English for everyone is unfair

Knowledge of English has come to be seen as the key talent of the 21st century, a way to perfect an individual's character and to modernize societies; a central facet of global development. China, for instance, introduced an ambitious universal English language teaching program in 2001 and English language teaching, including the use of English as a medium of instruction, has since been increasing at an ever faster rate. English has become a gate-keeper at various turns and determines access to good high schools and university entrance (see Zhang Jie’s PhD thesis for a detailed examination of China’s English fever since 2001).

Hu and Alsagoff (2010) explore how China’s compulsory English language learning stands up as a public policy. They identify four key considerations in evaluating language policy: moral justice, practical feasibility, allocative efficiency and distributive justice.

From an idealistic position of moral justice universal English language teaching is a good idea as access to English can be considered a form of instrumental language right: surely, everyone has a right to learn the global power code. However, in the same way that students have a right to learn the global power code, they also have an expressive language right to the full development of their mother tongue and they also have the right to acquire other kinds of useful knowledge. The moral justice argument for English is thus limited to that degree that learning English does not interfere with learning the mother tongue or other subject knowledge.

From a moral justice perspective, the case for English is thus so-so. So, what about practical feasibility? Universal English teaching in China, as elsewhere, is subject to some intractable and incapacitating constraints, which include a severe shortage of qualified teachers, lack of appropriate instructional materials and the non-existence of a sociolinguistic environment in which English is meaningful.

It could be argued that a language policy should not be criticised for implementation problems because these might straighten themselves out over time. On the other hand, they might not, and if policy makers have failed to come up with an implementation plan together with the policy, there is no reason to believe in magical transformation in the future.
The verdict on universal English teaching becomes even more negative when it comes to allocative effectiveness. The costs of teacher training, of hiring expatriate teachers, of developing suitable materials and of creating the necessary infrastructure to teach English are high. At the same time, the available evidence suggests that English language teaching in China, as elsewhere, has, to date not been particularly effective.

Furthermore, addressing the problem of costly and ineffective English language instruction may have made other subjects more costly and less effective, raising the question of distributive justice. Hu and Alsagoff (2010) cite evidence that the promotion of English has benefited only a relatively small number of students in well-resourced urban schools at the expense of the majority of students. Universal English thus benefits an elite group while disadvantaging everyone else:

Because of their privileged position, they [=Chinese elites] are also consuming resources that might otherwise have been allocated to policy options that could benefit the majority, who are not compensated for the losses they suffer as a result of the diversion of these resources. As a consequence, the English medium instruction initiative has not only perpetuated the unequal distribution of power and access but is also creating new forms of inequality. (Hu and Alsagoff 2010, p. 375)

If moral justice, practical feasibility, allocative efficiency and distributive justice are taken into account, the verdict on the universal English learning initiative in China is thus unambiguously negative. Hu and Alsagoff (2010) go on to also assess the English instruction policy not only for the Han majority but also for ethnic minority students and in that context their verdict is even more dire, “an outlandish extravagance” (p. 377).

If universal English instruction is indeed a wrong-headed policy for China’s majority and minorities alike, as the authors conclude, what policy alternatives are there? The authors suggest the provision of English as an enrichment subject rather than as a compulsory subject and the removal of English from high-stakes assessment.