structure over time and space.

Thirdly, while the study provides valuable insights into English language policies in the national SSSEE exam, it still has short-term ethnographic limitations. It cannot capture the long-term effects of policies on rural and urban students’ final academic performance, future opportunities and possible changes. Longer-term ethnography could track students’ progress over several years and assess the extent to which English language policies affected their academic success and opportunities. Compared to short-term ethnography, which pays more attention to a specific issue and offers in-depth analysis and discussion, long-term ethnography could better understand the impact of these policies on students’ long-term academic and personal development and observe participants’ changes in different times and spaces, allowing the research to trace structural changes embodied in ELE policies.

The fourth limitation is related to confirmability. As qualitative research, it is difficult to ensure that the research results are completely in line with the experience and ideas of the interviewees without being influenced by the researcher’s subjectivity. However, as Miles and Huberman (1994) argue, researchers’ admission of their degree of bias to a certain extent guarantees the confirmability of the study. In this study, the
researcher described ethical considerations and reflexivity in detail in the methodology chapter. Different methods were used to provide data from different perspectives and member checking was used to allow participants to confirm that the data content is what they actually said. The translation of the original data was double-checked by another native Mandarin speaker. Future research could adopt other methods, such as peer review or multiple researchers, to ensure that personal bias does not influence the findings too much.

8.4.3 Future Research

Further research could investigate the impact of neoliberal language education policies on students and marginalised groups in various disadvantaged settings. This may include exploring students’ experiences in places such as suburban areas, remote rural areas, and minority communities within a country or in a global context. Researchers could also study the impact of neoliberal policies in different stages of education to see if they obtain similar results and whether critical approaches used here can be applied in all stages of education.

To examine the implications of this study for policymaking and curriculum, future research could also focus on modifications to language education policies and the English language curriculum by following critical pedagogy and intercultural citizenship and looking at the impact of those adjustments on individuals. This may involve analysing how policy changes affect students’ educational experiences and outcomes and the wider social, economic and political implications of these changes. To increase depth and scope, future research could include more participants from a wider range of schools and incorporate the perspectives of parents and other stakeholders in the education system with different methodologies and methods. While this study focuses specifically on ELE policies, future research could explore the impact of neoliberal policies on other domains of education. This could include investigating the impact of marketisation and privatisation on school funding, teacher training, assessment and curriculum development to detect possible inequalities within different groups of stakeholders in education.

By providing concrete recommendations for future research, this study contributes to the ongoing dialogue on neoliberalism and education policy in China and beyond. The
study’s recommendations provide researchers with a roadmap to build on the current findings to further understand the complex issues surrounding language, education and social justice. Hopefully, this thesis will contribute to the resistance of neoliberalism and any other form of dominance on individuals within education or wider daily life.

When I look back at my thesis and reflect on it, I wonder if we should completely deny the structural power represented by neoliberalism. In thinking about what it has cost us, what has it brought us in return? It is extremely difficult for human beings to resist strong structural forces, but doesn’t the progress from the distant past to modern society prove that human agency has the power to change any form of structure? Should we jump out of the context of the current timeline to think about how to bring a better future to education in a longer timeframe? Thinking and reflection are endless processes, but I believe that seeing, speaking out and thinking are already powerful approaches that always generate hope.

*There is hope, however timid, on the street corners, a hope in each and every one of us…*

*Hope is an ontological need.*

-Freire (1992/1999, p. 8)
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Appendices
Appendix 1 Information Sheet and Consent Form

For Teachers:

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

My name is Hang Lu, and I am a PhD student at the University of Edinburgh, UK. You are invited to take part in my research on foreign language education policies and the disparity between urban and rural compulsory education in China under the influence of neoliberalism. Before you make a decision, it is important for you to be informed about the purpose of the study, why you are invited and your rights during the research.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY?
The purpose of the study is to trace how neoliberalism has influenced Chinese English language education in the compulsory education stage and explore the disparity between rural and urban English language education.

WHY HAVE I BEEN INVITED TO TAKE PART?
You are invited to participate in this study because you are a part of the compulsory English language education practices as a language educator.

DO I HAVE TO TAKE PART?
No – it is entirely up to you. Even if you do take part in the study, you will have the right to withdraw at any time without giving a reason. Withdrawing from the study will have no effect on you.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN IF I DECIDE TO TAKE PART?
Your classroom activities will be observed. This observation will not affect teaching/learning in the classroom. You will be invited to participate in an individual interview that focuses on the national English language curriculum and syllabus, school policies, English language learning activities in school and so on. The interview will take place in a safe environment and when it is convenient for you. I would like to audio record your responses (and will require your consent for this), so the location will be in a quiet area. The interview will take around 45 minutes to complete.

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE BENEFITS OF TAKING PART?
The study intends to help you reflect on your English language teaching processes or/and experiences. It will also provide the data for my doctoral thesis and an opportunity for me to participate in the educational practices in the compulsory education stage which will benefit my teaching practices in the future.

ARE THERE ANY RISKS ASSOCIATED WITH TAKING PART?
No, there are no risks.

WHAT IF I WANT TO WITHDRAW FROM THE STUDY?
You can withdraw at any stage of the research. Please contact with Hang Lu (Telephone: +8618805647363/ Email: hang.lu@ed.ac.uk).

DATA PROTECTION AND CONFIDENTIALITY
Your data will be processed in accordance with Data Protection Law. All information data will be stored on a password-protected computer file and all paper records will be stored in a locked filing cabinet. Your consent information will be kept separately from your responses in order to minimise risk.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN WITH THE RESULTS OF THIS STUDY?
The results of this study will appear in Hang Lu’s doctoral thesis, published articles, reports and presentations. Quotes or key findings will always be made anonymous. You have the right to choose a pseudonym for yourself. The data will be stored for a minimum of 3 years and may be used in future ethically approved research.

WHO CAN I CONTACT?
If you have any further questions about the study, please feel free to contact Hang Lu (Telephone: +8618805647363/ Email: hang.lu@ed.ac.uk).

For more information of the data please go to: https://www.ed.ac.uk/records-management/privacy-notice-research
PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Study Title: ........................................

1. I confirm that I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet for the above study.

2. I have been given the opportunity to consider the information provided, ask questions and have had these questions answered to my satisfaction.

3. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I can ask to withdraw at any time without giving a reason.

4. I understand that my anonymised data will be stored for a minimum of 3 years and may be used in future ethically approved research.

5. I agree to take part in this study.

Name of person giving consent    Date    Signature

_________________________    ___________    _______________________

Name of person taking consent    Date    Signature

_________________________    ___________    _______________________

Please initial box
For Students and Parents:

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

My name is Hang Lu, and I am a PhD student at the University of Edinburgh, UK. Your child is invited to take part in my research on foreign language education policies and the disparity between urban and rural compulsory education in China under the influence of neoliberalism. Before you decide on behalf of your child, it is important for you to be informed about the purpose of the study, why your child is invited and his/her rights during the research.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY?
The purpose of the study is to explore how neoliberal language education policies affect compulsory education in rural and urban areas in China.

WHY HAVE MY CHILD BEEN INVITED TO TAKE PART?
Your child is invited to participate in this study because he/she is a part of the compulsory English language education practices as a language learner.

DOES MY CHILD HAVE TO TAKE PART?
No – it is entirely up to your family. Even if you have already been a part of the research in the future, you still have right to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason. It will not have any consequence if you decide not to join the study.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN IF MY CHILD DECIDES TO TAKE PART?
Your child’s classroom activities will be observed. Your child may be chosen as an interviewee and will be asked a number of questions regarding implementation of the national English language curriculum and syllabus, school policies, relative activities of English language teaching and learning, and so on. The interview will take place in a safe environment at a time that is convenient to you. I would like to audio record your responses (and will require your consent for this), so the location will be in a quiet area. The interview should take around 45 minutes to complete.

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE BENEFITS OF TAKING PART?
It will help your child to reflect on his/her practices.

ARE THERE ANY RISKS ASSOCIATED WITH TAKING PART?
Yes, there isn't.

WHAT IF I WANT MY CHILD TO, MY CHILD WANTS TO WITHDRAW FROM THE STUDY?
You can withdraw at any stage of the research. Please contact with Hang Lu (Telephone: +8618805647363/ Email:

DATA PROTECTION AND CONFIDENTIALITY
Your Child's data will be processed in accordance with Data Protection Law. All information data will be stored on a password-protected computer file and all paper records will be stored in a locked cabinet.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN WITH THE RESULTS OF THIS STUDY?
The results of this study may be summarised in Hang Lu's doctoral thesis, published articles, reports and presentations. Quotes and key information will always be made anonymous. Your children have the right to choose a pseudonym for himself/herself. Information may also be kept for future research.

WHO CAN I CONTACT?
If you have any further questions about the study, please feel free to contact Hang Lu (Telephone: +8618805647363/ Email:

For more information of the data please go to: https://www.ed.ac.uk/records-management/privacy-notice-research
PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Study Title: Foreign Language Education Policies and The Disparity between Urban and Rural Compulsory English Education in China --- The Influence of Neoliberalism.

1. I confirm that I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet for the above study.

2. I have been given the opportunity to consider the information provided, ask questions and have had these questions answered to my satisfaction.

3. I understand that my child’s participation is voluntary.

4. I wish to withdraw my child from the study

Name of person giving consent  Date  Signature

________________________  __________  ________________________

Name of person taking consent  Date  Signature

________________________  __________  ________________________

Please only complete this form if you do not want your child to take part in the study.

If we do not receive this form from you, we will assume that you are happy for your child to take part.
Appendix 2 Sample of Fieldnotes

Fieldnote: (内容一样...) 

1. Warming up
   PPT & slides show a "fun park"
   "Where are they?"
   "Where are they doing?"
   The picture shows a place that the children did not know what the roller-coaster looks like and none of them have tried roller-coaster before.

2. Try to encourage and inspire students.

3. The teacher tried to stand by the children.

鼓励和实践感传的...
4. Listening task (标题需修改)

* Urban-based materials.

Students seem hard to connect themselves to the context.

Compared with the urban school, the rural school has a less intensive class. Cozy but pressure.

Never... until.

"You never know until you try sth."

Teacher tries to educate students through this collocation.

Teacher tries so hard to cheer students up.

But students really feel hard to connect with the context.
2020. 09. 28. 早课。

1. Homework arrangement.
   * Teamwork, active & competitive.
   * Potparty

10个单词，10个造句，5个以上短语。

2. Assessment.

3. 重点。
   “细节决定成败，态度决定高度”
   “志存高远，自强自强”

4. Students in the back of the classroom keep talking about other things in class.
   basketball, games, shoes

5. Let student dedicate be the dominant of the class.

6. Grammar based. 阅读笔记好。
   voluntary
⑧ 引导学生思考“人物”
(Critical thinking about the text)
(对话活动太少)

2020. 10. 20 下午第二节

① 例句解释语法点。
② 使用日常生活引导学生思考“问题与父母""问题与你的生活”
③ 演出一个小短剧《我们不是机器》《我不会让父母失望的》
④ 听力
Appendix 3 Interview Guides

Interview Guides for Teachers:

1. Would you please talk about your English language learning experience?  
   能谈谈您的英语学习经历吗？

2. How many schools have you worked at? What types of schools are they?  
   请问您在几所学校工作过，都是什么样的学校呢？

3. Why did you want to become an English teacher?  
   您是为什么想当老师呢？

4. Do you know about the national curriculum standards?  
   您对英语课程标准的内容有了解吗？

5. Could you share any thoughts you have about the standards?  
   能谈谈您对课标有什么看法吗？

6. As a frontline teacher, how do you interpret the role of the standards in your classroom teaching?  
   作为一线教师，您如何理解课标在您教学中的作用呢？

7. If you could provide suggestions for revising the curriculum, do you have any thoughts or comments you would like to share?  
   如果可以给课程标准提修改意见，您有什么想说的吗？

8. Does our school have its own policies or curriculum to guide daily teaching?  
   咱们学校有什么自己的决策，大纲来指导日常教学吗？

9. What do you envision as an ideal classroom and how about your real classroom?  
   您觉得您理想中的课堂是什么样的？你现实的课堂呢？

10. How will you describe the relationship between your teaching work and the school or other administrative departments?  
    您会怎么形容您的工作和学校或者其他管理部门之间的关系？

11. Would you please share some thoughts on the role of English as a language in your professional and daily life?  
    能谈谈您对英语在您的工作和生活中作为一门语言扮演的角色有什么看法吗？

12. Do you have any questions for me?  
    您对我有什么问题吗？
Interview Guides for Students:

1. Would you please talk about your English language learning experience?
   能谈谈你的英语学习经历吗？

2. Would you please share some thoughts on the role of English as a language in your study and daily life?
   能谈谈你对英语在你的学习和生活中作为一门语言扮演的角色有什么看法吗?

3. Do you know about the national curriculum standards?
   你了解国家课程标准吗?

4. Would you please share some thoughts on your daily English language class?
   能谈谈你对你们日常的英语课有什么想法吗?

5. Would you please share any impression on your textbooks?
   能谈谈你对英语课本的印象吗?

6. Would you please talk about any impressions about your English language teacher?
   你能不能讲讲你们英语老师，你对老师有什么印象?

7. If you could provide suggestions for your teacher, do you have any thoughts you would like to share?
   如果你可以给老师提意见，你有什么想说的?

8. How do you think your own English learning? Any plans or expectations?
   您怎么看自己的英语学习情况呢？有什么计划和目标吗?

9. Would you please tell me about your aspirations for future?
   能和我说说你未来的理想吗?

10. Do you have any questions for me?
    你对我有什么问题吗?

*Adjustments to interview questions were made based on the contexts and responses during the actual interviews*
Extract from the interview with Hui (the urban student):

R – Researcher   H – Hui

R: 能谈谈你的英语学习经历吗？你从几年级开始学英语的？
H: 三年级。在 xx 小学，xx 区那边。三年级开始在学校学，六年级开始上补习班。
R: 六年级就上补习班了呀，那你从三年级到六年级学了三年英语，用一个词来概括的话，你会怎么说？
H: 枯燥乏味
R: 为什么用这个词呢？
H: 从小学是开始学 abc 的，刚开始接触吧，觉得好难，本来挺有意思的课，自己什么单词都不认识，老师就只会硬上，越上越难，就觉得枯燥。老师上课其实就是按照课本，一句一句上，就是很无聊。
R: 那你对现在的英语课是什么想法呢？
H: 我挺喜欢的，老师上课会做游戏，有时候还会和我们开玩笑，比较有意思。只不过是压力比较大在学校。只有 40 分钟，课程比较简短，必须记下一些知识点，课下还得努力。同学基本上差不多英语课都是这个状态。有一些同学上课容易开小差，因为内容太多了学不进去。
R: 那如果你可以给老师提意见，你有什么想说的？
H: 多做一点活动吧，像今天一样，大家一起玩游戏，都参与进来那种集体活动。可以把知识点掺杂到集体活动中呀，边上课边做活动。
R: 那你觉得英语对你来讲是一门什么样的语言，在你的学习生活中间。
H: 就是要学的一门语言。
R: 那你为什么要学英语呢？
H: 最主要的原因就是英语是一门课，跟数学语文一样是三门主课。在中考中间好重要。
R: 那现在你觉得英语学习对你来说什么最难？
H: 语法，语法很难。

R: 那你希望老师还能为你们做点什么呢？

H: 其实课下可以多布置一些作文，把语法运用到作文里，多给点时间，我们可以找老师面批之类的

R: 那你觉得作文的用处在哪里呢？

H: 可以把学的英语都运用起来，还比较贴近生活，写一个作文，就像讲一个故事，可以转达自己的内心活动之类的，然后是可以像别人抒发自己的感情。而且找老师面批的话，可以找到自己的问题，然后改过来。就像课本里面的阅读其实不也就是写的作文吗？

R: 那你对你们的课本有什么印象，你喜欢吗？

H: 我很喜欢，每学期一拿到书我就要读。里面的阅读介绍好多知识，中国的外国的，我觉得挺有意思的。老师教之前我都读完了基本上。

R: 那你觉得书里那些故事哪里有意思呢？

H: 其实还是想了解的更多吧，就是世界之大，无奇不有。还是想了解别的知识，不能只是自己在这里说，还是要看到别的意见。

R: 那你觉得是了解更重要还是你说的，自己说更重要？

H: 我觉得都很重要吧，但是在能说之前，了解就更重要。

R: 哈哈，这个观点很有意思。那你听说过英语课程标准吗？

H: 我知道。虽然不知道具体内容，但是我知道教材是根据那个编的，因为开头写了。我们老师也跟我们说了，里面讲了我们要学什么怎么学。我记得课本里面写我们要加强对外国文化的了解，让我印象怪深的。看！这不就我刚讲的吗？了解很重要。

R: 哈哈哈哈哈，对对。你还怪会讲的！

.....
R – Researcher   H – Hui

R: Could you talk about your experience learning English? At what grade did you start learning English?

H: I started in the third grade, at XX Primary School in XX District. I began learning in school from the third grade, and then started attending extra tutoring classes from the sixth grade.

R: Wow! You extra started tutoring in the sixth grade! If you were to summarise your three years of learning English from the third to sixth grade in one word, what would it be?

H: Tедious.

R: Why use that word?

H: We started with the basics, learning the ABCs in elementary school. It seemed interesting at first, but when I couldn’t recognise any words, the teacher just kept pushing forward, making it more challenging. The classes became monotonous as the teacher just followed the textbook, one sentence at a time.

R: What are your thoughts on English classes now?

H: I quite like them. The teachers incorporate games and jokes into the lessons, making them enjoyable. However, there’s pressure at school with only 40-minute classes. The class time is brief, and we need to memorise key points during class and work hard afterward. Most students are in a similar situation, finding it challenging to focus in class due to the overwhelming content.

R: If you could provide suggestions to your teacher, what would you say?

H: Include more activities, like today when we played games together. Engaging in collective activities where knowledge points are intertwined would be beneficial. Integrating knowledge into group activities can make classes more interesting.

R: How do you perceive English in your learning life?

H: It’s a language I need to learn.

R: Why do you want to learn English?

H: The first and foremost reason is that English is a subject, and together with mathematics and Chinese, they are the three main subjects in the curriculum. Its position in SSSEE is very important.
R: What do you find most challenging in English learning now?

H: Grammar; it's quite difficult.

R: What more would you like your teacher to do for you?

H: Teachers can assign more compositions as homework, incorporating grammar into them. Allow more time for us to find teachers for face-to-face feedback.

R: What do you think is the purpose of writing compositions?

H: It allows us to apply the English we’ve learned, closely relates to daily life, and serves as a means to express inner thoughts and emotions. Seeking feedback from teachers helps us identify and correct our mistakes. Isn’t reading comprehension in textbooks essentially a form of composition writing?

R: What’s your impression of the textbooks? Do you like them?

H: I like English textbooks very much, and I read them at the beginning of every semester as soon as I get them. The texts inside are particularly interesting, introducing many domestic and foreign things, just like short stories. Before the teacher’s teaching in the classroom, I have already finished reading the stories by myself.

R: What makes the stories inside interesting to you?

H: It’s about wanting to know more, exploring the vast world. It’s about understanding other perspectives and not just sticking to our own views.

R: Do you think it’s more important to understand or to express your own views?

H: I think both are important, but understanding is more crucial before expressing our own views.

R: Haha, that’s an interesting perspective. Have you heard of English curriculum standards?

H: I know the Standards. Although I am not very clear about some specific content, I know that our textbooks are formulated based on this, which is written in the preface of the textbooks. Our teacher said that what we need to learn, how to learn, and the standards of examinations are all written in the Standards. I remember the textbooks show that the Standards hopes that we students could develop and enhance our understanding of international cultures while mastering English language ability. This is what impressed me the most. Look! It is what I just mentioned, isn’t it? Understanding is crucial!

R: Haha, right, right! you express yourself quite well.

...
## Appendix 5 Sample of Thematic Analysis

### 1. Example of Coding

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Extracts</th>
<th>Codes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I started in the third grade, at XX Primary School in XX District. I began learning in school from the third grade, and then started attending extra tutoring classes from the sixth grade. We started with the basics, learning the ABCs in elementary school. It seemed interesting at first, but when I couldn’t recognise any words, the teacher just kept pushing forward, making it more challenging. The classes became monotonous as the teacher just followed the textbook, one sentence at a time. I quite like them. The teachers incorporate games and jokes into the lessons, making them enjoyable. However, there’s pressure at school with only 40-minute classes. The class time is brief, and we need to memorise key points during class and work hard afterward. Most students are in a similar situation, finding it challenging to focus in class due to the overwhelming content. Include more activities, like today when we played games together. Engaging in collective activities.</td>
<td>Extra resources for English learning Negative comments for previous English class Comments on previous teachers teaching practices Positive perspectives on English class Comments on current English teacher Negative comments on current English class What students learn in the class comments for classroom recommendations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
where knowledge points are intertwined would be beneficial. Integrating knowledge into group activities can make classes more interesting.

The first and foremost reason is that English is a subject, and together with mathematics and Chinese, they are the three main subjects in the curriculum. Its position in SSSEE is very important.

Grammar; it’s quite difficult. Teachers can assign more compositions as homework, incorporating grammar into them. Allow more time for us to find teachers for face-to-face feedback. It allows us to apply the English we’ve learned, closely relates to daily life, and serves as a means to express inner thoughts and emotions. Seeking feedback from teachers helps us identify and correct our mistakes. Isn’t reading comprehension in textbooks essentially a form of composition writing?

I like English textbooks very much, and I read them at the beginning of every semester as soon as I get

<table>
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<th>Suggestions for teacher</th>
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<tr>
<th>Ideas and perspectives on English language</th>
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<th>Comments on English language and the exam</th>
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<th>Negative comments on the English learning content</th>
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<th>Suggestions</th>
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<th>What students want to learn related to exams</th>
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<th>What students want to learn for using English in real life</th>
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<tr>
<th>Students’ expectations for teachers</th>
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<th>Positive feedback on textbook</th>
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them. The texts inside are particularly interesting, introducing many domestic and foreign things, just like short stories. Before the teacher’s teaching in the classroom, I have already finished reading the stories by myself. It’s about wanting to know more, exploring the vast world. It’s about understanding other perspectives and not just sticking to our own views.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive ideas on English language</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What students really want to learn relates to curriculum standards</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I know the Standards. Although I am not very clear about some specific content, I know that our textbooks are formulated based on this, which is written in the preface of the textbooks. Our teacher said that what we need to learn, how to learn, and the standards of examinations are all written in the Standards. I remember the textbooks show that the Standards hopes that we students could develop and enhance our understanding of international cultures while mastering English language ability. This is what impressed me the most. Look! It is what I just mentioned, isn’t it? Understanding is crucial!

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive feedback on standards</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Comments about teacher, attitude towards the standards.</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Ideas on English language learning which relates to standards</th>
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2. Examples of Searching for Themes

Comments on previous teachers’ teaching practices Comments on current English teacher comments for classroom Students’ expectations for teachers Comments about teacher

Students can align with the teachers.

Negative comments for previous English class Negative comments on current English class Negative comments on the English learning content.

Most of the comments on the classroom tasks are negative

Ideas and perspectives on English language Comments on English language and the exam What students learn in the class What students want to learn for using English in real life Ideas on English language learning which relates to standards

What students want to learn can be related to both exams and standards

Positive perspectives on English class Positive feedback on textbook Positive ideas on English language Positive feedback on standards attitude towards the standards

Positive feedback on textbook and policies

Suggestions for teacher Suggestions What students want to learn related to exams recommendations Students recommendations

Extra resources for English learning Capital
3. Examples of Defining and Naming Themes

Students can align with the teachers --- summarised from the data --- Students’ perspectives on teachers and teaching

Most of the comments on the classroom tasks are negative --- Students are restricted by the classroom learning although they align with teachers and polices --- reviewed literature on controlled subjects --- Neoliberal Subjects

What students want to learn can be related to both exams and standards --- Both about their ideal identity and their perspectives on standards --- Investment & Students’ perspectives on standards

Positive feedback on textbook and policies --- summarised from the data --- Students’ perspectives on standards

Students recommendations --- students’ construction of imagined identity as an English speaker --- related to reviewed literature --- investment

Capital --- related to reviewed literature --- investment