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**Two Countries, One Policy: A Comparative Synthesis of Early Childhood English
Language Education in China and Australia**

Abstract

Although English is taught to students worldwide at different educational levels, the actual implementation of early childhood English language education (ECELE) may vary from country to country. This study aims to comprehensively compare how ECELE is being put into practice in China and Australia, where young children learn English as a foreign language and as an additional language or dialect, respectively. Based on a critical analysis of relevant policy documents and the empirical studies found in the literature, this paper provides a detailed account and comparison of how ECELE is delivered in China and Australia. It is found that despite their different sociolinguistic contexts, the educational authorities in both countries share the same ostrich policy and inactive involvement in overseeing and directing ECELE. The implications for policymaking are also addressed.

Keywords: early childhood education, English language education, comparative synthesis, China, Australia

Two Countries, One Policy: A Comparative Synthesis of Early Childhood English Language Education in China and Australia

English is taught to students worldwide at different educational levels, as a 'global language' and the first 'world language' (Crystal, 2012). According to the British Council (2013), there are 1.5 billion active English learners worldwide, and by 2020, this figure would reach two billion. All these English language learners could be classified into three categories: those who learn English as their first language (L1), those who learn it as a second or an additional language/dialect (ESL or EAL/D), and those who learn it as a foreign language (EFL) (Ellis, 2008). Learners of the last two categories differ in the broader language environment in which their English learning takes place: ESL or EAL/D learners learn English in a situation in which the target language (i.e. English) plays an institutional and social role in the community, whereas EFL learners' English learning 'takes place in settings where the language plays no major role in community and is primarily learnt only in the classroom' (Ellis, 2008, p. 243). Comparing to EAL or ESL/D learners, EFL learners have limited exposure to English aside from the formal setting of classrooms (Christopher, 2016). The quantity and quality of English input EFL learners receive depend heavily on educators' and peers' English proficiency level. For instance, Azkarai and Oliver's (2019) study found that young Spanish EFL students engaged in more negotiations of meaning rooted in communication breakdowns than their Australian ESL counterparts, who demonstrated better English proficiency. Also, EFL learners' opportunity to use English in other social domains is much rare, compared to those who learn English in an English-dominant society (Christopher, 2016; Sun et al., 2016).

Such different learning conditions reflect the different overall sociolinguistic environments, which could result in variations in how English language education is delivered in different societies. And the discrepancies could be rather pronounced between

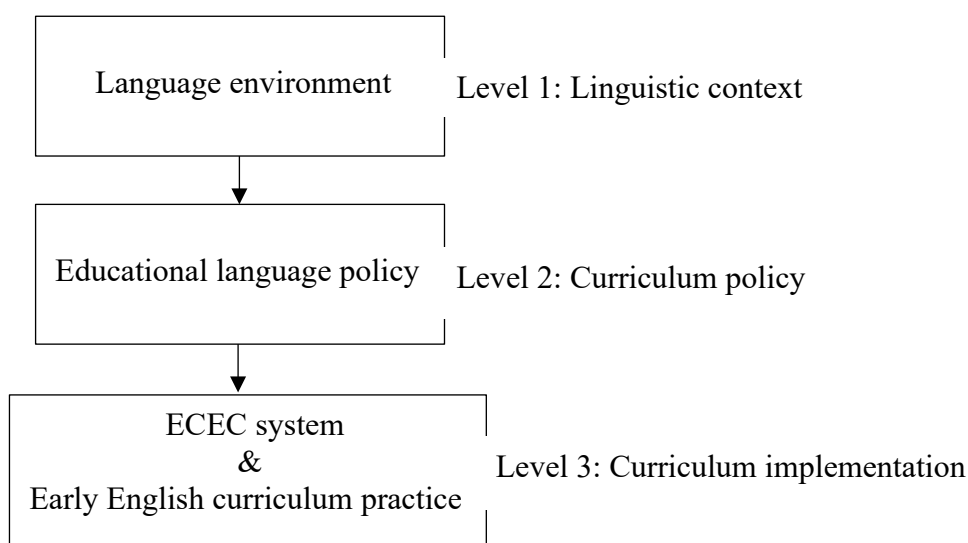
countries where English is endowed with distinctive societal status in response to each country's unique historical, cultural and economic circumstances. For example, young English learners in China and Australia—the two countries featuring diverse sociolinguistic contexts—may very well be experiencing different modes of early childhood English language education (ECELE). However, surprisingly, no prior study to date has explicitly made a comparison between China and Australia regarding how ECELE is conceptualized and implemented. In particular, no efforts have been made to comprehensively study this issue through different lenses, including overall sociolinguistic background, national policymaking, and the actual practice of English language education. Existing research provides some evidence regarding preschools' general mode of delivering English curricula (e.g., Chu, 2016; Hui, 2007), teachers' classroom educational practices (Hu and Baumann, 2014; Liu, 2018), and children's language learning outcomes (Millar, 2011), etc. These findings collectively provide the groundwork on which the present study is based.

China and Australia, as will be further illustrated, each has large numbers of young children learning English in addition to their home languages or dialects. Yet many of these children found themselves in an unfavourable language learning environment due to the educational authorities' inactive involvement, comparing to other multilingual contexts such as Singapore and Hong Kong. For the first time, this paper is dedicated to exploring and comparing the features of ECELE in China and Australia, based on a critical review of relevant policy documents and the available empirical studies found in the existing literature. A three-level analytical framework (see Figure 1) adapted from Yang and Li' (2019b) work guided the systematic comparison: On the first level, we provide a brief account of the language environment in both countries to contextualize our inquiry on a macro sociolinguistic level. On the second level (i.e. Curriculum policy level), we analyze the two countries' national and educational language policies to clarify the policy-backdrop under

which the ECELE operate. On the third level (i.e. Curriculum implementation level), we introduce each country's early childhood education and care (ECEC) system to describe and compare the educational settings responsible for delivering the English language education. Then we present the existing empirical evidence on how ECELE is actually put into practice. Based on this, we further layout the discussions on the implications of this critical review.

Figure 1

Three-level Analytical Framework for Early Childhood English Language Education



1. Language Environment in China and Australia

1.1 China

In China, the Modern Standard Chinese (MSC, hereafter 'Chinese') with simplified Chinese characters as the written form and Putonghua (the 'common tongue') as the spoken form is adopted as the official national language (Li, 2015). For people of Han heritage that constitute 91.5% of the entire population (National Bureau of Statistics, 2010), despite there are over thousands of Chinese dialects being used in informal and everyday-life domains, a clear line has been drawn between Chinese as high function language and Chinese dialects as low function languages by the official language policy (Guo, 2004; Jiang & Dewaele, 2019).

In practice, Chinese is spoken and used as the official language in all formal social aspects (e.g., government departments, courts of law, hospitals, schools, social media, television program, entertainment venues etc.), while all regional dialect-speakers must learn Chinese via formal education. For the fifty-five ethnic minority groups who speak more than 290 ethnic-minority languages and constitute the rest 8.5% of the population (National Bureau of Statistics, 2010), they are encouraged to learn and use this common language (i.e. Chinese). The use of their heritage languages, however, is primarily confined to private spaces such as at home and within their own communities. Ethnic minority students learn Chinese as a second language (L2) in schools to prepare themselves linguistically to be integrated into the mainstream Chinese society (Gao & Ren, 2019), upon which the process of urbanization and the expansion of market economy has made a tremendous impact. Given China's enormous population and diverse cultural groups, MSC plays the role of the common language that transmits common ideas, breaks down linguistic barriers, establishes a sense of cultural solidarity and ultimately, forges a shared Chinese national identity.

In terms of foreign languages, English has been highly valued by the Chinese government as a beneficial tool that contributes to the nation's ongoing endeavour for modernization. It also opens substantial opportunities for the country to connect to the global technological know-how and capital (Gao & Ren, 2019; Grey, 2019). Since the late 1970s, English has gained an irreplaceable role in maintaining and strengthening China's political, economic, and cultural connections to other parts of the world. Over the years, it has been recognized by the government as a strategically important language for harnessing the positive effects of globalization. In particular, while the recent 'One Belt, One Road' strategy aims to establish a China-centred global trading network, the importance of English will be further stressed. For individuals, English is widely recognized by educators, parents, and students as a crucial skill to acquire for personal advancements through gaining access to

better education opportunity, wider knowledge base, future career development and the like. According to a national survey, the number of English learners in China has amounted to 400 million (Wei & Su, 2015), markedly outnumbering the total population of the UK and Australia combined. China, as some have claimed, has become an emerging English-using country, where English plays a significant role at both the individual and the national level (Fang, 2018).

1.2 Australia

Australia is a nation characterized by its multilingualism and multiculturalism. The most recent census held by Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) in 2016 showed that there were over 300 separately identified languages spoken in Australian households (Ollerhead, 2019), and more than one-fifth of Australians spoke a language other than English at home (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2016). In Sydney, the most multilingual city of the country, about 40% of households speak a language other than English (Chik et al., 2019); for children growing up in these families, they are likely to use their heritage language as the first language (L1) and learn English, the socially dominant language, as an additional language or a dialect (EAL/D). EAL/D students are those whose first language is a language or dialect other than English and who require additional support to assist them in developing proficiency in English. Australia's diverse language demography results from two major sources: immigrant families (e.g., Asians, Arabians, etc.) who speak foreign languages and Aboriginal Australian settlers (i.e. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders) who speak their heritage languages. However, unlike other English-speaking countries such as the United States and Canada—the two countries that each has one dominant second language (i.e. Spanish and French, respectively), Australia is unique in its own right that it does not have a dominant second language; in fact, on the national level, apart from English, the next most commonly spoken languages at home were Mandarin Chinese (2.5%), Arabic (1.4%),

Cantonese (1.2%), and Vietnamese (1.2%) (ABS, 2016). This makes Australia a microcosm of the world in which a rich tapestry of cultures and languages co-exist in small numbers but collectively, comprising a sizeable proportion of the Australian society (Verdon, 2014). Therefore, from the earliest times, as Clyne (1997) argued, Australia's language policy planning has been marked by tension: on the one hand, the English monolingualism is deemed as a symbol of British tradition as well as a marker of Australia's independent national identity. On the other hand, multilingualism is the social reality owing to the influx of immigrants and the need for preserving the language heritage of the indigenous population. Thus, while English is used as the de facto national language (Chik et al., 2019) in all social domains, the advocacy for aiding EAL/D learners' acquisition of English requires additional efforts from the Commonwealth government, educational authorities, and individuals.

In sum, Chinese society showcases a typical EFL sociolinguistic context, in which the English language education is primarily undertaken within educational settings. But given the Chinese-dominant language environment, there is rather limited opportunities and venues outside the school context for young learners to make authentic use of English, despite its substantial significance to themselves as well as to the nation. In contrast, Australia represents a typical EAL/D environment, in which speakers from diverse language backgrounds learn this social-dominant language in school settings while also having extensive exposure to it in the broader social domains. The next section presents how each government has developed their respective language policy against such different language environment.

2. National Language Policy in China and Australia

2.1 China

The Chinese government has been promoting the use of Modern Standard Chinese (MSC) as the official national language to form a common linguistic basis for the nation and as a strategy for safeguarding state sovereignty, promoting ethnic unity, and facilitating the construction of modernization (Pan, 2016; Shen & Gao, 2019). In 2000, the *Law of the People's Republic of China (PRC) on the Standard Spoken and Written Chinese Language* was approved and enacted by the Eighteenth Meeting of the Ninth National People's Congress Standing Committee of the PRC as the first national law on language. This language law stresses the right of every citizen to learn and use Chinese as the universal language and stipulates that local government at various levels should take measures to popularize Chinese and promote its written form. Also, this law recognizes the importance of preserving and facilitating the development of spoken and written languages used by ethnic minority groups as they represent valuable cultural resources of the country. These notions and principles were reiterated in another major national policy document issued by the Ministry of Education (MOE) in 2012, the *Outline of National Long-term Reform and Development of Spoken and Written Chinese Language*. This outline further specified that by 2020, the use of the national common spoken language (i.e. Putonghua) and the MSC should be universally realized across the nation and ethnic minority group students are expected to master Chinese after the nine-year compulsory education.

Viewed from a sociohistorical perspective, China's foreign language policy has always been a product of the joint forces of historical, political, economic, and cultural reality within a given timeframe. Since the founding of PRC in 1949, Russian, for a short period, was the only foreign language promoted by the country and taught at all school levels (Deyun, 2000); meanwhile, English was condemned as the language of the enemy—the USA—and was ruled out from school teaching (Gil, 2016). This is mainly because the Soviet Union was portrayed as the role model and blueprint for the 'newborn' China to follow suit.

The two governments shared a similar political ideology and interest. During this period, the Chinese government's planning and development of all socio-political domains—the educational sector included—were largely borrowed or directly copied from the 'Russian model'. In the early 1960s, the teaching of English made a comeback as China's relationship with the Soviet Union experienced a grand breakdown, which resulted in the degraded status of Russian as a once prestigious foreign language used and promoted in China (Gil, 2016). The following decade saw an unprecedented series of drastic political turmoil, including the 'Great Leap Forward' (1958-1960) and the 'Cultural Revolution' (1966-1976) (Li et al., 2016). During that period, China cut off its connections to the outside world and any teaching of foreign languages was stigmatized and came under violent criticism, resulted in a complete rejection and abandonment of foreign language education (Gil, 2016). After Deng Xiaoping assumed power in 1976 and subsequently launched the 'reform and opening-up' policy in 1978 in an attempt to systematically rectify his predecessor's mistakes and reset the nation on the right track, China re-opened its door to the outside world. During this period, the MOE convened a conference in 1978 on foreign language education and recommended English to be restored as the primary foreign language in China's education system (Zheng & Davison, 2008). Since then on, English has been intimately connected to the nation's continuing endeavour to realize modernization, economic rise, and the pursuit for higher international status. In 2001, MOE announced the *Guidelines for Vigorously Promoting the Teaching of English in Primary Schools*, requiring English language education to begin from primary Grade 3 in cities and suburban areas in autumn 2001 and the rural regions in autumn 2002 (Hu, 2007). In some major cities such as Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou, English language education begins even earlier from Grade 1 (Gil, 2016).

However, surprisingly, the Mainland Chinese educational authority turns a blind eye to and even prohibits any form of formal English education taking place in kindergartens. In

the *Guideline for Kindergarten Education (Trial Version)* (Ministry of Education [MOE], 2001) which specifies five main educational domains of kindergarten, the 'Language' section includes no educational objectives, teaching content or strategies for early English education. Children are only required and expected to gain proficiency in using Chinese. A similar absence of guidance for preschool English education can also be noticed in another vital ECE policy, the *Early Learning and Development Guidelines for Children Aged 3–6 Years* (MOE, 2012). A recent notice issued by the MOE stated that all kindergartens are forbidden to teach young children primary-school-level lessons, including Chinese, mathematics and English coursework (MOE, 2018). Formal English teaching practices and contents are considered as age-inappropriate and being detrimental to children's long-term interest in learning, and fundamentally contradicts to the widely accepted norm of 'play-based' teaching and learning that has been strongly promulgated in the recent decade's ECE reform (Lin et al., 2019; Yang & Li, 2018). Therefore, in contrary to the primary education sector, no authority-approved English language framework, let alone any relevant guidelines or syllabus is available at the preschool level for ECE practitioners to use as a reference to develop and implement English curriculum.

2.2 Australia

Australia is a multicultural and multilingual country that embraces linguistic and cultural pluralism. However, unlike China, it does not have a national language policy (Chik et al., 2019; Scarino, 2014) enacted via formal legislation and the commonwealth government does not direct the implementation of language education policy at the national level (Chik, 2019). This could be attributed to a number of factors. To begin with, Australia's federal system comprised of six states and two territories (Lo Bianco, 2008), thus, administrators, politicians and educators need to 'undertake language planning that devotes a high degree of attention to negotiated agreements with dispersed jurisdictions that preserve relatively

autonomous authority' (Lo Bianco, 2004, p. 1), which practically makes the nationwide policymaking an impossible task. This is further complicated by the nation's complex linguistic demography and its often conflicting language ideologies (Lo Bianco, 2008). Australia introduced its first official language policy document, the *National policy on language* (NPL), written by Lo Bianco (1987a). This document advocated the maintenance and development of bilingualism among Australians and elaborated a range of principles for language planning and education, such as all Australians should gain high levels of literate Standard Australian English (SAE); all Australians have the equal right to achieve bilingualism; the value of aboriginal languages and the associated indigenous culture should be appreciated and accepted as unique heritages of Australia (Lo Bianco, 1987b, 2004; Zhou & Zou, 2017). NPL reiterated some of the issues raised in the Senate Report tabled 1984: the competence of English, maintenance and development of languages other than English, English as a second language (Clyne, 1988). Despite the strong influence of NPL in shaping the development of a multilingual and multicultural Australia, it has been criticized by some scholars (e.g., Eggington, 1994) as being established upon several 'near-fatal' flaws including the 'single author weakness', the 'top-down weakness', and the 'narrow implementation weakness'. NPL was later supplanted by the *Australian Language and Literacy Policy* (ALLP) (Department of Employment, Education and Training [DEET], 1991), in which the newly set language education goals represented a move away from the scope of NPL (Liddicoat, 2010). Despite the release of NPL marks a high point in Australia's policymaking for languages; since then on, there has been a retreat in language policymaking (Scarino, 2014). Instead, several 'statements', 'plans', and 'programmes' have been proposed both at the national and the state level, for example, the *National Statement for Languages Education in Australian Schools: National Plan for Languages Education in Australian Schools 2005–2008* (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, 2005),

the *National Asian Languages and Studies in Australian Schools* (NALSAS) Strategy (Council of Australian Government [COAG], 1994). However, these policies were either not passed or short-lived (e.g., NALSAS was terminated in 2002 after the governmental funding had been ceased), and as Scarino (2014) argued, these policy documents do not constitute as formal national language policies that carry mandatory effect and hold a sense of commitment. To date, Australia only has a de facto national language policy.

Despite being a linguistically diverse country, successful participation in most aspects of Australian society depends largely on one's ability to communicate using the Standard Australian English (SAE) effectively. Researchers have noted that the Australian education system essentially frames linguistic homogeneity as the norm (D'warte, 2018) and maintains a monolingual mindset and monocultural orientation (Clyne, 2005; Coleman, 2012). In the early childhood education sector, English is the only mandatory language subject (Chik et al., 2019). For children who were born and raised in families speak a language other than English (LOTE) (e.g., children from immigrant families, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children etc.), English is an additional language or dialect (EAL/D) that must be learned throughout the subsequent stages of schooling. Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA, 2014) has published a series of documents under the title of *English as an Additional Language or Dialect Teacher Resource* to provide an overall framework in helping teachers and schools in their efforts of developing teaching and learning programs for EAL/D students. However, this framework only covers the schooling stage from Foundation to Year 10 (5-16 years old), leaving the preschool stage unattended. In New South Wales (NSW), a detailed curriculum framework—*ESL Steps: ESL Curriculum Framework K-6: teaching guide* (New South Wales Department of Education and Training, 2005)—is available to aid primary school teachers to carry out EAL/D education, yet again, no equivalent framework is in place for the ECEC sector. As Jones Díaz (2014) pointed out,

the policy initiatives, directives and funding guidelines associated with English as a second language remain exclusive to children attending school settings. In Australia's national-approved learning framework for young children from birth to five years of age: *the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) for Australia* (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2009), early childhood educators are advised to '*...encourage the use of and acquisition of home languages and Standard Australian English*' (p. 43), and to '*provide a literacy-enriched environment including display print in home languages and Standard Australian English*' (p.44) to allow children '*the right to be continuing users of their home language as well as to develop competency in Standard Australian English*' (p. 41). However, with only these sporadic and isolated educational recommendations in place, it is challenging for Australian ECEC practitioners to develop and implement systematic English curriculum to address young EAL/D children's language learning needs. Since 2015, Australian government initiated a digital, play-based language learning program entitled 'Early Learning Languages Australia' (ELLA) for engaging preschool children in a series of interactive applications (App)-supported, self-directed language learning activities without instructions from teachers (Chik, 2019). Around 80,000 children and 2500 preschools have already involved in ELLA, and by 2020, the available languages are expanded to 15 (e.g., Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Hindi, Indonesian). However, this program does not incorporate the learning of English for EAL/D children.

To sum up, China and Australia differ in their approaches to and the output of developing their respective national language policies: centralized vs decentralized approach; legislated policy vs absence of policy. In the educational sector, the different attitudes toward early childhood English education (prohibitive vs laissez-faire) manifested through how governments go about devising the relevant policies, resulting in a somewhat similar policy landscape among the two countries: currently, there is no formal early childhood English

curriculum guidelines in place for ECEC practitioners to make references to. Therefore, it can be inferred that ECEC educators in both countries are practising ECELE without governmental guidance and supervision. Empirical research is thus needed to shed light on this reality and more importantly, examining its effect on children's language outcomes.

3. Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) Systems in China and Australia

3.1 Chinese ECEC System

In China, early childhood education (ECE) is officially titled 'preschool education' (Li & Chen, 2017). It constitutes the fundamental component of China's basic education system but is excluded from the nine-year compulsory education system, which begins from Primary year 1 when children turn 6. At the national level, the Department of Basic Education of the Ministry of Education (MOE) is responsible for planning and issuing relevant policies to guide and regulate ECE on the national level. At the local government level, the educational department is charged with the responsibility of working collaboratively with other governmental departments (e.g., finance department, development and reform department etc.) to manage the operation of all local kindergartens. In the Chinese context, ECE broadly refers to the education and care programmes provided to children age from birth to six before they start attending primary Grade 1. It can be classified into two levels: the nursery level that caters to children age 0–3 and the kindergarten level that serves children age 3–6. Currently, most children in urban areas attend kindergartens offering full-day programs (usually from 8 am to 5 pm) (Hong & Chen, 2017). In China, 'kindergarten' refers to the educational settings children aged 3-6 attend before they are eligible for the primary school year one by the age of 6. A recent government policy document has placed families at the central position in raising and caring for children under three years (General Office of the State Council, 2019). Thus, it is expected that kindergartens would play a more central role in providing early education for

the 3-6 year-olds. In contrast, parents should take more responsibilities for the educare of 0-3 year-olds.

Kindergartens in China can be classified into two types: public kindergartens run by various governmental bodies (e.g., education department, non-education departments, public institutions, army, etc.) and private kindergartens run by non-governmental organizations (NGO) (private institutions, business owners, individuals etc.). By 2018, China has 266,677 kindergartens, accommodating over 46.56 million children with the gross enrolment rate (GER) reaching a record-high of 81.7%. Private kindergartens constituted over half (62.2%) of all kindergartens and recorded 26.40 million children enrolled; while the public kindergartens comprised a relatively smaller proportion (around 38%) (MOE, 2019). Since 2010, the Chinese government has launched an unprecedented wave of ECE reform by issuing a series of notices, regulations, and guidelines (Li et al., 2016). Among them, the *Outline of China's National Plan for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development (2010–2020)* (MOE, 2010) set the general goals of ECE reform and development for the next ten years. It emphasized the government's leading role in funding, planning and managing ECE development. Another important document, the *Several Views on the Development of Preschool Education by the State Council* (State Council, 2010), required all the governments to establish a public ECE service system jointly supported by both public and private systems (Li et al., 2016). In all kindergartens, education is required to be delivered via a play-based curriculum, covering five major developmental domains: health, language, social, science, and art (MOE, 2016).

3.2 Australian ECEC System

In Australia, the management of early childhood education and care (ECEC) is conducted through a three-level structure: the federal, state and territory, and local level (Raban, & Kilderry, 2017), with each level of government playing different but

complementary roles in managing ECEC (Australian Government Productivity Commission [AGPC], 2020). Similar to China, ECE is not compulsory in Australia, but up to 96.3% of children enrol in preschool programmes one year before they commence full-time schooling (AGPC, 2019). The provision of ECEC is delivered through a wide range of services for children aged from birth to five years. In broad terms, there are two main categories of Australian ECEC service providers: the centred-based service provider and the home-based service provider (AGPC, 2019; Tayler, 2016). The former type includes Long Day Care (LDC), Preschool (in some states it is referred to as 'kindergarten'), and Outside School Hours Care (OSHC); the latter type mainly includes Family Day Care (FDC). Although there are other options such as Occasional Child Care and Mobile Services for families to choose from, only the previous four types of services are regulated under the *National Quality Framework* (NQF) (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority [ACECQA], 2014a), the quality assurance framework that provides a national approach to regulate, assess and improve the quality of Australian ECEC service. As a key component of this framework, the *National Quality Standard* (NQS) (ACECQA, 2014b, revised in 2018) sets a national benchmark in seven quality areas (e.g., educational program and practice, children's health and safety, physical environment etc.) for all ECEC services to be rated by their regulatory authorities. Besides, another crucial element of the NQF, entitled *Belong, Being and Becoming: the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) for Australia* (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2009), is designed for guiding ECEC settings and practitioners to develop quality program and curriculum in facilitating children to reach five broad learning objectives: having a strong sense of identity, connected with an contribute to their world, have a strong sense of wellbeing, are confident and involved learners, and are effective communicators (Gibson, 2016; Raban & Kilderry, 2017). This curriculum framework has treated young children as active constructors of their own

knowledge about the world and assigned early childhood educators the role of culturally competent agents. They should actively foster children's cultural awareness and competence for better belong, being, and becoming in a multicultural and multilingual Australia (Yang et al., 2020).

Among the regulated ECEC services, LDC typically provide programs lasting for 8-10 hours per day for children aged from six weeks to five years, and children may attend for a whole day or part of the day. Some LDCs also provide preschool programs as part of their curriculum. In NSW, for instance, 'preschool' refers to a structured, play-based early childhood education program delivered by a degree-qualified early childhood teacher to get children ready for formal schooling. Preschools operate in a range of settings (e.g., standalone, centre-based service, or as part of a school) for children who mostly age between three and five. Further, FDC service offer small-group, flexible, home-based care through a network of authorized FDC educators. Among children age from birth to five years, most of them attend LDC, followed by standalone preschools and FDC services (AGPC, 2019). Some families may also send their children to multiple ECEC settings, among other reasons, to match parents' working schedule. As regards to the operational model, there are primarily two types of ECEC service providers: 'community-based not-for-profit providers' and 'private for-profit providers' (Tayler, 2016). The providers of the former type include local councils and community-based organizations such as schools and churches. In contrast, the latter one is commonly run by individuals or small businesses or corporations (Gibson, 2016), and is more likely to provide long daycare and to operate on a commercial basis (Tayler, 2016).

In sum, both Chinese and Australian educational authorities exclude ECE from their own compulsory education systems (see Table 1 below for a comparison). Despite that, young children have access to some form of centre-based pre-primary education as a majority choice (above 80%), and such practice has been extensively substantiated as beneficial to

children's long term learning and developmental outcomes (e.g., Bakken et al., 2017; Rao et al., 2019). However, the two countries differ in their ECE systems in that: first, the Chinese ECE system caters to children age under six, while the Australian ECEC system mainly serves children under the age of five. Second, in China, kindergarten is the dominant provider of ECE service, whereas diverse ECEC service providers are available in Australia for parents to choose. In addition, the management of ECE in China takes a more centralized approach, with local educational authorities implement the relevant policies drew up by the central government. In contrast, in Australia, the federal, state/territory, and local council each has unique and supplementary roles to play in administering the ECEC system.

Table 1

Comparison of Chinese and Australian Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) System

	Chinese ECEC	Australian ECEC
Commonality	Non-compulsory, fee-paying with a high enrolment rate	
	Management approach	Decentralized approach
	Management structure	Three-level: Federal—State and Territory—Local Council
Difference	Key curriculum documents	The Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) for Australia (DEEWR, 2009)
		The Early Learning and Development Guidelines for Children Aged 3–6 Years (MOE, 2012) Guideline for Kindergarten Education (Trial) (MOE, 2001)
	Age range of children	Birth to 5
	Main service provider	LDC, Preschools/kindergarten, OSHC, FDC
	Type of service	Centre-based vs home-based, for-profit vs not-for-profit

Note. LDC = long daycare, OSHC = outside school hour care, FDC = family daycare, DEEWR = Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations

4. Early Childhood English Language Education in Practice

4.1 China: Variations in Practice Under Prohibition

In China, from the late 1980s, a few kindergartens in major cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou started offering English language courses to young children (Yu & Ruan, 2012), such practice continued as a reflection to Chinese parents' positive attitudes towards young children's English learning. In the 1990s, the number of kindergartens adopting bilingual Chinese/English programs proliferated markedly in response to parents' growing demands (Yu & Ruan, 2012). In 1997, a group of Chinese and Canadian scholars introduced the early English immersion program to the Chinese context for the first time and piloted this new model of English teaching and learning in eight selected preschools in Xi'an, Shaanxi province. This educational experiment turned out successful as children involved in the partial immersion programs demonstrated positive outcomes in their receptive and expressive language skills. Naturally, this form of English education received parents' enthusiastic support. Since then on, the bilingual immersion programmes obtained nationwide popularity, and until today, it still represents a major form of early childhood English education in China (Qiang et al., 2011; Zhao, 2004). Entering the new millennium, learning English gained further momentum in kindergartens, and learning English from early years is an irreversible trend within the foreseeable future (Zhou, 2004). Although the Chinese government has a prohibitive policy on early childhood English education, most early childhood programs, particularly those in the private sector, usually incorporate English teaching in their curricula to meet parents' growing demands (Hu & McKay, 2012) and attract their attention as a marketing strategy. However, till this day, there is a dearth of empirical evidence shedding light on the issue of how English language curriculum is put

into practice in kindergartens, especially after the new regulation—the total ban of primary-school-level teaching of English—had been introduced approximately two years ago.

Despite the prohibition of early childhood English language education, many Chinese kindergartens run English programmes with the absence of a national English language curriculum framework. Consequently, it has resulted in many variations in practice on different domains and phases of curriculum implementation. At the curriculum-planning stage, kindergartens might look for various sources of their English curricula and take different approaches to design their own curricula. For example, the trial of an early English immersion program launched in 1997 in one Chinese city (i.e. Xi'an city) originated from the Canadian French immersion model first initiated in Canada in the 1960s (Qiang et al., 2011). Zhang's (2019) recent study described a two-way bilingual immersion program employing a set of standards recommended by the U. S. National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) in its curriculum design. In Liu's (2018) case study, the preschool English curriculum was initiated by an experienced native English-speaking teacher (NEST) and then further developed by a group of them who worked collaboratively to establish the theme-based packages. Yang and Li (2018) reported Chinese teachers and principals used the published textbooks to guide the English immersion activities at all age levels of the target kindergarten.

Kindergartens may also vary regarding how they go about scheduling their English instruction time and setting up language policy. In Hu and Baumann's (2014) study, the reported English instruction time was less than 2 hours each week, whereas Liu (2018) found a more extensive English language program that allocates 2.5 hours of English instruction time each day either in the morning or the afternoon session. In a program integrating Chinese and American educational model, Chinese and English each took up 50% of the instruction time to create an additive bilingual environment; while during the unstructured

activities such as lunchtime, English is used as the language of instruction (Zhang, 2019). More flexibility was documented in Lin's (2013) study, in which although teachers were required to use only English in the immersion program, they switched to children's first language (i.e. Chinese) when 1) children had difficulties understanding English; 2) children were unable to express themselves; and 3) children needed to make themselves understood immediately.

In terms of the teaching content and pedagogical practice of kindergarten English curriculum, Lin (2013) reported that teachers favoured a form-based English teaching content (e.g., acquiring vocabulary, the accuracy of pronunciation) and showed an inclination for adopting a play-based pedagogical practice featuring games, demonstrations, realia and pictures. This finding gained support from Shimpi et al.'s (2015) investigation, in which Chinese teachers indicated their positive stance towards adopting a thematic, play-based, and child-centred bilingual program in their practices after receiving a 2-week teacher training program. In fact, such pedagogical orientation is not new to Chinese teachers, as it has been introduced to China since 1997 via the early English immersion program, which placed considerable importance on the integrative and activity/theme-based nature of the English curriculum (Qiang et al., 2011). However, despite its popularity, the actual practice of bilingual immersion program face much difficulties such as catering children's individual needs (Fu, 2007), teacher professional development (Hui, 2007), lack of parental involvement (Chu, 2016)...etc. In addition, with the influence of progressive values and ideas imported from Western countries (e.g., respect for children, active learning, individual learning, play-based approach), school-based curriculum development (SBCD) has become a common practice among Chinese kindergartens (Yang & Li, 2018, 2019a). Against such backdrop, Chinese kindergartens are keen on offering their English language programs with a mixture

of imported curriculum approaches such as the Whole Language Approach (Yang, 2013), Montessori Method (Zhang, 2013), and Multiple Intelligence Theory (Zhou, 2012).

Hu and Baumann's (2014) investigation revealed that the learning of the alphabet was one of the most important parts of English instruction. To teach the letter-sound relationship, teacher-directed pedagogy was adopted as children were requested to repeat after the teachers' reading. Such pedagogical practice was also noted by Liu (2018), who found that the foreign English teachers' classroom activities were highly structured and teacher-centred, featuring extended duration of large-group sessions with the lesson goals of recognizing, memorizing and articulating English words, phrases and sentences; foreign teachers' lack of professional knowledge and working experiences were speculated as the leading cause of such practices. Another commonly found teaching content relates to the daily English expressions (e.g., weather, days of the week, greetings etc.) (Hu & Baumann, 2014; Liu, 2018), which were taught via the teacher-led 'repeat-after-me' method as well as the routine opportunities created for children to practice these phrases constantly throughout the school year (Liu, 2018).

4.2 Australia: An Understudied Phenomenon Amid Policy Vacuum

Despite the multilingual nature of the Australian society provides an ideal arena for investigating the provision of English language curriculum to young EAL/D learners, researchers have paid very little attention to how English education is realized in the ECEC sector, compared to the enormous volume of empirical studies in primary schools (e.g., Dobinson & Buchori, 2016; D'warte, 2018). Most published studies did not explicitly investigate the practice of English language curriculum; instead, only certain aspects (e.g., teacher-child interaction, teaching pedagogy) of the English curriculum were examined as independent variables relating to children's English language outcomes.

In a recent study looking into bilingual children's language learning in Australian ECEC settings, Niklas et al. (2018) found that bilingual children who attended in higher process quality preschool programmes demonstrated better English verbal abilities than those who attended other forms of ECEC services; and children's longer attendance of higher quality programmes positively affected their English learning outcomes. This finding articulates the quality issue of preschool language program since it plays a central role in affecting children's educational experience in classrooms and ultimately influences their language learning outcomes. A few other studies linked EAL/D children's language developmental outcomes to educators' teaching practice and environmental influence. For example, Clarke (1999) found that four Vietnamese-speaking preschoolers' acquisition of words and routinized language resulted from the joint effect of the preschool setting's larger environmental scaffolds and those supplied by the teachers. Millar's (2011) study pointed out that it was teachers' hands-on, open-ended class activities that allowed children to follow what the other children were doing, therefore improved their English skills rapidly. Also, Hu et al.'s (2014) investigation revealed that ECEC teachers would comply with parents' wishes by encouraging Chinese children to use more English in the early childhood setting. Such finding indicates that without a general educational guideline in place, educators' practice may be swayed by other forces in the surrounding environment. Furthermore, a recent study reported finding that young EAL/D preschoolers' production of informative statements related to teachers' employment of questions (Farndale et al., 2016). However, these studies have one common inadequacy: they have only taken a narrow scope in examining the practice of early childhood English education, most of these studies chose to only evaluate children's language performance in relation to the overall programme quality or teachers' teaching practice, as opposed to placing the central investigation focus on exploring the implementation of early childhood English education itself. Thus, all the prior studies lacked

the depth and comprehensiveness of the investigation. On top of that, with the shortage of empirical studies in the existing literature, we are in no way near from establishing a complete understanding of how early childhood English language education looks like in the Australian ECEC sector. This represents one direct consequence of the absence of an ECEC-sector-specific English language curriculum framework. As educational practitioners are unguided, unsupported, and unregulated in their efforts of actualizing the early English language education, and this may have made it a challenging task for prior researchers to conduct an in-depth investigation on this matter of concern.

5. Comparison: Two countries, same ostrich policy

As discussed above, prior research conducted in China and Australia collectively laid down some preliminary accounts of how English language education is practised in preschool settings. However, no systematic comparison has been made between the two countries in terms of how and why ECELE is carried out. In China, English language programmes have been widely adopted by kindergartens to meet parents' increasing demand for children's second language learning. However, in practice, wild variations exist in how Chinese kindergartens adopt or experiment with different approaches to implementing their English curricula. Such inconsistencies could be, to a large extent, attributed to the absence of a normative curriculum framework and other relevant policy (Feng, 2005). The adopted bilingual educational models range from 'total immersion' taught by native speakers using solely English as the language of instruction to 'partial immersion' programs where English and Chinese are used as the media of instruction. Different as they are, they share the primary purpose of creating the bilingual environment to foster additive bilingualism, where children's acquisition of English does not come at the cost of their competency in mother tongue (Baker, 2001; Feng, 2005).

The development of Chinese early childhood curriculum (ECC) has been profoundly influenced by the ideologies imported from Western countries—the USA in particular—since the 1980s (Li, 2015). Chinese educational authorities actively promote an integrated ECC and criticize the Soviet model of subject-based curriculum, teacher-directed approach, and the explicit teaching of academic skills (Li, 2015). With a new round of ECEC reform began in 2010 (Li, 2015; Li et al., 2016), the child-centred, play-based curriculum gained overwhelming support in the ECEC sector. Against such backdrop, Chinese kindergartens face the great challenges of the forbidden stance taken by the educational authority regarding any formal early childhood English education, as stated in the recent issue by MOE (2018). Therefore, they must, on the one hand, conform to the governmental regulations; on the other hand, provide English education to young children to meet parents' expectations for a 'global citizen'. Such policy-practice dilemma creates many difficulties in practice. For example, for many kindergartens that have been running English programs for years, they face the challenge of either abandon the English curriculum as a whole or transforming it under no readily available professional guidance, which may negatively affect children's English learning due to the inconsistent learning experiences.

In Australia, although many children who learn English as an additional language or dialect require language support from preschool educational settings, the limited existing research yields no scientific evidence showing such English curriculum is carried out as a norm among preschool settings, nor does it offer any detailed account of how exactly such programmes have been put into practice in any individual ECEC setting. This worrying reality may very well put young Australian children, particularly those who learn English as an additional language or dialect, at a disadvantaged position since they are missing out coherent language support from an early age, the critical period for L2 acquisition (Cardimona et al., 2016; Johnson & Newport, 1989). Same as their Chinese counterparts,

Australian preschools and ECEC practitioners face the challenge of the absence of a systematic EAL/D curriculum framework at the preschool level, and the government is taking an inactive role in guiding such practices. Which, ironically, contradicts with the principles of EYLF and has put young children in a disadvantaged situation. The EYLF views young children as culturally competent individuals who should be actively interacting and connecting with the broader community and (local) culture with English and their heritage languages (Yang et al., 2020). However, the ostrich policy does not give Australian young EAL/D learners the much-needed opportunities to receive the coherent 'intentional teaching' of English (Yang et al., 2020), making them incompetent to engage in authentic, responsive, and culturally-sensitive interactions with the significant others in English. In addition, with the lack of English curriculum framework for EAL/D learners, preschools' curriculum decision-making and implementation might be overly driven by the desire of catering to parents' educational expectation, rather than the needs of children. In sum, although there is extremely limited empirical evidence depicting the practice of early childhood English education in ECEC settings, viewing from the current educational policy landscape, Australian education system appears to demonstrate a monolingual mindset and monocultural orientation (Coleman, 2012). It also tends to adopt a reading readiness approach (see Li, 2015) in its planning of EAL/D curriculum for young children, in which language learning support remains available only in the formal schooling stage.

In summary (As Table 2 shows), China and Australia both represent a multilingual and multicultural social context, yet displaying quite distinctive English-learning environments. The educational authorities in both countries are similar in their inactive involvement in overseeing and directing the implementation of ECELE, leading to unguided, unregulated and varying practices of early English education in preschool settings. Such reality could be attributed to the following factors, with varied configuration depending on

the sociocultural context in which the early English education takes place: 1) the top-down educational policymaking model that fails to adequately respond to stakeholders' varied needs, difficulties, and expectations; 2) the pedagogical emphasis on play-based learning (Lin et al., 2019) that discourages educators from planning and actualizing intentional English teaching; 3) the widely-accepted notion of Developmental Appropriate Practice (DAP) that denies the appropriateness of early English education featuring didactic learning and teacher-led instructions (Yan, 2013); 4) the prevalence of the reading readiness philosophy that stresses 'the importance of waiting until a child is ready to learn to read before providing any type of instruction' (Li, 2015, p. 46); 5) a lack of well-trained workforce prepared to assume responsibility for the language needs of young bilingual learners (Zhang, 2012). As a consequence, the ostrich policy—whether prohibitive or laissez-faire—will harm the long-term development of young children. Thus, this policy should be reviewed with empirical evidence, urgently and systematically.

Table 2*Comparison of Chinese and Australian Early Childhood English Language Education*

Comparative framework		China	Australia
		Multilingual and multicultural environment	
Level 1: Linguistic context	Language environment	Mandarin Chinese as the official language, with 290 ethnic-minority languages spoken. English is learned as a foreign language	English as the de facto national language, learned by many as an additional language/dialect
		Monolingual mindset in language planning	
Level 2: Curriculum policy	Educational language policy	Formal English education begins in primary school. English education forbidden in ECEC settings	EAL/D support available only in the formal schooling stage. No guidelines available at preschool level
	ECEC settings	Kindergartens	LDC, FDC, Preschool, OSHC

Level: Curriculum implementation	Curriculum practice	Wild variations. Immersion bilingual programs. Mixing with other imported curriculum approaches (e.g., Whole Language Approach, Montessori Method, Multiple Intelligence Theory).	Lack of empirical study, no evidence suggesting English education is carried out as a norm for preschool EAL/D learners.
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6. Implications

The above discussion indicates that educational authorities in China and Australia either downplay the importance of (China) or has lost interest in conducting comprehensive bilingual language policymaking (Australia) (Lo Bianco, 2008). To tackle such reality, we call for educational authorities' broadened understanding of young children's language development: language is not only a learning subject but also a 'cultural tool' (Vygotsky, 1981) used by speakers to achieve such specific goals as communication, identity construction, culture transmission, heritage maintaining, social development, etc. Therefore, the development of evidence-informed bilingual education policy should be the crucial first step, as it goes beyond the scope of early childhood curriculum (ECC) itself. Afterwards, the guiding principles of this national policy should be applied to integrate early EFL and EAL/D guidelines to the existing ECC frameworks in China and Australia, respectively. In addition, while acknowledging the importance of play-based learning for young children, educational authorities should not ignore the unique features of early second language acquisition that requires the adoption of 'intentional teaching' of English (Yang et al., 2020) in an additive bilingual learning environment.

The implementation of quality early English language education relies on a qualified ECEC workforce, who are knowledgeable and experienced in planning and carrying out ECELE. Thus, it would be beneficial to include and systematize early EFL and EAL/D teacher training in the education of pre-service preschool teachers. In particular, teachers

should be equipped with the basic understanding that children arrive at preschools with varying language abilities and diverse cultural backgrounds. Their training should prepare them to be sensitive and responsive to students' individual needs. In addition, for in-service preschool teachers, opportunities for ongoing professional learning should be provided to enhance their knowledge on children's second/foreign language acquisition, pedagogical knowledge, and instructional methods that are age- and culturally appropriate. To this end, parent-teacher communication should be established and maintained to build a strong and effective partnership. Last but not the least, empirical research is in urgent need to provide valuable insights to the current status of ECELE and the needs of children from different profiles of family language background; with such knowledge base, educational policymakers can make informed decisions on how to best support children's learning of English. In Australia, it is widely known that 'burying head in the sand' is not the proper approach to solving pressing problems. In China, 'taming the flood' by digging channels to conduct water into the sea is the wisdom left by 'Yu the Great' (2123 – 2255 BC), who has had the floods under control and became the founder of the first Chinese dynasty. Therefore, empirical studies should be conducted, and national curriculum guidelines, professional standards, and teacher education programs should be provided to impose regulation in the market, thus to promote professional and appropriate early childhood English language education in the two countries.

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