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Current Issues in Language Planning

ISSN: 1466-4208 (Print) 1747-7506 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rclp20

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To cite this article: Yingna Wang & Anthony J. Liddicoat (2026) The impact of socioeconomic status on parental agency in family language policy for English language learning in China, Current Issues in Language Planning, 27:2, 199-219, DOI: 10.1080/14664208.2025.2451555

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/14664208.2025.2451555

Published online: 16 Jan 2025.

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CURRENT ISSUES IN LANGUAGE PLANNING
2026, VOL. 27, NO. 2, 199–219
https://doi.org/10.1080/14664208.2025.2451555

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The impact of socioeconomic status on parental agency in family language policy for English language learning in China

Yingna Wang[a] and Anthony J. Liddicoat[b]

[a]School of Foreign Languages and Cultures, Jilin University, Changchun, People's Republic of China; [b]Centre for Applied Linguistics, University of Warwick, Coventry, United Kingdom

ABSTRACT

This study investigates how Chinese parents of different socioeconomic status (SES) exercise their agency in family language policies (FLP) for English language learning amid educational reforms and sociocultural dynamics. Drawing on Spolsky's language policy framework and Bourdieu's, concept of capital, this study analysed 40 interviews with parents from different regions of China. The findings reveal that parents' ideologies, management strategies, and practices in children's English learning at home vary across SES groups, influenced by differences in access to economic, social, cultural and linguistic capital. High-SES parents perceive English as vital for global opportunities and set ambitious educational goals, employing resource-intensive support to encourage early bilingualism. Conversely, low-SES parents, constrained by limited resources, prioritise English primarily for school success and locally-based careers and employ adaptive strategies. Practices across SES groups vary from immersive activities in high-SES families to more passive exposure and basic academic support in low-SES families. The study demonstrates that SES, mediated by capital, affects parental agency in FLP. By illustrating the disparities across SES groups, this study contributes to a broader discourse in FLP, demonstrating how parents manifest resilience and adaptability in optimising resources for language learning through dynamic interactions with macro- and micro-level contexts.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 16 August 2024
Accepted 3 January 2025

KEYWORDS
Parental agency; family language policy; English language learning; socioeconomic factor

Introduction

Recent developments in language policy and planning (LPP) highlight the critical role of individual agency in shaping it (Bouchard & Glasgow, 2019; Liddicoat & Taylor-Leech, 2020). Since the 'reform and opening up' policy in China in 1979, English has become a core subject in China's educational system (Wang & Gao, 2008). However, this reform has also accelerated socioeconomic disparities (C. Li, 2020). These shifts have also introduced pressures, particularly for parents who view education as vital for personal success. In response, parents across social classes invest substantial resources in their children's education (X. Gu, 2021).

CONTACT Yingna Wang wangyingna@jlu.edu.cn School of Foreign Languages and Cultures, Jilin University, 2699 Qianjin Street, Changchun 130000, China

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Despite these advances, there is limited understanding of how socioeconomic factors influence Family language policy (FLP) practices in specific cultural contexts like China. FLP focuses on the role of parents in fostering bilingualism (Curdt-Christiansen & Wang, 2018) and FLP research has evolved from early diary studies of bilingual children to current interdisciplinary and transnational studies on how multilingual families construct and negotiate identities and practices through language (King, 2016). However, how Chinese parents from diverse SES navigate FLP to support their children's English language learning remains underexplored.

This study addresses the following research question: How do Chinese parents of different SES backgrounds implement parental agency in planning and practising family English learning in the context of educational reforms and differing sociocultural dynamics? Addressing this question will deepen our understanding of the interplay between SES and parental agency in FLP, offering insights that could further inform FLP research.

This study employs Spolsky's (2004) tripartite framework of language management, focusing on language ideology, management and practices, to investigate the influence of SES on parental decision-making in children's English language learning in China. Spolsky's framework is suitable for this investigation as it addresses critical components for understanding parental agency in FLP. Language ideology refers to the beliefs that shape family attitudes toward language; practices concern the choices made in daily interactions, and management includes deliberate efforts to guide these practices. While management and practices are typically distinct, recent studies suggest they may function along a continuum, with practices sometimes reflecting conscious, strategic decisions rather than purely spontaneous actions (Bonacina-Pugh, 2017; Tang & Calafato, 2024).

With the 2021 'Double Reduction' policy imposing restrictions on extracurricular learning to alleviate the burden on students, parents face new challenges in exercising agency over their children's early English education (Zeng & Yung, 2024). Drawing on Curdt-Christiansen and Wang (2018), this study conceptualises parental agency as parents' capacity to make informed decisions within sociocultural constraints.

Parental agency and socioeconomic background in FLP

FLP explores family members' ideologies, planning, and practices concerning language use; these factors inform how a child's linguistic trajectory evolves and the socialisation processes around language (Curdt-Christiansen, 2016). Although parental agency is integral to these processes, its relationship with SES remains understudied in FLP.

This study employs Spolsky's (2004) framework of FLP and Bourdieu's (2018) concept of capital to address the understudied interplay between parental agency and SES. Spolsky conceptualises language policy in terms of language ideologies, management and practices and his framework has been widely used to help understand how families make decisions about language learning and use.

How parents make decisions about language is socially contextualised, and families' SES is one potential influence on their decision-making (Poon, 2020). Previous studies have highlighted the need to examine SES in FLP. For example, Duff (2020) discusses how multiscalar influences on FLP, such as media, policy, and socioeconomic conditions,

converge to form language practices across generations in China, suggesting the need to examine how socioeconomic disparities mediate parental agency. In understanding socioeconomic disparities, it is important to consider capital as being more than just economic capital. As Bourdieu (2018) argues, economic, social and cultural capital influence individuals' actions. Economic capital relates to financial resources; cultural capital encompasses embodied skills and academic qualifications; social capital refers to networks and relationships. As a subset of cultural capital, linguistic capital emphasises that language proficiency is a social asset. All these aspects of capital are potentially relevant in understanding how SES impacts on families' decision-making about language.

One aspect of decision-making that is potentially influenced by SES is parents' ability to exercise agency. Agency is conceptualised as a temporally embedded social process influenced by past experiences, future possibilities and present contingencies, mediated by sociocultural factors, structure, and agent interactions (Liddicoat & Taylor-Leech, 2020). SES can influence parental agency in families by framing their access to resources, aspirations, and ability to mobilise and foster multilingual practices at home. Recently, LPP and FLP literature have begun examining agency more directly, emphasising parental agency as a key player in language maintenance and promotion (Tao & Xu, 2022) and previous research has identified major components of parental agency, including investment in bilingualism, distribution of resources and language management strategies (Ronderos et al., 2021; Seo, 2023). Moreover, emotional factors have also been acknowledged as affecting FLP decisions since parental satisfaction and anxiety can determine their language choices and practices (Tang & Calafato, 2022). High-SES families in China, as illustrated by Tang and Calafato (2022), may well consider multilingualism as a commodity they can invest in to increase potential economic return for their children. However, this commodification could introduce unique challenges, such as added stress on children and the proliferation of an elitist mindset towards multilingual education.

Socioeconomic factors influencing FLP for English learning in China

Studies of FLP in China have explored the role of parents in planning family language use, particularly regarding Putonghua and regional dialects and the stress arising from the early acquisition of English. Curdt-Christiansen and Wang (2018) found that parents significantly influence the linguistic ecology in urban China. Peng and Wan (2023) observed that parental agentive efforts are displayed through negotiating the home linguistic environment and allocating educational resources for language development.

While Chinese parents are highly involved in children's English education (Butler & Le, 2018; Xia & Gao, 2022), more profound insight into how SES influences this involvement is necessary. Zheng and Mei (2021) found that parental SES impacts on language ideologies and investment in children's language learning in Shanghai communities. Additionally, they noted that national language policies may deter early bilingual English learning, affecting community-level activities. Despite these challenges, families in these two relatively higher and lower SES communities valued English but adopted varied management practices. H. Li et al. (2022) identified three types of bilingual parenting among parents of Beijing preschoolers: no specific language policy, monolingual

parenting and bilingual parenting associated with different educational levels. M. M. Gu et al. (2022) have demonstrated that socioeconomic factors significantly influence parental decisions and strategies in multilingual settings, shaping their attitudes and engagement in their children's language education.

SES has been shown to have a number of effects on families. SES affects child characteristics, parent–child interaction, and availability of learning resources (Pace et al., 2017). Parental income and education level are positively correlated with students' performance in English, with parents' beliefs and expectations as strong predictors (Butler & Le, 2018). High-SES parents consistently hold high expectations, but low-SES parents reduce their expectations as their children advance through middle school. SES also influences parenting styles. Du and Li (2024) found similar patterns in China to those described by Lareau (2018) in the US. They note that privileged families employ intensive parenting and use cultural and political resources to enhance children's success. In contrast, working-class families adopt laissez-faire approaches. SES also affects parents' self-efficacy and involvement in family education and children's academic achievement (Duan et al., 2018; Tazouti & Jarlégan, 2016).

This study explores the impact of socioeconomic factors influencing Chinese families' English language policies and practices amid evolving educational policies. By extending the research beyond metropolitan areas and including diverse SES levels, the study aims to contribute to the field by highlighting how SES influences parental agency in FLP for English learning in less studied contexts in China.

Methodology

Participants

Participants were recruited using purposive sampling strategies to ensure diversity in SES, educational backgrounds, professional backgrounds, and geographic regions within China. Invitations were distributed via social media platforms (WeChat) and parent networks. The selection criteria included parents of children aged between 6 and 16 years willing to participate in the study, representing different SES backgrounds, as inferred from educational attainment, occupation, and resident in different regions.

The study included 40 parents with an average of 40.8 years. Their children had been learning English for three to ten years. These parents were from 16 regions and provinces in China, covering the most developed eastern coastal regions and less developed middle and western areas for a wide geographic distribution.

Parents had a wide range of professional experience and education, from primary school completion to doctoral degrees. This diversity allowed for a rich exploration of the influence of SES on parental agency in FLP for English learning. Details of the participants are provided in Appendix 1. A summary of their profile is shown in Table 1.

Participants were categorised into high- and low-SES groups based on a composite consideration of their profession, educational background, and inferred income level. While direct income figures were not solicited, these data were inferred through details of the participants' employment, academic achievements, and residential

Table 1. A summary of the socio-demographic profile of participants.

Parents	High-SES		Low-SES	
Number	21		19	
Age	30–35(5)	41–45(6)	30–35(3)	41–45(6)
	36–40(8)	46+(6)	36–40(6)	46+(4)
Gender	Male(4)		Male(5)	
	Female(17)		Female(14)	
Highest Educational level	Bachelor(16)		Primary(1)	Vocational high(2)
	Master(3)		Junior high(7)	Associate degree(5)
	PhD(2)		Senior high(4)	
Region	Shandong(4)	Xinjiang(1)	Shandong(5)	Liaoning(1)
	Jilin(3)	Shaanxi(1)	Jilin(4)	Jiangxi(1)
	Henan(2)	Chongqing(1)	Heilongjiang(4)	Guangdong(1)
	Hunan(1)	Liaoning(1)	Sichuan(3)	
	Zhejiang(1)	Guangdong(1)		
	Jiangsu(1)	Hebei(1)		
	Jiangxi(1)	Sichuan(1)		
	Hunan(1)			
Profession	teacher(7)	consultant(1)	corporate staff/worker(5)	freelancer(2)
	manager(4)	pharmacist(1)	homemaker(4)	businessperson(1)
	self-employed(4)	administration	small business owner(1)	sales(1)
	doctor(1)	staff(1)	farmer(2)	nursery staff(1)
	engineer(1)	professor(1)		waitress(1)
				nurse(1)

regions. Bourdieu's concept of capital informed this categorisation, as it links economic, cultural, and social capital to parental involvement in FLP. High-SES parents typically possess advanced academic degrees and are employed in professional or managerial capacities within economically prosperous regions. Conversely, low-SES parents generally received education up to high school level or below and engaged in unskilled or semi-skilled occupations. Among the 40 parents, 21 participants fell into the high-SES group, and 19 fell into the low-SES group.

Data collection

Data collection was conducted from March to October 2023 through interviews via online meetings (WeChat and Voov Meeting) and took place two years after the initial adoption of the double-reduction policy. Before the interview, participants completed a demographic questionnaire to collect profile information, including parents' age, gender, educational background, English proficiency level, career, region, and children's details. The semi-structured interviews, between 20 and 30 min, focused on parents' beliefs, management and practices regarding their involvement in their children's English learning at home. Specifically, the interviews explored parents' ideologies towards English learning and its importance; management strategies adopted by parents, including decision-making about learning resources and activities; home language practices, such as using English in daily interactions and support with homework; and challenges faced by parents in supporting their children's English learning in the context of the double-reduction policy. The interviews were conducted in Chinese and were audio-recorded with consent for transcription and analysis. Selected extracts were translated into English for this paper, and only the English version is included here because of space limitations.

Data analysis

The data were analysed using a deductive thematic analysis approach guided by Spolsky's (2004) framework, which includes language ideologies, management and practices. The analysis was also informed by Bourdieu's (2018) concept of capital to the extent that economic, cultural and social capital influence parental agency in FLP. Economic capital matters in how financial resources can have an impact on the availability of educational materials and extracurricular activities for children. Cultural capital can shape how parents' educational background and English language proficiency enable them to support their children's learning and navigate educational systems. Social capital can influence how parents draw on networks for information, advice, and support. These forms of capital were introduced into the analysis to account for how contrasting social and economic conditions affected parental ideologies, management strategies, and language practices.

The interviews were transcribed and coded using *Nvivo* software. Coding was developed using a coding scheme based on Spolsky's framework. Data were coded into these three pre-established categories, allowing for an organised analysis of how parents' ideologies, management and practices related to their children's English learning were influenced by SES. Within each main category, subthemes highlighted similarities and differences between high- and low-SES parents. Alongside this, constant comparisons were used to examine variations across the data. Reflections and insights were documented through memo writing to capture the nuances of parental agency in the context of SES. This analysis revealed how SES, shaped by economic, cultural and social capital, influenced parents' beliefs, strategies, and daily interactions with their children's English learning within Spolsky's framework.

Parents' ideologies revealed contrasts in how low- and high-SES families perceived the significance of English learning for future opportunities. Management strategies emphasised disparities in approaches and resource availability influenced by SES. Practices highlighted varying levels of involvement among different SES families in supporting children's English learning at home.

Results

Parental ideologies of English learning

Parental ideologies represent the beliefs and values that underpin parents' approaches to their children's English learning. These ideologies were informed by SES, which influences the resources available to parents and the opportunities they can provide for their children. Three subthemes emerged: parents' beliefs about the value of English learning, objectives and expectations for English learning, and navigating cultural identity. These ideologies support management strategies and daily practices shaped by the different forms of capital that parents possess.

Parents' beliefs: valuing English learning

This belief in the intrinsic value of English transcends SES. High- and low-SES families recognise English as a tool for education and future opportunities. For example, Pao's mother (H-SES) emphasised the role of English in academic exams,

> English is a tool for communication and a major subject in the Gaokao. Although the 'Double Reduction' policy may somewhat weaken the status of English as a major subject, English remains critical for middle and high school entrance exams.

This shows that she values the role of English and does not consider the double 'reduction policy' as impacting on the importance of English because of its role in crucial examinations, which was also the primary reason and the most tangible goal expressed by parents who value learning English across SES groups. Le's mother (L-SES) explained the value of learning English beyond passing critical exams. She said:

> English is vital for both children's studies in the future and after entering into society. English is the most widely used language, so I feel that it has great significance for children's futures and is also a language that must be learned.

This parent maintains that the value of English is not limited to passing exams; instead, she focuses on benefits for children 'in society.' As English is 'most widely used,' she considers English the language for the 'future,' stressing that English could provide a competitive edge in the job market. Such consensus shows a widespread belief across low- and high-SES families in the instrumental role of English in accessing broader educational, professional, and social opportunities in the future.

Objectives and expectations for English learning

While the overarching goal of advancing English proficiency is shared, the specific expectations attached, the perceived depth of its value, and the expected outcomes vary significantly. These are influenced by the availability of resources, accessibility of opportunities, and perceived barriers. Low-SES parents tend to hold a pragmatic understanding of its value, where English proficiency relates to practical success and opportunities, mainly in passing the 'English exam in college entrance exams' (Yang's father, L-SES). Chuang's father (L-SES) said:

> It is necessary to invest in English. Since kindergarten, I have sent him to a training centre and purchased learning devices. However, I think he won't need English for future work. Didn't some representatives suggest at the Two Sessions making English a minor subject with fewer points? If one is to develop in China, English might not be a major subject.

This excerpt shows that the parent considers learning English necessary for his son's further education, primarily to pass exams, but not essential for his future career in China. He believes his son would probably find a job in China, where he may have fewer opportunities to use English. This pragmatism, rooted in views of economic capital, reflects the belief that English is primarily an academic requirement, not a key to professional success in the local context. Though globally valuable, English may be less relevant to families prioritising economic mobility within China. The mention of 'representatives' proposing changes to the primary subject status of English in middle school and reducing the score in college entrance exams (Chen & Gu, 2023) suggests that media discussions have also influenced some Chinese parents' perceptions and practices regarding their investment in English education.

However, high-SES families hold broader and more ambitious expectations. They often prepare their children for an internationalised future. This view aligns with an understanding of English as providing cultural and social capital, as parents with

higher education and international exposure value English for its role in global mobility. Pao, Hua and Dou's parents (H-SES) all mentioned planning to send their children to study overseas, and they firmly believe mastering English is necessary for academic and professional success in a globalised world and have a clear plan for their child's education abroad. They tend to help their children plan early in English and achieve higher levels in primary schools, such as passing Cambridge English qualifications, Cambridge English exams A2 Key (KET), B1 Preliminary (PET), B2 First (FCE), which equal or exceed the requirement of the *Gaokao*. Hua's mother (H-SES) said:

> Because I work in foreign enterprises in China, the working language is English. I deal with many emails and meetings in English. Therefore, I deeply understand the importance of English. Mastering English will bring more opportunities for salary increases and promotions.

As a manager in a foreign company, she used English daily at work, so she considered English language education essential for job and career development. Working experiences influence a parent's ideology and belief in learning English. This statement suggests that the difficulties parents encountered, and the opportunities open for them enhanced their ideology about promoting English learning. These personal experiences influenced their language planning for their children.

Navigating cultural identity

Parents also recognised the role of learning English in shaping children's cultural identities, particularly among high-SES parents who viewed it as a resource for intercultural communication. Pao's mother (H-SES) expressed that learning English offers cultural enrichment:

> Even if you disregard these practical aspects, learning an additional language and understanding more about English-speaking countries' cultures can enhance one's cultural depth, broaden one's perspectives, and improve one's demeanour, which is also great, isn't it?

Parents see English learning as a means for children to interact with and appreciate people from global cultures with empathy. English is seen as more than a tool; it is a means of thought and a gateway to appreciating civilisation. High-SES parents also consider that English learning provides an entry for intercultural communication, obtaining diverse cultural experiences and integrating global citizenship into their children's globally-aware identities. They value the cultural capital gained through English, seeing it as a way to foster global citizenship and intercultural understanding. They seem to adopt a cosmopolitan perspective that describes open-minded individuals who embrace global citizenship and navigate between cultures (Beck, 2006). This view ties into social capital, where access to global networks and exposure to diverse cultures enhance personal and professional development. It also indicates parents' awareness of the power of language in developing thoughts and intellectual engagement.

High-SES parents are searching for ways to balance a solid national identity with the desire for global integration through English. Ni's mother (H-SES) aims to balance cultural identity and language proficiency. She explained:

> I feel a big gap when I see kids excelling in English on *Xiaohongshu*. Still, I want her to first build a solid foundation in Chinese, so I' m not sending her to an international or bilingual school. Developing two languages simultaneously is very difficult. Chinese is more complex than English, and language is also an aspect of identity.

The parent perceives that simultaneously learning two languages is challenging. The reference to *Xiaohongshu*, a social media platform, shows that social media can influence parents' beliefs and practices in English learning. Even so, the parent prioritises Chinese due to its perceived complexity and crucial role in shaping the child's identity. Despite the appeal of bilingualism, high-SES parents like Ni's mother prioritise a solid cultural foundation in Chinese, reflecting a complex decision-making process that integrates cultural, educational and social considerations.

Parents' management strategies for English learning

This section explores parents' management strategies to support their children's English learning. It shows shared commitments and distinct management strategies shaped by SES-related resources and constraints, providing insights into parental agency and how Bourdieu's concept of capital informs these strategies.

Parental roles and modes of engagement

The data shows that SES affects how parents engage with their children's English learning. Low-SES parents usually monitor and oversee their children's study routines rather than engaging in direct teaching, especially in areas requiring advanced language proficiency. Chuang's father (L-SES) said:

> I can only ensure he completes his school and extracurricular homework, reviews his textbooks, and avoids playing with his phone during study time. My English is average (high school level), so I can only help him check words. For listening and speaking, we rely on teachers. We would like a native English speaker, but here in a small city in Shandong, we can't find foreigners. We can only send him to English training centres.

This statement highlights a typical mode of involvement for low-SES parents, who focus on discipline and study habits but have limited direct involvement in learning due to the constraints imposed by their linguistic abilities. Limited linguistic capital hinders these parents from assisting with advanced English skills, such as speaking. Their desire to find a native English speaker reflects the perceived value of authentic instruction and a native-speakerist view of language learning (Holliday, 2018). However, geographic and financial constraints restrict these opportunities. The preference for native speakers reflects the perceived authenticity and quality of language instruction they offer. It contrasts with the opportunities available to high-SES families in affluent or urban areas, highlighting capital disparities across SES groups. Despite these limitations, low-SES families focus on maximising available resources.

In comparison, high-SES parents provide personalised, resource-intensive support. Pao's mother (H-SES) explained her role:

> Parents must be facilitators, encouragers, and role models in a child's English learning. As a facilitator, an educator can provide interesting teaching materials. An encourager consistently motivates the child and is a role model. The main reason for my child's effective

> early English learning was that any slight progress was met with my praise, which motivated the child to learn more.

This approach indicates a conception of parental roles, integrating emotional and cognitive support. High-SES parents engage actively in their children's learning, providing resources, creating a supportive environment, and offering positive reinforcement. These parents draw on their cultural capital to create a nurturing learning atmosphere and to model effective learning behaviours, which enhances intrinsic motivation and language development.

High-SES parents also adopted a dynamic role in their children's learning and encouraged collaborative learning. Jia's father (H-SES) observed a reversal of roles in his interaction with his son:

> In the process of his English learning, I see myself also as a learner, especially during our interaction. Sometimes, I even find that he knows words that are new to me. I learn alongside him, and we make progress together.

This excerpt depicts a collaborative learning environment where both parent and child engage in mutual learning. The son may become the teacher occasionally. It reflects the dynamic and flexible language learning environment at home, reinforcing the child's motivation and autonomy in the learning process.

Strategic planning

High-SES families in this study adopted strategic planning for their children's English development, emphasising early exposure and intensive bilingual parenting. Beta's mother (H-SES), an English teacher, shared her approach: 'I listened to English during pregnancy.' Similarly, Dou's case (H-SES) involved exposure to 'English immediately after birth.' Early intervention often involves financial investment in picture books, professional English tutors, online and offline language courses, and real-world experiences like travel abroad. Miao's father (H-SES) noted spending up to 200 RMB per hour and 15,000–20,000 RMB annually on his child's English learning, but acknowledged that such resources were out of reach for many families.

High-SES families tend to structure English learning into their daily routine, even amidst busy work schedules. Hua's mother (H-SES) explained:

> Although busy with work, we spend at least an hour helping our child learn English daily. We usually read English storybooks with them, watch English cartoons, listen to English songs, and read English picture books or comics, which helps to foster her interest in learning English.

Consistent routines reflect that English learning is integrated into daily family life. Emphasising co-participation and active involvement, high-SES parents have a comprehensive plan for their children's English development from an early start to daily time management strategies, investing money and effort in language learning. Such consistent engagement shows a commitment to integrating English learning into family life, demonstrating a high degree of use of cultural capital in the conscious creation of opportunities for language exposure.

Conversely, low-SES families lacked a clear plan for their children's English development. Most children in those families have a relatively later start, usually in primary school. Grade 3 is the grade in which most students start learning English at school,

and this results in a delayed start compared with their high-SES peers. Zhu's father (L-SES) said he only began sending his child to a training centre when he 'saw other families doing the same.' This reflects the lack of strategic foresight in resource planning, which can further lead to a divide in FLP across SES groups.

Leveraging learning resources and opportunities

Parental agency in high-SES families is evident in parents' strategic use of language-learning resources, including families' linguistic capital and external support. As Pao's mother (H-SES) explained:

> The child's father is quite good at speaking English and spends more time speaking with him. We found a native English teacher and bought some suitable English books. We are also considering enrolling Pao in a summer camp abroad to improve his spoken English and understand English culture.

This excerpt demonstrates how high-SES parents strategically mobilise various forms of capital to create immersive learning environments. Since the father is proficient in English, the father's linguistic resources (i.e. linguistic capital) are utilised, providing a natural and immersive language acquisition environment at home. Action such as hiring native-speaker tutors and attending international summer camps further display parents' commitment to investing in language and culture-immersive learning experiences (i.e. economic and social capital). These parents adopt a comprehensive approach to fostering their child's English language education.

The recent educational reform has prompted parents across both low and high-SES backgrounds to adapt their strategies as the overarching belief in the value of English remains unaltered. Some high-SES parents considered the reform 'good news' for it provided 'more time for extracurricular development, especially for improving English speaking and actual use of English.' High-SES parents, such as Yue's mother, expressed concerns over the sufficiency of formal English lessons at school. Therefore, she still needed to find new English classes to switch from offline to online to complement school. However, she found 'native-speaker teachers hard to find' and sought alternatives, such as 'reading English stories.' Beta's mother (H-SES) also said:

> The outside training institutions are gone, and the online courses have also stopped, which is a considerable savings. However, we still need to learn English mainly through self-study, so now the child watches English movies, cartoons, and books.

This shows that the reform has led to suspending some extracurricular and online courses, resulting in financial relief for parents, who previously allocated a substantial amount of money to these additional classes. Nevertheless, the intrinsic value of English learning remains, compelling them to assume increased responsibility for strategically planning and managing their children's learning endeavours at home, such as relying more on self-directed learning methods and utilising more accessible resources for language practice. This shift suggests that parents are still committed to guiding their children's English education but are adapting to the new circumstances to maintain and improve their English.

Parental agency in low-SES families is exercised through adaptive strategies within the confines of their financial and resource constraints. After the education reform, several

low-SES parents began spending more energy and time on their children's English learning due to children's increased difficulty in English exams and a sense that the time allocation for school-based instruction had declined. Shuo's mother (L-SES) said: 'The English exam is getting more difficult since the reform, and what they learn in school is not enough.'

Though financial resources are scarce, some low-SES parents turn to digital tools and social networks. Qi's mother (L-SES) used apps 'recommended by the teacher,' while Xiang's father (L-SES) asked for assistance from older siblings. Such strategies are examples of resilient agency as parents use digital tools and peer networks to counteract constraints while sustaining their efforts to involve their children in English learning.

Parents' home English language practices

This section presents how parents across SES groups integrate English into the home environment, focusing on their interaction with children and support for academic achievement. These practices are the essence of parental choices in FLP, with SES influencing the extent and nature of involvement. These differences illustrate how capital is used differently and informs the type of involvement and the environment parents create to support their children in learning English.

Interacting with children in English

Parents of all SES levels recognised the need to create linguistically rich language-acquisition environments. However, the level and way of interaction in English differed considerably, influenced by parents' linguistic capital. Low-SES parents often lack university education and English proficiency and face challenges conversing in English with their children. When asked, most of them said that they 'do not speak English with the children' and 'do not dare to teach' due to concerns about their pronunciation and intonation (Lin's mother, L-SES). They may occasionally check children's English vocabulary by asking, 'What is this in English?' (Yang's father, L-SES). Their strategies often rely on passive exposure, such as listening to English programmes or educational apps.

In contrast, high-SES parents with higher education and English proficiency engage more actively. Their linguistic capital allows them to create an immersive English-speaking environment at home. Tian's mother (H-SES) practises English with her child while shopping or during meals, while Miao's father (H-SES) incorporates English into daily interactions, such as parent–child co-reading of English picture books.

Following the 'Double Reduction' policy, which reduced homework loads, some high-SES parents reported more opportunities to interact with their children in English. Dou's mother (H-SES) said: 'As both of us have studied overseas, we can play with the child in English at home.' She said:

> I told Dou, 'Today we have fish,' she saw the fish roe and liked eating it. She asked me, if "Dan (egg in Chinese)" is "egg". I said yes, and then she said, "Fish egg." She could produce her own output!

The parent tells about a mother-daughter verbal interaction in English at home. The mother knows the child likes fish eggs, so she guides the child in talking about it. The mother, who holds a master's degree in childhood psychological development, adopts

an approach that aligns with the child's interests. Initially, the child does not know how to say the word in English, so she first checks the English word for egg and then deduces it as 'fish egg.' When the child moved from 'egg' to 'fish egg,' the mother was thrilled to see the child's learning, highlighting the effective use of English in daily interaction at home. This excerpt suggests that children's natural language acquisition is enhanced through deliberate scaffolding and guided learning in child–parent interaction in high-SES families drawing their cultural and linguistic capital.

Tian's mother (H-SES) also described how English was used in daily secret talk between the mother and daughter when they 'purposely did not want others to overhear their gossiping.' By using English in a playful language-learning opportunity, this personal, meaningful interaction strengthens the mother-daughter bond. She further explained:

> When she comes home from school, I ask her, 'How is the day going?' She will respond with 'Pretty good!' or 'Great! Not bad.' She then describes specific school activities, possibly mixing in some Chinese. I tell her the corresponding English words, encouraging her to express herself in English.

This excerpt describes when the parent asks about the child's day at school in English, the child responds in English, with a mixture of some Chinese. The parent prompts the child with English expressions and encourages the child to speak English. It illustrates translanguaging (W. Li, 2018) in bilingual parenting in a high-SES family. The parent provides a supportive translanguaging space by recognising and accepting the different languages at play and developing strategies to maximise the learning outcomes by encouraging the child's use of her entire linguistic repertoire. Using two languages here is incidental and pedagogical, as the parent takes the opportunity to actively introduce and English vocabulary and encourage its use. The parent provides scaffolding and fosters a supportive environment and this practice can boost the child's confidence and motivation. By incorporating English into everyday situations, high-SES parents employ their linguistic capital to provide an enriched language environment, promoting bilingual development and reinforcing the connection between language learning and family engagement.

Supporting academic achievement

Parental involvement in academic support, particularly with English homework, varies significantly between low and high-SES families. Driven by high-SES parents' ideology and meticulous management, their children often commence their English learning at an early age. They usually achieve proficiency levels that surpass the benchmarks the school curriculum sets as a result of their parents' access to resources and early investment, so these parents find there is less need for day-to-day academic support. For example, Beta passed the A2 Cambridge English Test for young learners at an early age. These parents rarely focus on homework support unless it is required for collaborative projects with parents or preparation for English-speaking competitions.

On the other hand, low-SES parents sometimes struggle with English, which affects their ability to provide direct support. They primarily assist with basic tasks such as memorising vocabulary and textbook articles but feel less confident with more complex assignments or extracurricular readings. As Yang's father (L-SES) described:

> Once, the teacher asked the children to read the textbook aloud and make records. I knew something was wrong with his pronunciation, but I couldn't correct these mistakes. I have seen other parents talking with their children in English. At that moment, I felt a significant gap.

The parent shares his experience supporting the child's English homework at home. He can monitor the completion of the assignment, which involves recording the child's reading aloud and recognising some pronunciation errors. Still, he is unsure how to help the child correct and improve it. The uncertainty suggests a lack of confidence in his English abilities and a perceived need for other resources to support the child's language development. He also senses an inadequacy compared to other parents who can interact with their children in English, highlighting the consequences of the perceived gap in English proficiency. The comparison reveals the role of parents' language proficiency in creating an English environment at home. The sense of inadequacy or anxiety among some parents highlights the challenges and limitations that SES can impose on parental agency as they are less able to provide prompt feedback and a rich linguistic environment that their counterparts. This reveals the importance of linguistic capital in FLP and how the lack of it in low-SES families can impact on their ability to provide the support for their children's English learning they feel is necessary. Some low-SES parents even 'felt ashamed and guilty' for not being able to support their children with English homework and had to resort to seeking external help, such as 'seeking help from her cousin' (Si's mother, L-SES) and 'hiring a college student to be the tutor, as it is cheaper than the training centre.' She acknowledged the gap in support that her child receives compared to peers whose parents are linguistically capable. Financial constraints compound this gap, leading some to seek more affordable, but less professional, tutoring options, such as hiring a college student.

Some parents, such as Le's mother (L-SES), face significant barriers to supporting their child's English learning due to their limited education. She said:

> My English foundation is weak; I only completed junior high school and have had little exposure since. Thus, teaching my child English is quite challenging. However, by learning with him, I might put in more effort than him, learning first and then teaching him.

This excerpt depicts the challenges parents with limited English proficiency face when trying to support their child's English learning at home. Starting from a fundamental level of English proficiency and after years of living without English, she knows her limitations and the potential barriers to creating an English learning environment. However, she has devoted time and energy to overcoming these challenges. She is determined to study first, using online resources to improve her proficiency. This approach highlights the role of cultural capital in overcoming educational gaps, as she uses available resources to improve her skills and better support her child. The practice of learning herself and later teaching the child is a strategic and practical response. Despite all the obstacles, her commitment to learning English with her child highlights the parent's dedication to educational development and reveals that when the parents are determined and motivated, SES can be mediated to some extent, showing the resilience of parental agency in low-SES parents.

In this section, the analysis has shown how parents' SES affects their involvement in children's English learning, both in direct interaction and academic support. High-SES

families with more linguistic and cultural capital usually produce an enriched learning environment that provides early and intensive English exposure. With insufficient resources and linguistic capital, low-SES families tend to use passive learning strategies or turn to external help. However, they may persevere through adaptive behaviours.

Discussion

This study has explored how Chinese parents at different SES levels implement parental agency in FLP in the context of recent educational reforms. It offers insights into how parents navigate their children's English learning by using Spolsky's (2004) framework as the analytic framework and Bourdieu's (2018) elaborated concept of capital.

The results show that macro- and micro-level factors shape parental agency in FLP. At a broader level, macro-level factors such as educational reforms and sociocultural context create the broader landscape that influences parental decisions. These structural forces affect access to resources and shape the cultural construct through which parents view English language learning. At the micro level, SES emerges as a more fundamental determinant, influencing the extent and types of capital (economic, cultural, and linguistic) that parents are able to mobilise, and shaping their exercise of parental agency in FLP. These micro-level factors interact with the macro-level factors to mediate parents' decision-making and actions.

Figure 1 represents the relationships among macro-level factors, SES, capital, and parental agency, showing how the implementation of parental agency differs based on SES. SES, mediated by capital, shapes parental agency in FLP by allowing or limiting use of various forms of capital, and this influences the ideologies, management strategies, and practices parents employ to support their children's English learning. Thus, the interplay of these factors reflects the complexity of parental agency in bilingual upbringing in China, shaped by both structural forces and individual efforts. The double arrows in the diagram signify dynamic, reciprocal relationships – for example, macro-level factors like educational reforms shape micro-level factors, which in turn can influence policy adjustments. Similarly, ideology, management, and practices iteratively inform and adjust to one another in the exercise of parental agency.

Both groups value English learning primarily due to its role as a gatekeeper for access to higher education, although their long-term objectives and aspirations vary. High-SES parents have greater access to economic, social, cultural, and linguistic capital and drawing on this capital, they adopt globally oriented ideologies, emphasising English for global citizenship and cross-cultural understanding. They engage in strategic planning and invest resources to enhance children's language learning and provide personalised, resource-rich support and engage proactively to ensure better outcomes. Their practices include immersive English interactions and collaborative learning, integrating English into daily routines and acting as facilitators and role models. Some high-SES parents prefer to raise 'original English immersion kids' *(Yuanban Wa*), aiming for native-like English proficiency through authentic materials. Low-SES parents, constrained by limited access to capital, prioritise the practical and immediate academic outcomes and benefits of English learning, reflecting a more utilitarian FLP. They employ monitoring and adaptive management strategies, utilising accessible resources. Their practices involve passive exposure to English and providing basic academic support,

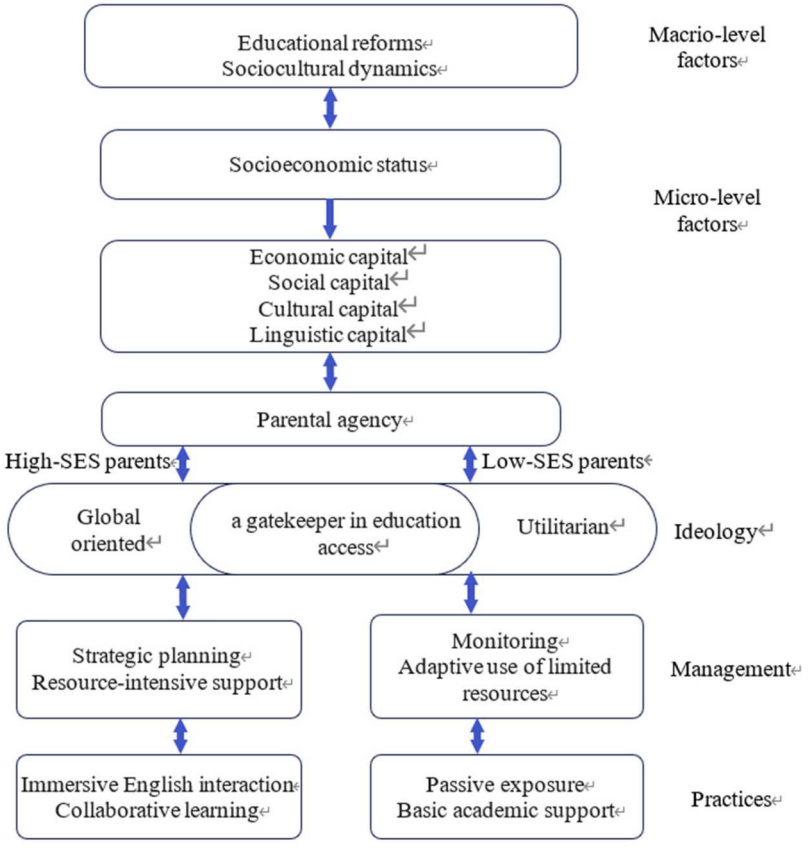

Figure 1. Parental agency in FLP for English language learning in China across SES groups.

like supervising homework. They may raise 'School-Curriculum English kids' (*Xiaonei Wa* or *Yingshi Wa*) who focus on achieving curriculum-based language competency. Though they recognise the importance of creating a supportive and language-rich home environment, low-SES families struggle to integrate English into daily routines due to limited English proficiency. Their reactive and limited involvement in children's learning reflects their agency in employing available resources and opportunities.

These findings align with other studies that have addressed aspects of SES. Curdt-Christiansen (2009) emphasises that socioeconomic resources shape parents' language management using Bourdieu's concept of capital to analyse the FLP of Chinese immigrant families in Quebec, and demonstrates how these forms of capital mediate parental agency in shaping multilingual development and literacy and are grounded in sociocultural and economic ideologies. Similarly, Liang et al. (2022) have observed that higher SES predicts proactive bilingual parenting in Singapore, reflecting strategies akin to high-SES parents' strategies in this study. Xu et al. (2023) built on this by examining multilingual competence as cultural capital among middle-class parents in Shanghai who targeted language learning for future socioeconomic advantages. The current study extends Xu's work and brings in the dimension of SES differences by examining how high- and low-SES parents use varying degrees of economic, social, cultural, and

linguistic capital to negotiate FLP in the context of structural constraints such as policy reforms.

These findings indicate that structural forces not only exist in the background but also affect agentive responses (Mirvahedi, 2021). Integrating culturally sensitive theories into structural approaches could offer a fuller picture of how individuals interpret and react to policies at home (Van Mensel, 2015). The findings shed light on the influence of SES differences on ideologies, management and practices, extending understanding of how parental agency in FLP in China in Curdt-Christiansen and Wang (2018) study. Moreover, the study draws from Tang and Calafato's (2022) insights regarding lower-SES families' multilingualism, revealing that low-SES parents negotiate limitations using innovative strategies, thereby playing a more agentic role than previously understood.

The results, however, diverge from H. Li et al.'s (2022) conclusions that low-SES parents are less engaged in bilingual parenting practices. The study's findings highlight that low-SES parents cannot be seen as passive agents but actively work around constraints to support their children's English learning processes, displaying agency through resilience and adaptability. These parents draw on the opportunities and resources that are available, and this challenges the idea that they are inevitably compelled to reinforce the prevailing social structures (Bouchard & Glasgow, 2019). M. M. Gu et al. (2022) have similarly observed that structural forces influence but do not solely determine agentive responses in FLP.

The results show that parents adapt to educational changes using digital tools, highlighting the dynamic nature of parental agency and these findings are consistent with Bose et al. (2023). Thus, parents' responses to the 'Double Reduction policy' indicate not a diminished valuation of English but an effort to adjust and mitigate the policy's impact, which echoes Kostoulas and Motsiou's (2022) view that speakers show adaptability in dynamic linguistic environments.

This study makes several contributions to the field of FLP research. Integrating Spolsky's language policy framework with Bourdieu's capital offers a theoretical framework for understanding how SES and access to capital influence parental agency in FLP. This integration builds upon Curdt-Christiansen's (2009) approach, which was initially used to analyse FLP among Chinese immigrant families in Quebec and extends it to the context of Chinese families focusing on learning English within China. This approach allows the study to understand better how structural factors and agency interact in different contexts.

The study also emphasises the critical influence of SES on parental ideologies, management strategies, and practices. The results expand previous literature by describing how SES impacts parental agency within the sociocultural context of China, emphasising both access to and distribution of resources.

The findings provide insights into the dynamic nature of parental agency and adaptability in response to educational reforms and sociocultural conditions across SES groups. Committed to overcoming limitations in formal and out-of-school English education opportunities, parents devise and implement adaptive strategies tailored to their specific SES and contextual realities. These findings align with research on adaptability in dynamic linguistic environments and offer valuable insights into how parents navigate policy changes, enriching the broader discourse on language policy in multilingual

contexts. This study reconsiders the assumption that low-SES parents do not or are unable to contribute to their children's English learning. By analysing low-SES parents' resilience and adaptability, the study illustrates how they enact parental involvement in FLP despite their limitations, contributing to a more equitable understanding of the phenomenon.

Conclusion

This study showcases SES as an influential factor in parental agency in FLP for English learning in China. It reveals the complex interplay between structural factors and individual efforts in bilingual education by illustrating how SES mediates access to economic, social, cultural and linguistic capitals – these forms of capital shape parents' ideologies, management strategies, and practices. The results highlight the importance of acknowledging and supporting the role of all parents in promoting a more equitable perspective on FLP in multilingual contexts. Although this study is situated in the Chinese context, its implications may be applied to other multilingual contexts, inviting further research on the influence of SES on parental agency in FLP across diverse multilingual environments.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by the Fundamental Research Funds for the Central Universities, *The Practice and Research of the Translation and Communication of Chinese Wisdom* (No. 2022CXTD22), and China Scholarship Council (No. 202306170084).

Notes on contributors

Yingna Wang is an associate professor at School of Foreign Languages and Cultures, Jilin University. Her research interests include educational linguistics, language policy and planning and second language acquisition.

Anthony J. Liddicoat is a professor in Applied Linguistics at University of Warwick. His research interests include language education, language policy and planning and discourse analysis.

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Appendix 1. Participants' profile information

	Child name	Parent	SES	City	Occupation	Highest Education
1	Yue	mother	H	Changsha Hunan	University Professor	PhD
2	Pao	mother	H	Changchun Jilin	Sales Manager	Master's
3	Hua	mother	H	Weifang Shandong	Foreign Company Sales Manager	Bachelor's
4	Dou	mother	H	Jiaxing Zhejiang	Kindergarten Teacher	Master's
5	Jia	father	H	Zhengzhou Henan	Engineer	Bachelor's
6	Miao	father	H	Yangzhou Jiangsu	Self-employed	Bachelor's
7	Beta	mother	H	Nanchang Jiangxi	English Teacher	Bachelor's
8	Tian	mother	H	Jilin city Jilin province	English Teacher	Bachelor's
9	Ming	mother	H	Changchun Jilin	English Teacher	Master's
10	Jun	mother	H	Zhangjiajie Hunan	Doctor	Bachelor's
11	Nuo	father	H	Urumqi Xinjiang	Hospital Pharmacist	PhD
12	Wei	mother	H	Binzhou Shandong	Self-employed	Bachelor's
13	Yuan	mother	H	Chongqing	Freelancer	Bachelor's
14	Nan	mother	H	Xi'an Shaanxi	Self-employed	Bachelor's
15	Tu	father	H	Dalian Liaoning	Industry Consultant	Bachelor's
16	Xiaoyue	mother	H	Shenzhen Guangdong	Elementary School Teacher	Bachelor's
17	Hui	mother	H	Qufu Shandong	Junior High Teacher	Bachelor's
18	Ni	mother	H	Hengshui Henan	English Teacher	Bachelor's
19	Xiaoyang	mother	H	Qinhuangdao	Manager	Bachelor's
20	Yaoyao	mother	H	Weifang Shandong	Staff	Bachelor's
21	Xiangfei	mother	H	Chengdu Sichuan	Finance Manager	Bachelor's
22	Le	mother	L	Beian Heihe Heilongjiang	Freelancer	Junior high
23	Chuang	father	L	Dongying Shandong	Worker	Senior high
24	Yang	father	L	Linghai Liaoning	Small Business Owner	Senior high
25	Gao	mother	L	Chengdu Sichuan	Enterprise Employee	Vocational high
26	Si	mother	L	Siping Jilin	Waitress	Junior high
27	Lin	mother	L	Dongying Shandong	Oil Field Worker	Senior high
28	Xiang	mother	L	Tai'an Shandong	Farmer	Primary school
29	Shuo	mother	L	Heilongjiang	Farmer	Junior high
30	Yangzhuang	mother	L	Chengdu Sichuan	Housewife	Senior high
31	Dong	mother	L	Ruijin Jiangxi	Nurse	Associate degree
32	Ding	mother	L	Foshan Guangdong	Nursery Staff	Associate degree
33	Qi	mother	L	Changchun Jilin	Freelancer	Associate degree
34	Yu	mother	L	Zhangqiu Shandong	Housewife	Junior high
35	Rui	mother	L	Jilin city Jilin province	Businessman	Associate degree
36	Fang	mother	L	Sichuan	Worker	Junior high
37	Qv	mother	L	Weifang Shandong	Sales	Associate degree
38	Zimo	father	L	Jiamusi Heilongjiang	Housewife	Junior high
39	Zixuan	father	L	Jiamusi Heilongjiang	Housewife	Junior high
40	Zhu	father	L	Changchun Jilin	Printing Industry Worker	Vocational high