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STUDY

Parents' views on Chinese young learners' foreign language learning attitudes and motivation: A mixed methods study

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Abstract
Young learners' attitudes and motivation are important indicators of foreign language learning success and have thus attracted increasing attention over the last decades. As a large country where English is taught as a foreign language (EFL) and children generally start learning English at an early age, China provides an ideal context to study the attitudes and motivation of young EFL learners. Drawing upon the socio-educational model, this study surveyed 521 Chinese parents using an online questionnaire and interviewed eight of them to examine their perspectives on their children's attitudes and motivation towards EFL learning. The findings suggest that parental factors – socioeconomic status and parental involvement – influence young learners' EFL attitudes and motivation, as perceived by their parents. Parental factors, age at the onset of English language learning and intensity of exposure explained a significant amount of the variation in parents' reports on the attitudes and motivation of young learners. Furthermore, the parents reported that their children's EFL attitudes and motivation were constantly changing, and that family, school and extracurricular training appeared to play different roles in this process of change.

1. Introduction

In an increasingly multilingual world, a growing number of children are being exposed to foreign languages (FL) from an early age (Huang & Butler, 2022). Despite the inconclusive evidence regarding the advantages of starting FL learning early (Miralpeix, 2011; Muñoz, 2008, 2011, 2014, 2018; Muñoz & Singleton, 2011; Pfenninger & Singleton, 2017), the notion that 'the earlier the better' remains prevalent on a global scale (Carmel, 2022). Given that unpleasant early experiences in FL learning can have long-lasting or even lifelong adverse effects (Ushioda, 2013), it is essential to examine young learners' attitudes and motivation towards FL learning. Such research will allow us to comprehend the psychological state and learning behaviours of young learners, create supportive learning environments, and adjust teaching and learning strategies from an early stage.

In mainland China, many children start learning English well before they reach school age. According to Statista, an online survey of 2,995 respondents revealed that 42.3% of Chinese children start learning English before the age of 3, 21.9% do so between the ages of 3 and 4, 19.5% between 4 and 5, and 16.3% between 5 and 6 (iResearch, 2019). Another survey conducted by an online news portal – jiemian.com – yielded similar results; that is, 76% of the participants reported having their children learn English before their fifth birthday (Yu, 2018). Therefore, 'the earlier the better' belief seems to apply in the Chinese context.

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This belief spawned a large industry of early childhood English education in China. By the end of 2019, the number of paying users of this industry reached 23.4 million, with a steady growth of 14.6% compared with the previous year (FIRI, 2020). However, the introduction of the 'Double Reduction' policy in July 2021 forced a cooling down of the industry. 'Double Reduction' refers to the reduction in homework and extracurricular training. Under this policy, no online tutoring is allowed for preschool children; no new business registrations will be approved for companies providing academic subject (e.g. Chinese, English, mathematics) training to students from kindergarten through 12th grade (K–12); existing training course providers will face phase reduction through review and re-registration; and academic subject tutoring is strictly prohibited during holidays and weekends, with additional limitations on weekdays (Ministry of Education, 2021). This policy has led to a conflict between parents' desire for early English education for their children and reduced availability of English courses. Family education is highlighted as a remedy. The Family Education Promotion Law[1], enacted in January 2022, echoes the 'Double Reduction' policy and sets out the parents' role in family education, encouraging them to foster a positive educational environment at home (Ministry of Education, 2022a).

We believe that the effects of these changes in the English education landscape in China are multifaceted, particularly in terms of learning opportunities and immediate learning environment. This study used parents' perspectives as proxies to examine attitudes and motivation towards English as an FL (EFL) among young Chinese learners. Specifically, the study sought to investigate the relation between various parental factors and young Chinese learners' EFL attitudes and motivation from their parents' perspective, as well as the dynamic features of these learners' attitudes and motivation at the individual level through their parents' reflections and descriptions.

Attitudes and motivation are intrinsically linked to each other, and influence the effort and perseverance one puts into language learning and learning outcomes (Csizér & Dörnyei, 2005; Csizér et al., 2010; Mihaljević Djigunović & Nikolov, 2019; Nikolov & Timpe-Laughlin, 2020). In 2012, Mihaljević Djigunović proposed that attitudes and motivation should be regarded as the goal and the result of early FL learning rather than the cause of language achievement. Although FL attitudes and motivation have been intensively investigated, most previous studies have focused on teenagers and adult learners, while young learners' attitudes and motivation – as reported by themselves or by their parents and caregivers – is a relatively under-researched area (Butler, 2015a; Kormos & Csizér, 2008; Lamb, 2017). Furthermore, over the past two decades, contextual factors – such as socioeconomic status (SES) and immediate learning environment – have gradually attracted attention, and the dynamic nature of young learners' FL attitudes and motivation has been recognised (Mihaljević Djigunović, 2012). However, research on these factors remains scarce, particularly in the Asian context, and the limited number of studies on young learners' motivation have mainly focused on school-age students in instructional settings (e.g. Alawawda & Razi, 2020; Butler, 2014, 2017; Getie, 2020).

The current study contributes to the existing literature in several ways. First, the limited number of previous studies in similar contexts have mainly examined students above the age of 9 in one or more schools in the same city (e.g. Butler, 2015b, 2017). This study extends the research scope to learners aged between 3 and 12 across China. Given the commonly expressed concern that young learners tend to give contradictory information about what they do and how they feel in the FL classroom (Pinter, 2011), we collected data from their parents on the grounds that Chinese parents are believed to be familiar with their children's English learning activities (Butler, 2015b; Lin, 2019). In addition, this study considered parents' involvement in young learners' English learning activities in the family environment, as well as young learners' intensity of exposure to English – variables that have rarely been investigated in previous studies on FL attitudes and motivation.

2. Literature review

2.1 Theoretical approaches to FL attitudes and motivation

Attitudes and motivation, along with language aptitude, are believed to be three of the most important predictors of language success (Gardner, 1985). The ABC model emphasises that attitudes are a

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complex integration of feelings, behaviours and cognitions (McLeod, 2023). Applying this model to FL learning, attitudes encompass learners' positive or negative feelings associated with the language, the actions or predispositions they adopt on FL learning, and the beliefs, values and perceptions they attach to the target language. Gardner's socio-educational model classified attitudes into three distinct yet interconnected types: attitudes towards the learning situation (response to the immediate environment; e.g. teachers and courses), attitudes towards the target language community (e.g. the degree of affection towards the target language, country and people), and attitudes towards learning the target language (e.g. subjective evaluations about learning the target language) (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011; Gardner, 1985, 2010, 2019).

Motivation is conceptualised in a variety of ways under different theoretical frameworks, such as the socio-educational model (Gardner, 1985, 2010, 2019) and the self-determination theory (Noels, 2009; Noels et al., 1999, 2000). The socio-educational model takes a macro perspective to examine multifarious sociocultural dimensions, including language communities, language globalisation and multiculturalism (Ushioda, 2019), and it remains the theoretical cornerstone of second language (L2) motivation research. The self-determination theory posits that learners' motivation develops through the trajectory of amotivation, extrinsic motivation and intrinsic motivation (Noels, 2009; Noels et al., 2000). Extrinsic motivation drives people to learn through external rewards (e.g. good grades and praise from others), while intrinsic motivation concerns the inherent joy and satisfaction that comes from the learning process itself (e.g. through positive classroom experiences, engaging tasks and activities, captivating materials and positive connections with teachers) (Nikolov, 2002; Noels, 2009). Other theories offering insights into motivation include the person-in-context relational theory (Ushioda, 2009), the L2 Motivational Self System (Dörnyei, 2009) and the complex dynamic systems (Ushioda, 2019). At its core, motivation is considered a changeable behavioural and psychological phenomenon influenced by a variety of factors (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011). This study is mainly informed by the socio-educational model as it is particularly relevant to our need of addressing the complex nature of motivation by synthesising contextual factors and learners' individual differences.

2.2 Contextual and individual factors influencing FL attitudes and motivation

In recent decades, a consensus has gradually been reached that young learners' FL or L2 learning in both instructional and naturalistic settings is influenced by a complex combination of contextual and individual factors (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011; Gardner, 2019; Ushioda, 2019; Van Mensel & Deconinck, 2019). Mihaljević Djigunović and Nikolov (2019) presented a comprehensive framework for understanding and researching young learners' FL motivation based on extensive research spanning decades. This framework focuses on the developmental stages of young learners, the roles of key influencers – such as teachers, parents and peers – and the significance of classroom tasks. Young learners' FL learning journey is delineated into three distinct stages, each characterised by specific motivational dynamics: the initial stage (ages 6–8), where playful activities and the teacher's role are more influential; the middle stage (ages 9–11), where socialisation, assessment and peers begin to play a more significant role and tasks become more structured; and the final stage (12–14), which is marked by a shift towards peer influence and a more pronounced focus on real-world language use and assessment. Throughout these stages, SES and the broader social context exert an indirect but impactful influence on motivation.

Our study aims at investigating the influence of parental factors, age and exposure on young learners' FL learning attitudes and motivation. Parental influence can be further specified in three dimensions: SES (family income and parents' educational level), parental behaviours (e.g. their involvement in their children's L2 learning activities and strategies), and parental beliefs (e.g. parents' values of L2 learning and expectations of their children's L2 achievement) (Wigfield et al., 2006).

In a series of studies, Butler and her colleagues (Butler, 2014, 2015b, 2017; Butler & Le, 2018) examined the role of parental factors, particularly SES and parental beliefs and behaviours, in young learners' English learning and the development of their FL attitudes and motivation in the context of

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mainland China. After surveying 572 primary and secondary school students (4th, 6th and 8th grades) and their parents, and interviewing 96 students by means of focus groups, Butler (2015b) found that young learners' FL motivation varies across grade levels and is closely associated with their parents' SES. In a subsequent three-year longitudinal study, Butler (2017) examined the developmental changes of young learners' English learning motivation in a city on the east coast of China. Using a mixed methods approach (surveys completed by students and their parents, interviews with teachers, focus groups with students and classroom observation), Butler followed 201 primary school students from 4th to 6th grade and examined their intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, self-concept and anxiety, and explored the influence of SES (operationalised as the mother's educational level) on these motivational variables at both group level and individual level. All four motivational variables changed over time with different patterns, and significant differences were observed in the changing pathways among young FL learners from different SES backgrounds. Specifically, FL learners from high SES families generally had higher levels of intrinsic motivation and self-confidence, and lower levels of anxiety.

Butler's (2015b, 2017; Butler & Le, 2018) studies on the motivation of FL learners mainly focused on the age group of 9 years and above. By contrast, young learners under the age of 9, and particularly those under the age of 6, are rarely studied. The present study aims to fill this research gap by investigating attitudes and motivation of young learners from 3 to 12 years old, as reported by their parents. Unlike Butler's studies that were conducted in a specific geographic area, this study recruited participants (parents of young EFL learners) from all over mainland China. Furthermore, despite government advocacy for family education, few empirical studies have examined the influence of young learners' English learning activities at home and their parents' involvement in such activities. To the best of our knowledge, the present study is one of the first to explore this area.

In a different context, Turkey, Alawawda and Razi (2020) took parental involvement in young learners' English learning into consideration. The authors surveyed 154 parents of 1st-grade primary students using hard-copy questionnaires with Likert scale questions adapted from Gardner's Attitude/Motivation Test Battery (AMTB)[2], along with other questions about parents' demographic and sociodemographic information. The results revealed that parental involvement and the amount of FL input in the family did not have a positive influence on young learners' performance in English language at school or their FL motivation. Furthermore, parents' income did not appear to influence the methods they used to intervene in their children's FL learning. However, parents' educational level positively influenced the methods they employed, which in turn moderated their children's FL outcomes and motivation.

Regarding age at the onset of English language learning (hereinafter age of onset), it is generally believed that an earlier age of onset can produce a positive effect on learners' FL attitudes and motivation (Mihaljević Djigunović & Nikolov, 2019; Pfenninger & Singleton, 2017). However, only a limited number of studies addressed this variable in relation to young learners' FL motivation, and the results have been mixed. For example, in a longitudinal study, Pfenninger and Singleton (2016) surveyed 200 German-speaking learners of English in Switzerland and found that age of onset was a strong predictor of FL motivation and success at an earlier stage, but the correlation declined over time and became rather weak by the end of school age. In a more recent study, Chen et al. (2020) investigated the relationship between early English learning experiences and primary school children's English learning outcomes and attitudes toward English learning in China. The results showed that students who started to learn English before school age were likely to achieve higher grades in the FL, and their attitudes towards English learning were slightly more positive than those of students with no prior school learning experience of English.

In 2006, Tragant carefully controlled the age of onset (8, 11 and 18 years old) and total hours of English instruction (200, 416, 726 and 800 hours) and examined their impact on young learners' FL motivation. Contrary to common beliefs, FL learners with an earlier age of onset were found to have lower levels of motivation (Tragant, 2006). Muñoz's (2014) qualitative analysis further revealed that, in addition to age of onset, language contact also affected L2 learners' outcomes.

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Evidence from Tragant (2006) and Muñoz (2014) leads us to reconsider the relationship between age of onset, amount of exposure to the FL and young learners' FL attitudes and motivation. It is possible that an early age of onset needs to be accompanied by a sufficient amount of exposure – and eventually intense exposure – to generate a positive impact on L2 learning outcomes and motivation (Muñoz, 2014, 2018).

A significant challenge in researching young learners' FL attitudes and motivation is the assessment of these constructs owing to their subjective nature and young learners' developing cognitive ability. This study adopts a unique lens by regarding parents as 'proxies' to understand very young learners' attitudes and motivations towards EFL learning. Parents are often the first to notice and interpret their children's affective cues and behaviours related to language learning, given their unique position and the extensive time they spend interacting with them (De Houwer, 1999; Madigan et al., 2019). They are likely to discern subtle shifts in attitudes and motivation, which may not be easily captured through direct assessment or self-reports. Parents can identify their children's language preferences, efforts in learning activities and emotional responses to language use, particularly in the context of China where parents are closely involved in their children's education (Gao, 2012). This ability is attributed to the unique 'parents–child unit' (De Houwer, 1999), the continuity of interactions and the comprehensive exposure to the child's daily routines and learning environments, which educators or researchers may not fully observe. It is therefore reasonable to believe that parental reports can add valuable insights into young learners' FL learning motivation and attitudes.

In light of the above considerations, this study addressed the following research questions:

1. To what extent do parental factors relate to young Chinese learners' attitudes and motivation towards EFL, as perceived and reported by their parents?
2. What factors do Chinese parents believe contribute to the variation of young learners' EFL attitudes and motivation?
3. What dynamic features do Chinese parents perceive in young learners' EFL attitudes and motivation?
4. What is the role of family education, school teaching and extracurricular training in young Chinese learners' EFL learning after the introduction of the 'Double Reduction' policy, according to their parents' opinion?

3. Method

3.1 Participants

Participants were recruited via personal contacts, social media platforms and snowballing sampling. A total of 578 questionnaires were returned, but 57 were invalid[3] and were excluded from the analysis. Therefore, the final sample was comprised of 521 parents, 208 (39.92%) fathers and 313 (60.08%) mothers, from 23 different provinces of China, four municipalities directly under the central government and four autonomous regions of mainland China, with only one autonomous region (Tibet) not reached. Participants' children were between 3 and 12 years old ($M = 7.25$, $SD = 2.61$) and had already started learning English.

Among 74 participants who provided their contact details at the end of the questionnaire survey, eight were selected to participate voluntarily in a one-to-one interview with the first researcher. When selecting these participants, their profile was taken into account (demographic region, SES, language proficiency, degree of involvement in their children's English learning activities at home, their children's age, age of onset and level of motivation; see Table 1). The anonymity of the interviewed parents was preserved through codes, which were composed using the date and the order of the interview on that day, as denoted by sequential letters. Parents 0709B and 0719A, who each have two children, primarily shared information concerning their first child. The parents' EFL language proficiency was categorised into six levels, corresponding to the outcomes of standardised tests they undertook (see Part III of the questionnaire in the supplementary material).

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3.2 Instruments

This study adopted a mixed methods approach to examine young Chinese learners' attitudes and motivation towards EFL through their parents' perspectives. The quantitative component, based on the use of a questionnaire survey that was completed by those parents, allowed us to measure the constructs of integrativeness, attitudes toward the learning situation, motivation, anxiety and instrumentality through adapted scales across a large sample. It also enabled us to conduct statistical analysis that helped to identify relationships and predictive effects among family, individual factors and variables related to the parents' reported attitudes and motivation of young EFL learners. The qualitative component, corresponding to semi-structured interviews with parents, sought to provide further insights into the nuances and complexities of individual experiences and the dynamics of young learners' attitudes and motivation through their parents' lens, offering a depth and a context that quantitative methods alone cannot provide (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011).

3.2.1 Questionnaire survey

The questionnaire included three parts. The first part asked the participants questions about their children's chronological age, age of onset, learning experiences in online and in-person training courses, English learning activities at home, and parental involvement and encouragement. In the second part, 7-point Likert scale questions were adapted from Gardner's mini AMTB, a simplified version of the AMTB (Tennant & Gardner, 2004). The questions were slightly modified since our purpose was to ask parents – rather than the FL learners themselves – to rate their children's level of attitudes and motivation in learning EFL. We used 11 items to assess learners' integrativeness, attitudes toward the learning situation, motivation, anxiety and instrumentality (Tennant & Gardner, 2004). In the third and final part of the questionnaire, data about Chinese parents' demographic information, income, educational level and language background were collected.

A pilot study was conducted in two sessions with a total of seven participants. Three participants took the think-aloud interviews on Tencent Meeting, during which they read the questionnaire aloud and articulated their thoughts. The remaining four participants completed the questionnaire twice with an interval of two days, and Pearson product-moment correlation of their scores in the first and second instance reached a value of 0.865, which can be considered as high (Vogt & Johnson, 2016). Upon completing the questionnaire for the second time, the four participants were invited to take a stimulated recall to reflect on their inconsistent answers and the possible causes in retrospect. Based on their responses, some modifications were made to the wording and structure of the questionnaire. The questionnaire used to collect the data for this study is included in the supplementary material.

3.2.2 Measurement of FL attitudes and motivation

Four out of the five attitudinal and motivational variables were measured by multiple questions, with only one variable – instrumentality – measured by a single question. Despite the high level of reliability and validity of the mini AMTB (Bernaus & Gardner, 2008; Masgoret et al., 2001), this study further assessed the internal consistency of the adapted version using Cronbach's alpha. As shown in Table 2, the coefficients were between 0.791 and 0.908, indicating that the instrument we used to test attitudes and motivation of young EFL learners, as reported by their parents, was fairly reliable.

3.2.3 Measurement of sociodemographic and language variables

Contrary to Alawawda and Razi's (2020) and Butler's (2017) studies that only used the mother's educational level as an indicator of SES, this study considered the income and the educational level of both parents. We ensured a significant diversity of SES by recruiting participants from both rural and urban areas across mainland China. Parental involvement was calculated by adding the scores on 5-point Likert-type scale questions related to parents' participation in their children's English learning activities at home. Parental encouragement was measured using two 5-point scale questions concerning their beliefs about the importance of English learning and their levels of encouragement towards

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Table 1. Information of interviewees and their children

Code	Parent	Age (Child)	Age of onset (Child)	Region	Education level	Family income (RMB)	FL proficiency
0709A	Father	7	5	Jiangxi	High School	10–20W	Beginner
0709B	Mother	9	2.5	Shanghai	Postgraduate	50W+	Advanced
0709C	Father	9.5	6	Guizhou	Undergraduate	50W+	Elementary
0710A	Mother	11	5	Guangxi	Postgraduate	10–20W	Upper-intermediate
0711A	Mother	5	0	Guangdong	Undergraduate	50W+	Advanced
0711B	Father	10	4	Liaoning	Undergraduate	20–50W	Beginner
0711C	Mother	5.5	4	Qinghai	Postgraduate	10–20W	Elementary
0719A	Mother	8	4	Tianjin	Undergraduate	50W+	Pre-intermediate

Table 2. Summary of reliability coefficients for attitudinal and motivational variables

Variables and corresponding items	No. of items	Cronbach's α
Integrativeness Integrative orientation Attitudes towards the language community Interest in foreign languages	3	0.791
Attitudes towards the learning situation Attitudes towards the teacher Attitudes towards the course	2	0.869
Motivation Desire to learn the language Attitudes towards learning the language Motivational intensity	3	0.908
Anxiety Anxiety of speaking English outside of class Anxiety of speaking English in the class	2	0.846
Instrumentality Instrumental orientation to language study	1	–

their children's English learning. Parents' English proficiency was assessed based on their scores on standardised English tests, and their daily use of English was represented by the frequency of using English on a daily basis. Intensity of exposure denoted the intensity of extracurricular training[4] and family input and was calculated by dividing the sum of total hours of extracurricular training and family input by the difference between children's chronological age and age of onset. The reason why we used this formula is that many children in China do not learn English consecutively; therefore, it may be speculative to equate the intensity of exposure with the average hours of learning per week. For example, if a 7-year-old child started learning English at the age of 3, with yearly learning hours of 100 and a cumulative length of learning of 2.5 years, then the intensity of exposure is 100*2.5/(7–3) = 62.5. Table 3 summarises how the above variables were operationalised in our study.

3.2.4 Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews with eight parents were conducted to examine the dynamics of young learners' EFL attitudes and motivation from their parents' perspectives. These parents were asked to describe their children's English learning experiences, explain in detail their involvement in their children's learning activities in the family environment, share their beliefs about early English education and related policies, and elaborate on their evaluation of their children's EFL attitudes and motivation and the way attitudes and motivation develop. Each interview lasted from approximately 30 minutes to one hour, and the participants were given enough freedom to talk with minimum interruption.

All the interviews were conducted in Mandarin and recorded on Tencent Meeting, a widely used high-definition video conferencing tool in China. The automatic transcripts were then manually checked for accuracy. Data transcription used standard orthography and did not take imperfect speech (e.g. hesitations, pauses, fillers) or non-verbal features (e.g. gestures, facial expressions) into account. These data were analysed using NVivo 12 (QSR International, 2017), and thematic analysis was conducted following Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021). Combining the deductive and inductive coding approaches, and in line with the research questions and previous evidence, the analysis started with three predetermined themes – namely, 'age factors', 'changes in attitudes and motivation' and 'roles of family, school and extracurricular training' – leading to the identification of ten further sub-themes.

3.3 Ethical issues

Participation in this study was voluntary without compensation. All the participants were provided with an information sheet detailing the purpose of the study, data use and confidentiality, as well

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Table 3. Operationalisation of the variables of the study

Variables	Indicators
SES	Family income and parents' educational level.
Parental involvement	Parents' involvement in their children's reading, listening, video watching and English skills practicing activities at home.
Parental encouragement	Parents' beliefs about the importance of English and parents' level of encouragement of their children's English learning, both assessed with 5-point Likert scales.
Parents' English proficiency	Parents' English proficiency based on standardised English tests such as the College English Test (CET)[5], the Test for English Majors (TEM)[6], the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) and the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) exams.
Parents' daily use of English	Frequency of using English on a daily basis either at home or in the workplace, measured using a single choice question with 5 options (1 = never, 2 = rarely, 3 = sometimes, 4 = often, 5 = frequently).
Age of onset	The age that young learners started to learn English.
Intensity of exposure	(Total hours of extracurricular training + Total hours of family input)/(Current age−Age of onset) Extracurricular training includes online classes, online Artificial Intelligence (AI) courses and in-person classes offered by out-of-school training centres. Family input includes reading, listening to audios, watching videos, practicing language skills and other activities at home.

as the participants' right to freely withdraw from the study without any consequence. This information sheet was attached to the online questionnaire. After reading it, participants had the option to click on the 'Next' button by which they granted consent to participate in the study. Some of the questions included in the online questionnaire involved sensitive personal information, such as demographic region, SES and educational level. To minimise negative feelings, these questions were designed to include multiple interval choices rather than gap filling. Prior to the start of the interviews, participants again received a consent form by email and were asked to sign and return it. At the beginning of the interview, they were all once again verbally informed that the interview would be recorded, and each participant was assigned a unique identification number.

4. Results

4.1 Profile of parents and their children

The majority of families had an annual income between 50,000 and 500,000 Yuan (around £6,000 to £60,000). The highest level of education for most parents (67.8% of participants and 65.5% of participants' spouses) was undergraduate. Most participants had an English proficiency at the beginner level (27.8%) or had passed CET4 (32.8%) or CET6 (23.2%) (College English Test). Regarding the use of English, only 6.1% of the parents reported using it 'frequently' at work, while 31.5% never used English at work. Children's age of onset ranged from 0 to 10 years old ($M = 4.41$, $SD = 1.75$). The maximum number of hours these children spent on online training per week was 7 ($M = 1.1$, $SD = 1.45$), and the maximum number of hours they spent on in-person training per week was 6 ($M = 1.43$, $SD = 1.49$), but they received considerably higher English input from their parents, with a maximum of 35 hours per week ($M = 12.12$, $SD = 6.48$).

4.2 Predictors of young learners' EFL attitudes and motivation based on their parents' reports

Pearson-product moment correlations were run to assess the relationships between parent-perceived attitudinal and motivational variables and parental factors (see Table 4). Owing to the multiple correlations, Bonferroni correction was applied and α was set at 0.002. SES only correlated with

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anxiety ($r = -0.140$, $p = 0.001$). Parental involvement, parental encouragement and parents' daily use of English were positively associated with young learners' motivation and attitudes towards EFL reported by their parents ($ps < 0.002$), except for anxiety. Parents' English proficiency was negatively correlated with anxiety at $p = 0.008$.

Multiple linear regression analyses were also conducted to examine the contribution of age of onset, intensity of exposure, and parental factors to young learners' EFL attitudes and motivation, as reported by their parents. Multicollinearity was not an issue as the variance inflation factor (VIF) coefficients in the final models were below 2.0. As shown in Table 5, the models predicted a significant amount of the change in integrativeness ($F(7, 513) = 31.678$, $p < 0.001$, $R^2 = 0.302$), attitudes towards the learning situation ($F(7, 513) = 64.266$, $p < 0.001$, $R^2 = 0.467$), motivation ($F(7, 513) = 52.484$, $p < 0.001$, $R^2 = 0.417$) and instrumentality ($F(7, 513) = 36.918$, $p < 0.001$, $R^2 = 0.335$). Regarding anxiety, the only statistically significant predictor was SES ($F(7, 513) = 2.839$, $p < 0.001$, $R^2 = 0.037$).

Parental involvement and parental encouragement significantly contributed to all the parent-perceived motivational and attitudinal variables, except for anxiety. Parents' daily use of English contributed to integrativeness, motivation and instrumentality. Intensity of exposure to English was a strong predictor of attitudes towards the learning situation and motivation. Lastly, SES only predicted anxiety and instrumentality.

4.3 Parents' opinion on the dynamic features of their children's EFL attitudes and motivation

The eight interviewed parents appeared to consensually acknowledge the role of age of onset and to strive to provide their children with a supportive environment to learn English at home or enroll them in extracurricular training courses from an early age. Two parents (0711A and 0711C) expressed that an English-speaking environment should be created as early as possible, ideally right after the child's birth, to make children feel that speaking English is as normal as speaking Chinese and to prepare them for English education in primary school: 'If they [children] start late, they will resist it because English is new and difficult compared to their native language, so they tend to choose the easier one and avoid the more difficult one' (0711A).

Four parents (0709A, 0709C, 0710A, 0711B) noted that an English-rich environment enhances receptivity, facilitating more natural English learning. Of interest, parent 0709B used the expression

Table 4. Correlations between parental factors and parents' reported EFL attitudes and motivation

		INT	Attitudes	MOT	ANX	INSTR
SES	Pearson *r*	0.059	0.035	0.035	−0.140**	−0.050
	p	0.180	0.423	0.431	0.001	0.258
Parental involvement	Pearson *r*	0.341***	0.316***	0.357***	0.094*	0.228***
	p	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	0.032	<0.001
Parental encouragement	Pearson *r*	0.443***	0.632***	0.561***	−0.013	0.531***
	p	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	0.774	<0.001
Parents' English proficiency	Pearson *r*	0.101*	0.043	0.022	−0.116**	−0.020
	p	0.021	0.326	0.621	0.008	0.656
Parents' daily use of English	Pearson *r*	0.233***	0.151**	0.205***	−0.013	0.153***
	p	<0.001	0.001	<0.001	0.769	<0.001

Note: *$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$. INT: Integrativeness. Attitudes: Attitudes towards the learning situation. MOT: Motivation. ANX: Anxiety. INST: Instrumentality.

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Table 5. Factors predicting parents' reported EFL attitudes and motivation

Variables	Coefficient	Age of onset	Intensity of exposure	SES	Parental involvement	Parental encouragement	Parents' English proficiency	Parents' daily use of English
Integrativeness	Model Summary		$F(7, 513) = 31.678$ $p < 0.001$ $R^2 = 0.302$ Adjusted $R^2 = 0.292$					
	Beta	−0.084	0.087	−0.088	0.210	0.391	0.020	0.113
	t	−2.054	2.024	−1.812	4.740	1.422	0.416	2.594
	p	0.041*	0.043*	0.071	<0.001***	<0.001***	0.677	0.010*
Attitudes	Model Summary		$F(7, 513) = 64.266$ $p < 0.001$ $R^2 = 0.467$ Adjusted $R^2 = 0.460$					
	Beta	−0.032	0.117	−0.04	0.176	0.599	−0.016	0.013
	t	−0.899	3.110	−0.942	4.561	18.271	−0.379	0.337
	p	0.369	0.002**	0.347	<0.001***	<0.001***	0.705	0.736
Motivation	Model Summary		$F(7, 513) = 52.484$ $p < 0.001$ $R^2 = 0.417$ Adjusted $R^2 = 0.409$					
	Beta	−0.025	0.117	−0.039	0.217	0.513	−0.070	0.092
	t	−0.685	2.983	−0.870	5.381	14.985	−1.588	2.325
	p	0.493	0.003**	0.385	<0.001***	<0.001***	0.113	0.020*
Anxiety	Model Summary		$F(7, 513) = 2.839$ $p = 0.007$ $R^2 = 0.037$ Adjusted $R^2 = 0.024$					
	Beta	−0.025	0.005	−0.135	0.107	−0.021	−0.075	0.045
	t	−0.515	0.095	−2.365	2.065	−0.476	−1.326	0.880
	p	0.607	0.925	0.018*	0.039*	0.634	0.186	0.379
Instrumentality	Model Summary		$F(7, 513) = 36.918$ $p < 0.001$ $R^2 = 0.335$ Adjusted $R^2 = 0.326$					
	Beta	−0.039	0.088	−0.129	0.108	0.504	−0.047	0.101
	t	−0.982	2.092	−2.727	2.500	13.774	−0.991	2.373
	p	0.327	0.037*	0.007**	0.013*	<0.001***	0.322	0.018*

Note: *$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$.

'sensitive period' to describe the importance of starting to learn English early in life. Parent 0719A observed that her younger son, who began learning English when he was 18 months old, acquired English more rapidly and spoke more fluidly compared with her older son, who started to learn English at the age of 4.

The parents also reported that their children did not show apparent integrativeness. In other words, they had no particular interest in foreign cultures, although their curiosity for these cultures began to develop once they reached school age; for example, via the school curriculum, as parent 0709B noted. Likewise, they were not inclined to study or live in a foreign country, and their parents admitted to being reserved about sending them to study abroad or immigrating to English-speaking countries. In fact, the chances for the children to make contact with people from other cultures appeared to strongly depend on geographical regions. Parent 0709A said that it was quite rare to meet foreigners in some inland cities (e.g. Jiangxi), while parent 0709B mentioned that it was rather common to experience foreign cultures in some coastal or developed cities (e.g. Shanghai): 'As part of the curriculum, they [children] learn cultures of different countries, like the balloons in Turkey and the Eiffel Tower in France. My kid once mentioned that she wanted to see them in person' (0709B).

According to the parents, their children's attitudes towards the learning situation (English teachers and English classes) – in both public schools and private training centres – changed over time depending on the teachers' teaching methods and competences, and the curriculum design (including course content). Parent 0710A said that her child's attitudes towards English courses depended very much on the teacher, especially in the earlier years of school. Furthermore, effective teaching appeared to positively influence children's classroom enjoyment and their success in learning English. Parent 0711B reported that his child's interest in English learning declined after he entered primary school because he did not like how the teacher taught (using vocabulary and grammar drills). According to the results of the thematic analysis, young Chinese children tend to like EFL teachers whose lessons are more engaging, and they prefer meaning-based or game-based courses to those that focus on language structures. Parent 0709B retold her child's description as follows:

> They had a 'special 15 minutes' in their English class, where the English teacher asked them to play all kinds of games, like Charades and word relay. My child often brought home some flashcards and other stuff. She likes her English teacher, and she often told me excitedly that she would have an English class that day when I sent her to school. (0709B)

Thematic analysis of the participants' interviews also revealed that children's motivation to learn English was dependent on several factors such as parents' attitudes, teachers' feedback and changes in courses or environments. Parent 0709B linked her first child's dwindling interest in English to her own reduced involvement after the birth of her second child. Parent 0709C attributed his child's diminished diligence to lower expectations set during the child's shift to online learning amid the Covid-19 pandemic. Parents 0710A, 0711B and 0719A noted that their children began to value teacher feedback more upon entering primary school: 'The source of his motivation is the praise from us [parents] and teachers. After being affirmed by the adults around, he is motivated to learn and will learn better' (0710A).

Parent 0711A mentioned that her child's interest in learning English decreased dramatically after the age of 3 as the family moved from a multilingual environment (Hong Kong) to Zhuhai, a city where everyone in the family and the child's immediate environment spoke Chinese. Parent 0709B said that her child's desire to learn English declined since the 3rd grade in primary school because the teaching time for each class became longer, affecting the children's ability to concentrate. In turn, parent 0711C cited his nephew as an example of how difficult it was to improve the desire to learn of a child who was not motivated in the first place.

Furthermore, the interviewed parents noted variations in their children's anxiety about speaking English in and outside the English classroom. Some children, like those of parents 0709A and 0709B, enjoyed classroom interactions in English and actively participated in classroom discussions,

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with one child even praising English as a 'beautiful language'. 'He [my child] answers questions [in class] quite proactively and he loves it. He sometimes shares that kind of things with me when I send him to school' (0709A).

Others, like the children of parents 0710A and 0711B, had neutral attitudes toward speaking English in class. One parent (0709C) mentioned that his child viewed English-speaking activities as quite a boring routine.

Additionally, parents reported fluctuations in their children's anxiety in speaking English. Sometimes their children spoke English happily and naturally, but other times they worried about speaking and fled from any situation where they had to speak English. In these cases, encouragement from parents had little effect. It is worth noting that younger children were perceived by their parents as being less anxious about speaking English. Although at a certain point of learning (by the end of the first year of primary school as mentioned by parent 0719A or the second year as reported by parent 0709C) they became reluctant to speak, their confidence improved as they continued learning English, suggesting that familiarity and ongoing exposure to the language reduced their anxiety.

It is also important to note that seven out of eight interviewed parents reported that their children never thought about future job opportunities while they were learning English, although parents enthusiastically encouraged them to learn English for instrumental reasons. Parent 0710A was the only interviewee who mentioned that her 11-year-old child recognised the importance of learning English for finding a good job, and she believed it was the result of frequent discussions of parents and other adults around him. According to the parents, younger children tended to learn English out of interest, while older children tended to learn for instrumental reasons; for example, to get good grades in exams or to be praised by their English teachers.

4.4 Parents' opinion on the role of family education, school teaching and private language training

All eight parents who were interviewed acknowledged the importance of family education in their children's EFL learning, but they held different opinions about its specific role. Parent 0709B argued that the role of family education became much more important after the implementation of the 'Double Reduction' policy, as the training centre her child previously attended was forced to shut down. They found an online platform with paid recorded learning materials instead, but they had to spend more time monitoring and assisting their child's English studies. Parent 0711B estimated that family education contributes about 30% to skill improvement but significantly more to fostering children's interest and motivation to learn English. Parent 0711A considered family education as being paramount in motivating English learning, emphasising the efficacy of an immersive home environment. Parent 0711C believed that family education is crucial in the early stages of English learning but should only play a supporting role after the children enter primary school. Similarly, parents 0709A and 0710A agreed that although family education is important, it should play a secondary role and not contradict school education.

Parent 0709C mentioned that parents are familiar with their children's learning habits and characteristics, therefore, family education can be more individualised and 'to the point', but it is also limited because many parents do not have enough time or energy, or a good command of English skills, to tutor their children. Parent 0709A shared similar concerns that parents may not be as professional as teachers in public schools or private training centres. Parent 0711B further argued that while educational background, language skills and a good salary may help, parents' attitudes and involvement matter more. Parent 0719A held that most parents in China are likely to be at the two ends of a spectrum. While some parents place great importance on their children's English education and are never satisfied with their investment, others are not aware of the importance of learning English. The gap between these two groups of parents continues to widen and can be passed down from generation to generation.

Regarding school education, the parents who were interviewed believed that teachers in public schools in China are very authoritative, and that children are willing to follow the teachers'

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instructions, which is an important source of motivation to learn English. However, parents 0709C and 0711B argued that the role of school education is limited as there are only two to three English lessons per week at the primary school stage. Parent 0709B considered the role of school education to be significantly different from that of family education; while family education focuses on cultivating EFL learning interests and improving communicative skills, school education places more emphasis on knowledge aspects, such as EFL grammar and vocabulary. Parent 0719A added that the most important role of school education is probably to make parents aware that learning English is imperative, since English has turned out to be an indispensable component of the education system in China:

> I think the importance of school mainly lies in making it clear to parents that it is necessary to have our children learn English because they must pass English exams. However, for the whole society, family education is the cornerstone, and it decides the children's overall English proficiency. (0719A)

Lastly, while all interviewees mentioned that the policy of 'Double Reduction' cut down their children's extracurricular training time, opinions on its impact and the significance of such training varied among them. Parent 0710A questioned the value of private centres owing to high costs and unsatisfactory outcomes and believed that the policy can relieve the economic pressure put on parents. Parent 0719A, who primarily utilised a mobile app and graded reading materials to assist her two children's English learning, found the issue of extracurricular training not relevant to her. Parents 0711A and 0711C felt the role of extracurricular training and the impact of the policy were both minimal, attributing this to the limited tutoring time. By contrast, parents 0709B and 0711B believed the policy significantly affected their children's English learning, and parent 0709C considered such training courses essential for keeping pace with school education.

5. Discussion

5.1 Relationship between parental factors and young learners' EFL attitudes and motivation

This study investigated young Chinese EFL learners' attitudes and motivation, as reported by their parents. The first research question concerned the associations between parental factors and young learners' EFL attitudes and motivation, as perceived by their parents. Overall, parental factors – especially parental involvement and encouragement, and parents' daily use of English – were significantly linked to various aspects of parents' perceived EFL attitudes and motivation of young Chinese learners, supporting previous evidence (Alawawda & Razi, 2020; Van Mensel & Deconinck, 2019).

According to parents' perceptions, SES was negatively associated with their children's levels of anxiety and instrumentality, but this correlation did not extend to other attitudinal or motivational variables. This finding differs from Butler's (2015b, 2017) studies with 4th-grade, 5th-grade and 6th-grade primary school children, which revealed a substantial yet different role of SES in EFL motivation across different grade levels. These discrepancies may be attributable to the different theoretical frameworks and the age difference in the target populations between Butler's (2015b, 2017) studies and our study, as well as to the considerable shifts in the English learning landscape in China, especially following the enactment of the 'Double Reduction' policy. The Chinese government introduced this policy with the intention of alleviating academic pressure on students and reducing the reliance on costly after-school tutoring services, aiming to create a more equitable educational environment (Wang et al., 2022). As Qian et al. (2023) noted, private tutoring resources were distributed unequally among Chinese families of different socioeconomic backgrounds, and this was a central challenge to educational equality. With the introduction of the 'Double Reduction' policy, a significant number of private English training centres were shut down (Ministry of Education, 2021), and English education was centred in public schools, where learners of all SES levels follow the same curriculum under the 'New Curriculum Standard' (Ministry of Education, 2022b). Additionally, recent years have seen an increase in accessible

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and low-cost online English learning tools (e.g. mobile applications and social media platforms) available to young learners, which may further narrow the gap between higher and lower SES families in terms of educational resources. It is reasonable that this reduced dependence on SES lowered its impact on young learners' EFL learning.

Our results further suggested that young learners from higher SES families were not only less anxious about speaking English but also less likely to learn English for instrumental purposes. This could be related to the fact that Chinese parents tend to 'control' their children's learning activities with utilitarian goals in mind (Butler, 2015b, 2017). Parents with higher SES tend to adjust their controlling behaviour more elastically, so such behaviours are not necessarily harmful. Parents with lower SES often indulge their controlling behaviours and expect their children to change their fate through education, so that their children are more likely to feel anxious and learn English for more practical purposes.

5.2 Predictors of young learners' EFL attitudes and motivation

The second research question aimed to identify predictive factors that could explain the variation in EFL attitudes and motivation of young Chinese learners, as reported by their parents. According to our results, parents' involvement and encouragement proved to be strong predictors (see Butler, 2017, and Mihaljević Djigunović & Nikolov, 2019, for similar results). In addition, parents' daily use of English – but not parents' English proficiency – predicted young learners' integrativeness, motivation and instrumentality. It is possible that parents who use English frequently in their daily lives value the importance of creating a good English learning environment at home for their children, which in turn may have a positive effect on their children's EFL attitudes and motivation. This could imply that parents' daily use of English, rather than their English test scores, may better reflect the English environment in the family and, therefore, this variable should be taken into account in future studies on EFL attitudes and motivation.

Additionally, intensity of exposure contributed to all the parent-perceived attitudinal and motivational variables, except for anxiety. As intensity of exposure to EFL is often related to positive outcomes or higher EFL proficiency (Unsworth et al., 2015; Wilde et al., 2021), young learners who are exposed to greater amounts of English input may receive more positive feedback or may have higher levels of confidence when communicating in English, leading them to develop more positive attitudes towards the learning situation (teachers and courses) and a stronger motivation to perform better (Huang et al., 2020). Altogether, our results suggest that despite the widespread belief that 'the earlier the better', intensive exposure to EFL might be more effective in helping young learners develop positive attitudes and motivation towards EFL.

Notably, young learners' anxiety when speaking English in and out of English classes is worth further exploration. Other predictors of anxiety may include teaching methodologies, mediums of instruction, and individual differences variables (e.g. age and gender). Identifying potential factors that contribute to explain the change in young learners' anxiety and how it interacts with motivation is another promising line of future research.

5.3 Dynamics in young learners' EFL attitudes and motivation

The third research question referred to the dynamic features of young Chinese learners' EFL attitudes and motivation, as perceived by their parents. First, it is important to clarify that while Mihaljević Djigunović and Nikolov's (2019) framework primarily considers learners beginning formal language education around the ages of 6–7 years, the introduction to English language in China occurs considerably earlier, even before the age of 3 (Yu, 2018), and this early age of onset is not extensively covered by the above framework. Additionally, we focused on children under the age of 12, with the semi-structured interviews involving parents whose children were up to 11 years old. Consequently, our study did not extend to the third stage outlined in the framework of Mihaljević Djigunović and

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Nikolov (2019), and we did not examine the role of peers, which means we were unable to observe the transition in motivational influences from teachers to peers.

Moving to our findings, before reaching the first stage outlined in Mihaljević Djigunović and Nikolov's (2019) framework, young Chinese learners' early exposure to English is mainly driven by family environments and parental involvement, assisted by external tutoring. The reported strategies employed by the parents in our study, such as creating English-rich environments and engaging in English-focused activities, demonstrate a proactive approach to language learning. Following this, there is an observed transition from parental impact to teachers' influence as children reach the school age, which can be seen as an extension of the framework. Accordingly, young learners' EFL attitudes and motivation fluctuated during the aforementioned transition. As reported by our participants, even though integrativeness is not a major source of EFL motivation – a view that aligns with Kim's (2011) findings – young ELF learners in China begin to show interest in foreign cultures as they are exposed to foreign literacies as part of their curriculum. This is also consistent with the results of the regression analysis, revealing that intensity of exposure to English positively predicted young learners' integrativeness. Contrary to what is outlined in Mihaljević Djigunović and Nikolov's (2019) framework, assessment activities in the Chinese context begin earlier, with children undergoing informal quizzes or formal exams even at lower primary levels (Zhu & Chang, 2019), and that explains why parents perceived increased anxiety in their children regarding EFL learning as early as in the transition period (Mahmud, 2016). However, their children's anxiety was relieved as they became more proficient or accustomed to using English over time.

Consistent with the framework's identification of the teacher's pivotal role in the initial learning stage, parents in our study reported that young Chinese learners' attitudes towards English were significantly influenced by their teachers and their teachers' teaching methods and styles. Parents reported that engaging teaching methods contributed to positive attitudes in young learners, resonating with the framework's emphasis that the teacher serves as the main motivator and a role model at this developmental stage. However, parents did not report observing an overall decline in the teacher's influence on their children's motivation and attitudes, as is described in the framework of Mihaljević Djigunović and Nikolov (2019). This can be attributed to the nature of our study, which focused on parents' perspectives and did not allow us to observe the nuances of the impact of school teaching. Another plausible explanation is that in the Chinese educational context, the authoritative and central role of the teacher (Yau et al., 2009) may extend beyond the early stages of EFL learning, exerting a significant influence on learners' FL motivation throughout their language learning journey.

It is also worth noting that our findings support the idea that significant fluctuations in the motivation levels of young Chinese EFL learners can be linked to contextual influences, including the incorporation of new subjects, methods of assessment and alterations in instructional techniques (Nikolov, 2016). Other contextual factors, as reported by the parents in our study, included changes in the linguistic environment, the teaching methods and the duration of formal EFL classes.

5.4 The role of family, school and extracurricular training in young learners' EFL attitudes and motivation

The fourth and last research question focused on Chinese parents' opinion about the role of family education, school teaching and extracurricular training in their children's EFL learning, especially after the introduction of the 'Double Reduction' policy. Data from the interviews revealed that parents believed family education is the upmost factor for preschool children's EFL attitudes and motivation, and that school teaching takes the leading role when children reach school age. With the implementation of the 'Family Education Promotion Law' in China and the relatively easier access to online learning resources nowadays (e.g. reading materials, videos and recorded courses), Chinese parents have the means to get involved in their children's English learning activities, which explains the important role that family plays in preschool children's EFL learning. In most regions of China, the teaching of English starts from 1st grade (young learners aged around 6) and only in some less-

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developed regions from 3rd grade (young learners aged around 8) (Cheng, 2011; Qi, 2016). English is stipulated as a compulsory school subject, and parents have little say about how their children are taught or examined; therefore, school teaching overtakes family education as the prior factor of young learners' EFL attitudes and motivation. According to the results of our study, parents' positive encouragement and their active involvement explained a large amount of the variability in young learners' EFL attitudes and motivation, as perceived by their parents, even after the children enrolled in primary school. Therefore, parents' supportive role in school-age children's EFL learning cannot be underestimated.

Moreover, parents believed that extracurricular training has a relevant role to play, but its importance declined after the implementation of the 'Double Reduction' policy. By the end of 2021, the number of companies offering in-person training classes in China had been reduced by 83.8% and the number of companies offering online classes by 84.1% (Ministry of Education, 2021). Moreover, local educational authorities have carried out strict inspections to prevent out-of-school education agencies from offering unauthorised education services, and Chinese training enterprises are not allowed to employ foreign teachers residing outside of China to teach online (China Global Television Network, 2021). The sharp decline in extracurricular training services forced parents to have their children drop out of extracurricular classes and to turn to alternatives, which is often family education. As our results indicate, the importance of extracurricular training for young Chinese learners' EFL learning was undermined with the introduction of the 'Double Reduction' policy.

5.5 The advantages and limitations of using parents as 'proxies'

Our study used parents as 'proxies' to collect information about their children's EFL attitudes and motivation, which has both advantages and limitations. One advantage is that parents can provide valuable insights into their children's behaviours and emotions that may not be easily accessible through directly asking young learners, who might lack the (meta)cognitive and linguistic abilities to self-introspect and articulate their thoughts clearly. Additionally, parents observe their children in various informal contexts, which offers a broader perspective on their day-to-day experiences and reactions. Moreover, parental reports can mitigate the effects of social desirability bias, which may influence children's responses if they feel pressured to answer in a certain way.

However, using parents as 'proxies' poses notable limitations as well. Parents' perceptions can be biased by their own expectations, beliefs and experiences, and reliance on parental interpretation only could obscure the authentic voices of the learners themselves. Furthermore, parents might not always be fully aware of their children's internal states or the classroom dynamics that significantly influence FL motivation and attitudes. We therefore advocate for future studies to combine parents' assessments with learners' self-reports and to use other observational and testing instruments to facilitate data comparison and triangulation.

6. Conclusion

This study explored young learners' EFL attitudes and motivation from their parents' perspectives in the specific context of China, after the 'Double Reduction' policy changed the language education landscape. Building on existing research, which mainly focused on the motivation of school-age learners, this study provides additional insights into the EFL learning scenarios, impacting factors and motivational variations of young Chinese EFL learners before and during their transition into formal school education, as perceived by their parents. The 'Double Reduction' policy aims to promote changes in educational access and equity in China. While the distribution of educational resources has become more equitable, the impact of SES on young Chinese learners' EFL learning appears to remain significant. Higher SES parents may create additional opportunities for their children, contributing to lower anxiety and higher EFL proficiency. Therefore, although the policy may help to reduce SES disparities, the effects of SES are not likely to disappear completely. Our study also raises the need

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to improve the quality of school education, which is the paramount source of English education in the post-'Double Reduction' era.

Supplementary material. The supplementary material for this article can be found at: https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444824000326

Notes

[1] The Family Education Promotion Law was enacted by the Chinese central government in January 2022. It stresses that parents should create a good family educational environment and pursue a scientific way of education with the support of the state, schools and society (Ministry of Education, 2022a).

[2] AMTB is comprised of a set of Likert-type scales and multiple-choice questions that assess the perceptual and emotional variables recognised by the socio-educational model (Gardner, 2004, 2010).

[3] Twenty-five respondents answered, 'No idea at all' to the first screening question ('How well do you know your child's English learning situation?'); 29 answered 'Never learned yet' to the second screening question ('At what age did your child start to learn English?'); and three respondents included contradictory or fallacious answers to some of the questions.

[4] We refer to extracurricular training to describe the nature of courses offered by private language centers in China, commonly known as '培训班' or 'training classes'. This term is widely used in China to denote supplementary educational courses, including language learning. While these classes may utilise authentic materials and age-appropriate tasks, they predominantly focus on language structure and language drills. The primary aim of such training, particularly for school-age children, is to supplement the school curriculum, assisting students in keeping pace with their schoolwork or achieving higher scores in school examinations. In this context, the term 'training' emphasises the structured, often intensive, nature of these courses, which may not always align with the more holistic, immersive approaches typically associated with authentic material exposure and age-appropriate learning activities.

[5] CET (College English Test) is a national EFL test in China that assesses the English proficiency of non-English-major university students. It has two levels, CET4 and CET6, and the test-takers' specific scores are reported.

[6] TEM (Test for English Majors) is a national EFL test in China designed to assess the English proficiency of English-major university students. It has two levels: TEM4 corresponding to an intermediate level and TEM8 denoting an advanced level. The test-takers' specific scores are reported.

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