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# Nativeness versus intelligibility as goal of English pronunciation teaching in China: Changing attitudes in national syllabi and curriculum standards

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## Abstract

Since the 1990s, the emphasis on intelligibility as a goal in pronunciation teaching rather than near-native or nativelike competence has been reinforced by the increasing use of English as a lingua franca. The insight of the intelligibility principle has greatly impressed researchers in China's English education, but has "very limited and weak" impacts on English pronunciation teaching and learning in China. English education in China has been systematically conducted from schools to universities under the direction of national syllabi and curriculum standards issued by the Ministry of Education. Using the documentary research method, this paper, the first try of its kind, takes a historical look at China's national syllabi and curriculum standards for schools issued after 1949, focusing on the conception of the nature and the role of pronunciation and pronunciation teaching, pronunciation goals, teacher's role, as well as requirements or suggestions about what to teach and how to teach. By tracing the process of developments in pronunciation teaching notions and principles that were and/or are officially advocated in China, the paper reveals two important facts. First, the English national syllabi and curriculum standards have encompassed both the nativeness principle and the intelligibility principle, though implicitly giving dominance to the former one, which in part accounts for the favor for the nativeness principle in formal English education, especially in schools, in China. Second, with the notion of English as a lingua franca adopted in the syllabi and curriculum standards, the intelligibility principle has been gaining more and more weight. Consequently, by elaborating that the two principles are by nature not incompatible, it is proposed that the current curriculum standards go further to take balanced attitudes towards the two principles so as to lead Chinese English teachers and students to set more realistic and instrumental-pragmatic pronunciation goals in line with varying English learning purposes. The findings and the proposal could be adopted by teachers and learners so as to change the school reality and may shed light on future relevant revisions of the current national English curriculum standards, teaching material development, teacher training, and pronunciation teaching methodology research.

**Keywords:** Pronunciation goals, Nativeness, Intelligibility, English curriculum standards, Chinese English learners

## Introduction

Since the late twentieth century, it has been repeatedly pointed out that, with the globalization and the development of world commerce, travel and human mobility, non-native English speakers (NNESs) already greatly outnumbered native English speakers (NESs) and that much more verbal exchanges conducted in English happened between NNESs around the world (e.g., Crystal, 1997/2003; Gnutzmann, 2000; Jenkins, 2000, 2015; Jenkins & Leung, 2014; Jarosz, 2019; Kachru, 1992; Liu et al., 2022; Widdowson, 1994; Walker, 2010;). In the meanwhile, the purposes of learning English around the world have been diversified, accompanied by changing attitudes towards different native and non-native varieties, including accents (Seidlhofer, 2001, 2011). Generally, drawing on literature mentioned above, we can identify, in terms of target interlocutors, four kinds of learning purposes of English learners in what Kachru (1985) refers to as Expanding Circle countries where English is learned as a foreign language (EFL). One is to communicate with NESs, with specific needs such as to pursue education, to travel or to do business in an Inner Circle English country, one is to get prepared to finally integrate with the native speaker community of an Inner Circle English country, and another one is to use English as a lingua franca (ELF as used in Jenkins (2007) and Walker (2010)) for communication in international settings, often or mainly with a variety of other NNESs. Of course, it is also possible that many English learners, especially school students, learn the language just as a school subject, to pass various English tests merely for certifications or qualifications to get better employment or further education opportunities in their own country, with no motivation to use the language for real communication (Wu, 2015, pp.50–51) and no target interlocutors to think of at all.

Correspondingly, there have been two kinds of pronunciation goals that the teacher or learner sets in terms of the level of pronunciation proficiency which the learner has to achieve in order to communicate effectively in English, namely the nativeness principle and the intelligibility principle (Levis, 2005).

Around the world, the heated debates about the nativeness vs the intelligibility principle issue are still going on and will undoubtedly continue for some time to come (Hodgetts, 2020; Jarosz, 2019; Pennington & Rogerson-Revell, 2019). They have led to many studies oriented to English pronunciation teaching and learning in particular Expanding Circle countries, such as Turkey (e.g., Kayaoğlu & Çaylak, 2013), Poland (e.g., Janicka et al., 2005; Waniek-Klimczak, et al., 2013), and, of course, China (e.g., Deterding, 2006, 2010; Gao, 2012; Munro & Derwing, 1995; Wang, 2013, 2015; Wang & Jenkins, 2016; Xu, 2002), which boasts the largest body of learners of EFL in the world, with about 200 million to 350 million Chinese are studying or speaking English (Osnos, 2008).

In China, although studies, such as Gao (2012), Wang (2015), and Wang and Jenkins (2016), show that intercultural experience through English as a lingua franca raises challenges among Chinese EFL learners to the exclusive relevance of native English for successful intercultural communication, the nativeness principle is still favored in formal English education in China (Chen & Li, 2017; Gao, 2015; Pei, 2014; Wen, 2012; Zhang, 2014). Many other studies have also shown a widespread aspiration for NES norms-based English pronunciation among Chinese speakers (He & Miller, 2011; Hu, 2005; Kirkpatrick & Evans, 2010; Li, 2009; Wang, 2013; Xu, 2002). Although the insight of the intelligibility principle and the ELF approach have greatly impressed researchers in

China's English education (e.g. Gao, 2015; Pei, 2014; Xu, 2002; Wen, 2012;), they have "very limited and weak" impacts on English pronunciation teaching and learning in China (Gao, 2015; Wen, 2012, p.372).

Some researchers attribute that to the fact that "it is unrealistic to expect practitioners to be cognizant of all new research developments" (Hodgetts, 2020, p.3), for "teachers are not the target readers of academic publications and therefore, they are not acquainted with the latest findings of empirical studies" (Jarosz, 2019, p.1). Some hold that even if teachers are aware of pertinent research, practices that are recommended in research might not necessarily be assimilated into instruction (Gao, 2015; Pei, 2014; Piccardo, 2016, p.12), for instruction may be shaped by inertias and conflicting beliefs on the teacher side. Still, others simply point out that the lack of an intelligibility-based focus in the classroom may result from that fact that the instruction based on intelligibility requires careful thought in terms of priorities in terms of what to teach, whereas instruction based on nativeness "is easier for teachers to implement as this prioritization is not required" (Hodgetts, 2020, p.64; Levis, 2018, p.31). In particular, among the very few published studies accounting for the aspiration for nativeness in China, Li (2009) and Wang (2013) suggest that it "relates to the assumption that only native English satisfies their need for the use of English" (Wang & Jenkins, 2016, p.40). One thing that is not duly discussed yet is the fact that English education in China has been systematically conducted from schools to universities under the direction of the government via national syllabi and curriculum standards issued by the Ministry of Education (MOE, named State Education Commission (SEC) from June, 1985 to March, 1998).

Using the documentary research method, this paper, the first try of its kind, takes a historical look at China's national syllabi and curriculum standards for schools issued after 1949 till now by the MOE, aiming to answer the question: How are the nativeness principle and the intelligibility principle embodied or responded to in China's official documents concerning English pronunciation teaching and learning? It focuses on the conception of the nature and the role of pronunciation and pronunciation teaching, pronunciation goals, teacher's role, as well as requirements or suggestions about what to teach and how to teach. By tracing the process of developments in pronunciation teaching notions and principles that were and/or are officially advocated in China, the paper is to reveal current status quo of and potential development prospects for English pronunciation teaching and learning, discussing and analyzing relevant existing problems and possible solutions regarding pronunciation goals, standards and the teaching approaches behind them. Hopefully, it can promote English pronunciation teaching and learning towards the goal of ensuring intelligible speech which, instead of native-like pronunciation, is of vital importance to effective communication in international situations.

### **The nativeness principle vs the intelligibility principle**

As Levis (2005) observes, the nativeness principle is to teach or learn a native model of English pronunciation, aiming for a target of native or near-native pronunciation proficiency; in contrast, the intelligibility principle holds that the goal of pronunciation teaching and learning is intelligible speech, regardless of how native-like it sounds (Derwing & Munro, 2015, p. 6) or no matter how much the speaker's accent diverges from that of a native speaker (Pennington & Rogerson-Revell, 2019, p.133). Although there is no single accepted

definition of intelligibility (Derwing & Munro, 2005), that of Smith and Nelson (1985) has become a commonly accepted one, intelligibility as the listener's ability to recognize particular phrases or utterances (Hodgetts, 2020, p.57), which means learners' "producing speech that can be understood by a range of different listeners" (Liu et al., 2022, p.3).

In the field of academic research and writing, the nativeness principle dominated pronunciation teaching before the 1960s and its influence was rapidly diminished with the decline of the audiolingual method (Levis, 2005, p.370). Since then, it has been challenged and disputed, while the intelligibility principle has become more and more commonly accepted in pronunciation research publications, with the development and flourishing of communicative language teaching and the increasing use of English as a lingua franca among L2 speakers (Ketabi & Saeb, 2015, p.184–185; Pennington & Rogerson-Revell, 2019, p.135). In fact, the growing use of English as a lingua franca gave rise to the ELF approach to teaching pronunciation, proposing to replace a native English pronunciation model with the "lingua franca core" (LFC) (Jenkins, 2000, 2007, 2014). Advocates of the intelligibility principle argue against the nativeness principle, on the basis of two seemingly broad consensuses. Firstly, the nativeness goal is unattainable in most cases and can lead to learner disillusionment (Celce-Murcia et al., 2010; Derwing & Munro, 2005; Flege et al., 1995; Hodgetts, 2020, p.59; Levis, 2018; Morley, 1991, p.498; Wagner & Toth, 2017, p.87;). Secondly, native-likeness is not a necessary condition for intelligibility in communication (Derwing & Munro, 2015; Jenkins, 2007; Morley, 1991; Munro, 2011; Munro & Derwing, 1995). Besides, in contexts where interaction with native speakers is not required, adherence to a native-like target is counter-productive (Deterding & Kirkpatrick, 2006; Gramley & Patzold, 2004).

Nonetheless, despite the "current dominance" (Levis, 2005, p.371) and "increasing recognition" (Pennington & Rogerson-Revell, 2019, p.133) of intelligibility as the goal of pronunciation teaching in academic research, "both the nativeness and intelligibility principles continue to influence pronunciation in the language curriculum" (Levis, *ibid*), and research shows that in course syllabi and classroom practices, many L2 English teachers and learners still strongly adhere to L1 English pronunciation norms and prefer to aim for nativeness or native-likeness (e.g. Gao, 2015; Jarosz, 2019; Jenkins, 2005, 2012; Pennington & Rogerson-Revell, 2019; Scales et al., 2006; Walker, 2010; Wen, 2012).

To reveal how the two principles are embodied or responded to in China's official documents concerning English pronunciation teaching and learning, the following part is to examine all the national syllabi and curriculum standards issued by the MOE since 1949, beginning with the 1951 English Curriculum Standards for Secondary Schools (Draft) to the latest 2022 English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education, in terms of the guidelines and requirements for pronunciation teaching and learning, focusing on the role of pronunciation, the dominant pronunciation goal, teaching contents, and target interlocutors.

### **The five phases of English curriculum development for schools in China after 1949**

Generally speaking, English curriculum development for schools in China since 1949 can be divided into five general phases, in line with the prominent researchers' observations of the history of English language education in China, such as Dai & Hu (2009), Liu & Wu (2015), etc. The first phase, from 1949 to 1976, coincides with the particular

historical period of China, which was basically closed to the outside world, especially the Western world, due to the special political and social situation at home and complicated international relations (Wu, 2015, p.36, 49). The rest four phases are each marked by huge changes in terms of English learning purposes, academic requirements for learners, required teaching time, suggested teaching approaches, teaching resources and so forth. For the sake of the purpose of the study and convenience for analysis, all the syllabi and curriculum standards are to be examined along seven dimensions: role of pronunciation, requirements for pronunciation abilities, teaching contents, suggested learning activities, named pedagogy, pronunciation goal (namely, the goal of pronunciation teaching and learning), and target interlocutors (i.e., whom to communicate with in English in the future).

### **Beginning independent development (1949–1977)**

In the first 28 years of new China, only four national English syllabi or curriculum standards were issued by the MOE; none of them were properly implemented and all were short-lived due to the shifting political climate at home and complicated international situations (Liu, 2015a, pp.68–83). However, they were relatively consistent in terms of the guidelines for pronunciation teaching and learning, as shown by the following Table 1. It should be noted that descriptions used in the “Guidelines for Pronunciation Teaching and Learning” column are either summary of the relevant content in the original syllabi and curriculum standards or are faithful translations of the exact quotes from the original syllabi and curriculum standards and thus put in quotation marks. Now that requirements in the syllabi for graduation at the end of the schooling stage entail the requirements for the lower grades, in Table 1 and the forthcoming tables, only the highest level of requirements for relevant aspects of pronunciation teaching and learning are referred to. Here is one more note: all the national syllabi and curriculum standards issued from 1949 to 2000 can be found in the collection composed by the Curriculum and Teaching Materials Research Institute (2001), published by the Beijing-based People’s Education press.

As we can see, English pronunciation teaching in this phase was heavily influenced by the direct method, and somewhat by the traditional structural method and the audiolingual method. The direct method, based on observations of children’s first language acquisition and how adults learn in non-instructional surroundings, assumes that pronunciation constitutes a very important component of the learning and teaching process and should be focused on from the very beginning, and advocates that students, through intuition and imitation, listen to the model (the teacher or the recording) so as to gradually end up producing an utterance that would be close to the model (Jarosz, 2019, p.4). The structural method considers phonological units as the major building blocks of language, which can be transcribed, recorded, and analyzed (Hodgetts, 2020, p.55). In the audiolingual method, (the recording of) native speakers’ pronunciation is viewed as the model that learners should try to imitate to learn the building blocks of the language, and IPA is used to do in-depth analyses of speech sounds and enable exercises designed to increase student awareness of single sounds and word stress (ibid).

Consequently, pronunciation was given first priority, the correctness of pronunciation and intonation was emphasized and imitation was suggested as the key to pronunciation

**Table 1** Guidelines for pronunciation teaching and learning from 1949 to 1977

Syllabus/Curriculum Standards	Guidelines for Pronunciation Teaching and Learning
1951 English Curriculum Standards for Secondary Schools (Draft)	<p><i>Role of pronunciation:</i> Pronunciation tops the list of what to teach in the English course, followed by vocabulary, grammar, and writing</p> <p><i>Requirements for pronunciation abilities:</i> 1) "correct pronunciation of single sounds and words"; 2) "fluent and natural intonation" in reading aloud</p> <p><i>Teaching contents:</i> 1) "a phonetic transcription system (e.g., International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) or Webster Phonetic Symbols)"; 2) consonants and vowels; 3) suprasegmental elements (intonation)</p> <p><i>Suggested teaching/learning activities:</i> Reading aloud</p> <p><i>Named pedagogy:</i> "Apply direct method as much as possible for the first 2 years, then use translation method properly from the third year." Also influenced by the structural method</p> <p><i>Pronunciation goal:</i> No specification</p> <p><i>Target interlocutors:</i> No specifications</p>
1956 English Syllabus for Senior High Schools (Draft)	<p><i>Role of pronunciation:</i> "Pronunciation teaching and learning should be the focus of the first year, which helps students improve spelling and vocabulary, which in turn promote grammar and reading." "In the first year, vocabulary and grammar teaching must be done according to the need of pronunciation teaching."</p> <p><i>Requirements for pronunciation abilities:</i> (1) correct pronunciation; (2) correct and fluent intonation in reading aloud; (3) "correct and firm pronunciation habits"</p> <p><i>Teaching contents:</i> (1) IPA; (2) vowels and consonants; (3) suprasegmental elements (pronunciation rules of (combinations of) vowel letters in different syllabic structures, consonant clusters, stress, liaison, intonation, ellipsis, incomplete explosives and weak forms)</p> <p><i>Suggested teaching/learning activities:</i> (1) "imitating the teacher's pronunciation" by following the teacher's instruction of how each sound is produced; (2) reading aloud</p> <p><i>Named pedagogy:</i> Same as the 1951 syllabus</p> <p><i>Pronunciation goal:</i> Same as the 1951 syllabus</p> <p><i>Target interlocutors:</i> No specification, but with not just NESs intended, as shown by part of the descriptions about the purpose of learning English, to "meet the requirements of increasing international communication" and to "learn latest scientific and technological achievements from other countries"</p>
1957 English Syllabus for Junior High Schools (Draft)	Basically, the same as the requirements for the first two years of the 1956 syllabus

**Table 1** (continued)

Syllabus/Curriculum Standards	Guidelines for Pronunciation Teaching and Learning
1963 English Syllabus for Full-Time Secondary Schools (Draft)	<p><i>Role of pronunciation:</i> Same as the 1956 syllabus, emphasizing “mastery of pronunciation is fundamental to learning English”</p> <p><i>Requirements for pronunciation abilities:</i> Same as the 1956 syllabus, plus “natural intonation” in reading aloud</p> <p><i>Teaching contents:</i> Same as the 1956 syllabus, emphasizing “IPA is a powerful tool for pronunciation training and vocabulary learning, and students should learn to use it”</p> <p><i>Suggested teaching/learning activities:</i> Same as the 1956 syllabus, emphasizing “imitating is the main way to learn pronunciation”, suggesting using gramophone records, cassette records and radio broadcast</p> <p><i>Named pedagogy:</i> No specifications, but obviously embracing the structural approach and the audiolingual method and still influenced by the direct method</p> <p><i>Pronunciation goal:</i> Same as the 1951 syllabus</p> <p><i>Target interlocutors:</i> No specification, but with not just NESs intended, as shown by part of the descriptions about the purpose of learning English, to use English, “a very widely used language in the world”, to “meet the requirements of increasing international communication”, to “learn latest scientific and technological achievements from other countries”, and “to introduce China to other countries which are friendly”</p>

teaching and learning in the syllabi and curriculum standards issued in this period. Besides, teaching contents were required to include IPA or Webster Phonetic Symbols (only in the 1951 curriculum standards). All of these show that the nativeness principle was followed, though no clearly stated, in the syllabi issued during this period. However, as to target interlocutors, there were no specifications in all the four documents, but it can be told from some phrasings about the purpose of learning English in each of them (except for the first one) that not just NESs were intended. And this is true with all the other syllabi and curriculum standards issued in the following phases.

#### Starting consistent English language education (1978–1990)

In the first phase, English language education in China was frequently interrupted and went inconsistent with shifting political climate at home, but with the launching of the opening up and economic reform policies in 1978, it began to thrive in China (Liu, 2008, p.71). The 1978 English Syllabus for Full-Time 10-Year Primary and Secondary Schools (Trial Draft) marked the beginning of consistent English language education in this country. In reaction to the fact that the academic requirements had proved to be too difficult for learners, the 1978 syllabus and the four subsequent syllabi issued before 1990 kept lowering the requirements to meet students’ needs and abilities (Liu, 2015a, p.83, p.85). However, as the following Table 2 shows, the guidelines and requirements for pronunciation did not change much.

Except the 1988 syllabus, all the other four syllabi issued in this period clearly stated that foreign languages were an important tool for students to learn cultural and scientific knowledge and conduct international communication, and still considered pronunciation the fundament or key to successful (beginning of) English learning. In general, pronunciation teaching contents and activities remain stable, with the requirements for students’ intonation being lowered from “correct” to “basically correct”. At the same



**Table 2** Guidelines for pronunciation teaching and learning from 1978 to 1990

Syllabus/Curriculum Standards	Guidelines for Pronunciation Teaching and Learning
1978 English Syllabus for Full-Time 10-Year Primary and Secondary Schools (Trial Draft)	<p><i>Role of pronunciation:</i> Similar to the 1963 syllabus, emphasizing "mastery of pronunciation plays the key role to successful beginning of English learning"</p> <p><i>Requirements for pronunciation abilities:</i> 1) correct pronunciation; 2) correct and fluent intonation; 3) correct pausing and rhythm in reading aloud, reciting, and speaking; 4) "correct pronunciation habits from the very beginning"</p> <p><i>Teaching contents:</i> Same as the 1963 syllabus, but leaving out weak forms; emphasizing "IPA should be taught as soon as possible" (from the second year, to fourth graders) and that "basic knowledge about pronunciation with the aim to foster learners' practical ability to use the language for communication"</p> <p><i>Suggested teaching/learning activities:</i> Same as the 1963 syllabus, plus reciting, story-telling, singing, dialogue performance</p> <p><i>Named pedagogy:</i> No specifications (similar to the 1963 syllabus)</p> <p><i>Pronunciation goal:</i> Same as the 1963 syllabus</p> <p><i>Target interlocutors:</i> No specification, but with not just NESs intended, as shown by part of the descriptions about the purpose of learning English, to use English, "a very widely used language in the world", as "a tool for international cultural and technological exchanges and friendly communication"</p>
1980 English Syllabus for Full-Time 10-Year Primary and Secondary Schools (Trial Draft)	<p><i>Teaching contents:</i> Same as the 1978 syllabus; emphasizing that learners should be proficient in recognizing IPA symbols and pronouncing the phonetic transcriptions of words</p> <p><i>Target interlocutors:</i> No specification, but with not just NESs intended, as shown by part of the descriptions about the purpose of learning English, to use English, like other foreign languages, as an "important tool to learn cultural and scientific knowledge and conduct international communication"</p> <p><i>All the other aspects</i> remained the same as the 1978 syllabus</p>
1986 English Syllabus for Full-Time Secondary Schools	<p><i>Requirements for pronunciation abilities:</i> 1) "accurate pronunciation of individual words"; 2) "basically correct intonation, sentence stress and pausing in reading aloud"; 3) "correct pronunciation habits from the very beginning"</p> <p><i>Suggested teaching/learning activities:</i> Same as the 1980 syllabus, emphasizing "listening to records and reading aloud are important ways for students to master correct pronunciation and intonation", that "reading aloud helps to improve speaking" and that "pronunciation and intonation should be learned in the flow of speech"</p> <p><i>Named pedagogy:</i> No specifications, but obviously embracing the structural approach, audiolingualism, with hints of communicative language teaching</p> <p><i>Target interlocutors:</i> No specification, but with not just NESs intended, as shown by part of the descriptions about the purpose of learning English, to use English, a "very widely used" foreign language, as an important "tool to learn cultural and scientific knowledge, to acquire information from all other countries in the world and to conduct international communication"</p> <p><i>All the other aspects</i> remained same as the 1978 syllabus</p>



**Table 2** (continued)

Syllabus/Curriculum Standards	Guidelines for Pronunciation Teaching and Learning
1988 English Syllabus for Full-Time Junior High Schools in Nine-Year Compulsory Education (Initially Approved Edition)	<p><i>Role of pronunciation:</i> No specifications (for the first time, no longer referring to the fundamental or key role that pronunciation plays to successful (beginning of) English learning)</p> <p><i>Requirements for pronunciation abilities:</i> 1) "ability to produce correct pronunciation of individual words according to the IPA; 2) "basically correct pronunciation, intonation, sentence stress and pausing in reading aloud"; 3) "basically correct pronunciation and intonation in speaking practice" (first mentioning). (NOT mentioning the development of correct pronunciation habits any more.)</p> <p><i>Teaching contents:</i> A list of phonetic items was offered, covering all the relevant items of the 1978 syllabus (in turn, same as the 1956 syllabus), plus "syllabic consonants"; emphasizing that "basic knowledge about pronunciation" should be taught "with the aim to foster learners' practical ability to use English for communication"</p> <p><i>Suggested teaching/learning activities:</i> imitating, reading aloud, story-retelling, singing, drama performance; (for the first time) emphasizing that "records can provide standard pronunciation and intonation for students to imitate correctly", and that pronunciation teaching should be incorporated in comprehensive training of listening, speaking and spelling</p> <p><i>Named pedagogy:</i> No specifications, but obviously following the CLT approach, still influenced by the structural method and the audiolingual method</p> <p><i>Pronunciation goal:</i> No specification, but assuming a "standard" pronunciation model</p> <p><i>Target interlocutors:</i> Same to the 1986 syllabus</p>
1990 English Syllabus for Full-Time Secondary Schools (Revised Edition)	Same as the 1986 syllabus

time, one more aspect was added to the requirements, that is, rhythm (consisting of pausing and sentence stress); it was required to be "correct" in the 1978 syllabus, and then lowered to "basically correct". Still influenced by the audiolingual method, all the syllabi issued in this phase continued to recommend imitating as the main way to foster correct pronunciation and intonation. The 1988 syllabus, largely different from the other four syllabi in that it was mainly influenced by the CLT approach, laid a solid foundation for the syllabi issued in the next phase.

#### **Integrating with globalization (1991–2000)**

When CLT was first introduced to China in the late 1970s, it was considered unrealistic for the Chinese context, due to the large class size and poor teacher quality (Wang & Zhang, 2015, p.182, 208). However, with the issuing of the Guidelines for Reforming and Strengthening Foreign Language Teaching in Secondary Schools (The MOE, 1986), advocating methodology reform, the CLT approach began to influence policy makers (Wang & Zhang, 2015, p.182). It was formally introduced and promoted in schools initially with the issuing of the 1988 syllabus for junior middle schools, then followed by the five syllabi issued between 1991 and 2000 (for this reason, Liu (2015a, 2015b, p.91) groups the 1988 syllabus into the third phase of English curriculum development in

China). Two of the five syllabi, the 1992 and 2000 syllabus for junior high schools are revised versions of the 1988 syllabus, the other three are for senior high schools, but are highly influenced by the 1988 syllabus in terms of structure and contents. In the 1988 syllabus, “ability to use English for communication” began to be the key concept in depicting teaching objectives and principles. Especially, in line with the 1992 and 1993 syllabus, new sets of unified textbooks were compiled and published jointly by the People’s Education Press (PEP) and Longman Group Ltd. All together indicated a shift of emphasis from the grammar-translation method and the audiolingual method towards a more communication-oriented approach (Wang & Zhang, 2015, p.183). The guidelines and requirements for pronunciation teaching and learning during this period are shown by the following Table 3.

As revealed by Table 3, all the five syllabi issued in this period remained fairly consistent, in terms of pronunciation teaching contents, with the 1988 syllabus. In addition, three facts are worth noticing. Firstly, all the five syllabi, like the 1988 syllabus, no longer contained any specifications about the role of pronunciation in English teaching and learning, stopping referring to the fundamental or key role that pronunciation plays to successful (beginning of) English learning. Secondly, although it was emphasized in the 1992 syllabus, as well as the 1988 syllabus, that “records can provide standard pronunciation and intonation for students to imitate correctly”, imitating, from the 1993 syllabus on, was not mentioned at all. Thirdly, in this period, the requirements for pronunciation and intonation in reading aloud first remained same as those in the 1988 syllabus, but went higher in the second half of the decade. The 2000 English syllabus for junior high schools and that for senior high schools together represented the accumulation of principles and concepts of English pronunciation teaching and learning, and they also presented the highest ever requirements for high school pronunciation teaching: “correct pronunciation” and “correct intonation”, “natural intonation” and “fluency” were required again; in addition, “natural rhythm” was required for the first time ever, even in speaking practice.

The first two facts correspond with the tenet of CLT approach holding that pronunciation is just one aspect of the language forms and thus should not be the focus of language teaching, but be integrated into real communicative activities, namely, listening and speaking (Pennington & Richards, 1986). Consequently, pronunciation teaching techniques such as imitating (listen and repeat), reading out loud, recitation, were criticized and largely rejected by proponents of this approach as “useless and incompatible with the idea of communication as the main goal of language teaching” (Jarosz, 2019, p.10).

### **Deepening reform and innovation (2001–2017)**

This phase began with the background of a comprehensive project for reform in basic education initiated by the MOE just before the end of the twentieth century, with the issuance of the Action Plan for Vitalizing Education in the Twenty-First Century in early 1998 (Liu, 2015a, p.98; Wang & Zhang, 2015, p.184). The project focused on curriculum innovation, promoting each school subject to replace “syllabus” with “curriculum standards” and set for students not only academic targets but also targets in their attitudes, values and learning strategies (Chen et al., 2002, p.4).

**Table 3** Guidelines for pronunciation teaching and learning from 1991 to 2000

Syllabus/Curriculum Standards	Guidelines for Pronunciation Teaching and Learning
1992 English Syllabus for Full-Time Junior High Schools in Nine-Year Compulsory Education (Trial Edition)	<i>Requirements for pronunciation abilities:</i> Same as the 1988 syllabus, but no longer mentioning speaking practice All the other aspects are the same as the 1988 syllabus
1993 English Syllabus for Full-Time Senior High Schools (Initially Approved Edition)	<i>Requirements for pronunciation abilities:</i> Same as the 1992 syllabus <i>Suggested teaching/learning activities:</i> Same as the 1988 syllabus, but with two major differences: 1) a new activity added, speech contest; (2) imitating, for the first time ever, was not mentioned at all, nor the emphasis that “records can provide standard pronunciation and intonation for students to imitate correctly” <i>Pronunciation goal:</i> No specification, but with nativeness intended All the other aspects are the same as the 1988 syllabus
1996 English Syllabus for Full-Time Senior High Schools (Trial Edition)	<i>Requirements for pronunciation abilities:</i> Same as the 1988 syllabus, but as to reading aloud, sentence stress and pausing were no longer mentioned, and learned texts from the textbooks should be read aloud fluently and with correct pronunciation and intonation <i>Suggested teaching/learning activities:</i> Same as the 1993 syllabus, but with two new activities added, i.e., English corner and English class meeting <i>Pronunciation goal:</i> No specification All the other aspects are the same as the 1988 syllabus
2000 English Syllabus for Full-Time Junior High Schools in Nine-Year Compulsory Education (Trial Edition Revised)	<i>Requirements for pronunciation abilities:</i> (Including same items as the 1988 and 1996 syllabus, but to a higher level) (1) “ability to produce correct pronunciation of individual words according to the IPA; (2) “ability to read aloud texts from textbooks fluently and in correct pronunciation, intonation, and rhythm” and (3) “natural intonation and rhythm and basically correct pronunciation in speaking practice <i>Suggested teaching/learning activities:</i> Same as the 1996 syllabus <i>Target interlocutors:</i> No specification, but with not just NESs intended, as shown by part of the descriptions about the purpose of learning English, to use “English as an important tool to foster China’s opening up” and “communicating with other countries” All the other aspects are the same as the 1988 syllabus
2000 English Syllabus for Full-Time Senior High Schools (Trial Edition Revised)	<i>Requirements for pronunciation abilities:</i> (Same as the 2000 syllabus for junior high schools, but with slightly changed phrasings in reading aloud texts and speaking practice), indicating a lower level) 1) “ability to produce correct pronunciation of individual words according to the IPA; 2) “ability to read aloud texts from textbooks fluently and in basically correct pronunciation and intonation” and 3) “natural intonation and basically correct pronunciation in speaking practice. (No longer mentioning rhythm) <i>Suggested teaching/learning activities:</i> Same as the 1996 syllabus <i>Pronunciation goal:</i> No specification, but with nativeness intended <i>Target interlocutors:</i> Same as the 1986 syllabus, but not mentioning “very widely used” in describing the status of English All the other aspects are the same as the 1988 syllabus

In 2001, the English Curriculum Standards for Full-Time Compulsory Education and General Senior High Schools (Experimental Edition) was released. Then two separate versions of the English curriculum standards were published as revisions of the

2001 version, namely, English Curriculum Standards for General Senior High Schools (Experimental Edition) (MOE, 2003) and English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education (2011 Edition) (MOE, 2012). All the three versions of curriculum standards issued in the fourth phase manifest an innovative spirit in at least three aspects. First, the fundamental aim of the English curriculum is broken down into five general objectives (such as language skills and language knowledge), which are then divided into nine ability levels with descriptors provided for each level. Students are allowed to progress systematically through each level whilst meeting the full range of the curriculum's demands. Level 7 is the required standard for senior middle school graduation, Level 8 is for college entrance examination, and Level 9, the highest level, is for able students who are willing to pursue higher English proficiency. Second, they all emphasize student-centered teaching, autonomous learning, cooperative learning, inquiry-based learning and learning by doing. Third, they all explicitly advocate task-based language teaching (TBLT) and activity-based practices.

The guidelines and requirements for pronunciation teaching and learning during this period are shown by the following Table 4. Depictions of requirements in Table 4 are based on Level 9 since the three versions of curriculum standards all contain descriptors for Level 9 of each of the five general objectives, entailing the requirements for lower levels.

A quick comparative look at the 2000 English syllabi for high schools and the 2001 English curriculum standards will lead us to notice that the new curriculum standards presented largely increased requirements for pronunciation ability, teaching contents and suggested teaching and learning activities. The 2003 curriculum standards for senior high schools and the 2012 standards for junior high schools together went in agreement with the 2001 requirements, with even some more demanding details added. Suggested pronunciation activities were extended to real-life, authentic oral communication, and more advanced suprasegmental elements (such as assimilation, weak forms and rhythm) were included in the teaching content. Especially, requirements for pronunciation abilities reached the highest ever, with descriptors like “clear”, “correct”, “fluent” and “natural” pronunciation, “appropriate”, “natural” and “fluent” intonation, and “appropriate” tone and rhythm used not just for individual words or reading aloud, but for all oral activities. In a certain sense, the rise in requirements was based on “the improvements and achievements made in China’s English education since 1978” and to meet “the requirements of the development of the times” (MOE, 2001, p.1).

Another noticeable change was that the role of pronunciation was clearly specified again in the three versions of curriculum standards, after having been absent from the syllabi issued in the third phase (1991–2000) and the 1988 syllabus. Pronunciation was referred to as “one of the important elements of language teaching”, though no longer as something “fundamental” or “key” role to “successful (beginning of) English learning” as depicted in the syllabi issued in the first two phases. This reflects scholars and policy-makers’ changed perception about the role of pronunciation in the CLT approach. After all, as the communicative approach flourished into its full bloom in 1980s, there was an “appreciation of pronunciation teaching and its importance among scholars and practitioners” (Ketabi & Saeb, 2015, p.184).

**Table 4** Guidelines for pronunciation teaching and learning from 2001 to 2016

Syllabus/curriculum standards	Guidelines for pronunciation teaching and learning
2001 English Curriculum Standards for Full-Time Compulsory Education and General Senior High Schools (Experimental Edition)	<p><i>Role of pronunciation:</i> (1) "Pronunciation is one of the important elements of language teaching"; (2) "Natural and normative (<i>guifan de</i>) pronunciation and intonation will lay a good foundation for effective oral communication"</p> <p><i>Requirements for pronunciation abilities:</i> In oral English activities, (1) pronunciation should be clear, correct, fluent and natural; (2) intonation should be appropriate, natural, and fluent; (3) tone and rhythm should be appropriate</p> <p><i>Teaching contents:</i> Same as the 1988 syllabus, except for (1) the addition of assimilation, and the return of rhythm and weak forms, (2) the removal of IPA (for the first time ever)</p> <p><i>Suggested teaching/learning activities:</i> (1) Including all the activities ever suggested in all the previous syllabi, plus role play, in-class group discussions, presentations, situational dialogues, everyday communication; (2) once again emphasizing the important role of imitation</p> <p><i>Named pedagogy:</i> Task-based language teaching; still embracing the CLT approach and the audiolingual method; holding that pronunciation teaching should emphasize the combination of meaning and context, as well as the combination of intonation and speech flow</p> <p><i>Pronunciation goal:</i> No specification, but assuming a "normative" pronunciation model of some English speaking countries</p> <p><i>Target interlocutors:</i> No specification, but with not just NESs intended, as shown by part of the descriptions about the purpose of learning English, namely, to use English, "the most important carrier of information" and the "most widely used language in all aspects of human life", in the "informationization of social life and economic globalization"</p>
2003 English Curriculum Standards for Senior High Schools (Experimental Edition)	<p><i>Teaching contents:</i> Almost the same as the 2001 curriculum standards, except for the addition of "differences in pronunciation between major English-speaking countries"</p> <p><i>Target interlocutors:</i> No specification, but with not just NESs intended, as shown by part of the descriptions about the purpose of learning English, to use English, "an international language (<i>guoji tongyong yuzhong</i>)", to "learn advanced culture, science and technology from other countries" and "conduct international communication"</p> <p>All the other aspects are the same as the 2001 curriculum standards</p>
2012 English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education (2011 Edition)	<p><i>Requirements for pronunciation (Level 5, at the end of compulsory education):</i> Same as the Level 5 requirements in the 2001 curriculum standards, except for the addition of "ability to pronounce individual words according to their phonetic transcriptions"</p> <p><i>Named pedagogy:</i> "all methods that emphasizing both the process and the product of learning, such as TBLT" (encouraging teachers to choose or synthesize teaching methods appropriate for their own context to cultivate students' ability to do things with English)</p> <p><i>Target interlocutors:</i> No specification, but with not just NESs intended, as shown by part of the descriptions about the purpose of learning English, to use English, "one of the most widely used languages", as "an important tool for international communication and scientific, technological and cultural exchange"</p> <p>All the other aspects are the same as the 2001 curriculum</p>

Equally remarkable, IPA, which topped the pronunciation teaching content and were taken as a powerful tool for pronunciation training and vocabulary learning in all the previous syllabi, was removed from the teaching content in the three versions of curriculum standards. No reasons were officially made public, but it is most likely because the challenges that IPA poses to school students, especially graders, as both empirical and anecdotal evidence indicates. However, in the 2012 curriculum standards, students are required to develop the “ability to pronounce individual words according to their phonetic transcriptions” (no longer making specific references to IPA as the syllabi from the previous phases). This somewhat reflects disagreements among policy makers in their attitudes towards the IPA and implies that other phonetic symbol systems may be used if necessary.

Last but not least, the 2001 curriculum standards, for the first time ever in China’s history of English curriculum development, directly claimed that “natural and normative pronunciation and intonation will lay a good foundation for effective oral communication”. The same vein continued in the following 2003 and 2012 curriculum standards. Meanwhile, all the three versions of curriculum standards explicitly suggest that students should basically master one of the native accents of English, such as British or American accent, etc. (MOE, 2003, p.64; 2012, p.45). This indicates that even though the curriculum standards on the whole were highly influenced by the CLT approach, which is in favor of intelligibility over nativeness as the pronunciation goal, the nativeness principle still kept its dominance in pronunciation teaching.

#### **Further innovation (2018-present)**

The phase of further innovation in China’s English curriculum development is marked with the issuance of the 2017 edition of English Curriculum Standards for General Senior High Schools by the MOE in 2018. However, the preparation for this new phase dates back to as early as 2013, when the MOE started the research project on “core competencies of Chinese students’ development”. One year later, the MOE launched the project to revise the general senior high school curriculum and the reform of English language education in primary and secondary schools has been promoted from “cultivating students’ comprehensive language competence” to “the subject core competencies” (Liu, 2022, p.95). It is required that “the curriculum standards of each subject refine the subject core competencies in accordance with the nature of the subject”, to “establish the internal relationship between students’ core competencies and curriculum instruction” (MOE, 2018, p.4). In April 2022, the MOE released the revised version of English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education which was designed in alignment with the 2017 edition of English Curriculum Standards for General Senior High Schools. Both of the two new versions categorize four aspects of students’ core competencies for the English subject, including language ability, cultural awareness, thinking capacity, and learning ability. The guidelines and requirements for pronunciation teaching and learning in them are shown by the following Table 5.

Generally speaking, the second generation of English curriculum standards (the 2018 and 2022 standards) remain, in terms of pronunciation teaching and learning, highly consistent with the first generation of standards (the 2001, 2003 and 2012 ones), except for a few detailed changes. As to the unchanged, the important role of pronunciation

continues being highlighted and imitation is still emphasized as an important way to develop “natural and normative pronunciation and intonation” (MOE, 2003, p.64; 2012, p.45; 2022, p.85). As to the changes, the new generation of curriculum standards bring to focus the meaning-expressing functions of pronunciation and intonation for the first time ever and thereby emphasize the combination of meaning and context, as well as the combination of intonation and speech flow, to a further extent than the first generation of curriculum standards as well as all the previous syllabi. The content requirements and suggestions for teaching and learning highlight language use, emphasizing the goal of learning to use pronunciation (knowledge) in real contexts to comprehend and convey

**Table 5** Guidelines for pronunciation teaching and learning from 2018 to present

Syllabus/curriculum standards	Guidelines for pronunciation teaching and learning
2018 English Curriculum Standards for Full-Time Compulsory Education and General Senior High Schools (2017 Edition)	<p><i>Role of pronunciation:</i> Pronunciation knowledge is one of the five aspects of language knowledge that lay the foundation for the development of the ability in using language</p> <p><i>Requirements for pronunciation abilities:</i> (1) the combination of the 2003 and 2012 curriculum standards; (2) one added requirement: with the help of phonetic knowledge, to effectively and accurately understand the attitudes, intentions, and emotions of other speakers and express opinions, intentions, attitudes and emotions</p> <p><i>Teaching contents:</i> (1) Assuming students have learned the items as listed in the 2012 curriculum standards and some basics about phonetic transcriptions; (2) emphasizing the meaning-expressing functions of such suprasegmental features as intonation, stress, tone, rhythm, and pausing</p> <p><i>Suggested teaching/learning activities:</i> Same as the 2001 and 2003 standards (emphasizing the importance of imitation), with the addition of debating</p> <p><i>Named pedagogy:</i> The activity-based approach to English learning (still embracing the CLT approach and the audiolingual method)</p> <p><i>Pronunciation goal:</i> No specification</p> <p><i>Target interlocutors:</i> No specification, but with not just NESs intended, as shown by part of the descriptions about the purpose of learning English, to use English, “a lingua franca widely used in today’s world”, to learn advanced science and technology from foreign countries, spread Chinese culture, and enhance mutual understanding and exchange between China and other countries</p>
2022 English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education (2022 Edition)	<p><i>Role of pronunciation:</i> Same as the 2012 and 2001 standards</p> <p><i>Requirements for pronunciation abilities:</i> Same as the 2012 and 2001 standards</p> <p><i>Teaching contents:</i> Same as the 2012 standards, except for (1) the removal of assimilation and syllabic consonants, (2) the return of “phonetic transcriptions”</p> <p><i>Target interlocutors:</i> No specification, but with not just NESs intended, as shown by part of the descriptions about the purpose of learning English, to use English, “a language widely used in the economic, political, scientific, technological and cultural activities of today’s world”, as an important tool for international communication and exchange and cooperation”</p> <p><i>Pronunciation goal:</i> No specification, but assuming a “normative” pronunciation model of some English speaking countries</p> <p>The other two aspects are the same as the 2018 curriculum</p>



meaning, opinions, intentions, attitudes and emotions (MOE, 2018, p.20; 2022, p.19, p.38, p.85). Assimilation and syllabic consonants are removed from the teaching contents perhaps because they do not contribute much to that goal. In addition, phonetic transcriptions, being absent in the first generation of curriculum standards, come back to the teaching contents for they have been regarded as a useful tool for pronunciation training and vocabulary learning even in the first 2012 standards, which did not include phonetic transcriptions in the teaching contents.

### **Summary**

With the reform and opening-up policy being carried out, great changes have taken place in China's English education on a whole, especially in terms of EFL teaching approaches, methods and technology, syllabus and curriculum development (Liu & Wu, 2015, pp.viii-ix). However, the above scrutinization of all the national syllabi and curriculum standards issued by the MOE since 1949, beginning with the 1951 English Curriculum Standards for Secondary Schools (Draft) to the latest 2022 English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education, remain relatively consistent in terms of the guidelines and requirements for pronunciation teaching and learning, especially in terms of the role of pronunciation, the dominant pronunciation goal, teaching contents, and target interlocutors, though the phrasings may vary in different syllabi and curriculum standards across the five phases. Changes have occurred mainly in the requirements for pronunciation, suggested teaching/learning activities, and named pedagogy; of course, no denial is meant of the various changes in the other four dimensions.

### ***The role of pronunciation***

Although it has been repeatedly acknowledged that pronunciation teaching has from time to time been marginalized and neglected within the profession of English language teaching (Ketabi & Saeb, 2015), it has never been marginalized or neglected in the official syllabi or curriculum standards in China for the past seven decades. Rather, it was given first priority before the 1990s, claiming the "fundamental or key role to successful (beginning of) English learning" and have been treated as an important element in all the syllabi and curriculum standards since 1949, though the social significance of pronunciation, and accent in particular, has not been mentioned, with focus on the meaning-expressing function of pronunciation.

### ***Teaching contents***

As to teaching contents, it can even be said that the 1956 syllabus set the basic frame of pronunciation teaching contents for all the syllabi and curriculum standards issued after it. In general, both segmentals and suprasegmentals are covered in the syllabi and curriculum standards: consonants (including consonant clusters, syllabic consonants) and vowels, variations of sounds in the stream of connected speech (weak forms, liaison, incomplete explosives, ellipsis, assimilation), stress, pausing, rhythm, intonation, and tone, though not all of the items are always included or in this order. The general tendency in the reduction and addition of particular items is that they depend both on the perceived students' needs to reduce workload as well as to achieve desirable pronunciation abilities, and on the importance of the phonetic feature to meaning-expressing in

contexts. Also, with the improvement of the quality of English education in China, the requirements for pronunciation teaching have kept an up-going tendency.

#### ***Suggested teaching/learning activities and working pedagogy***

Similar to the case of teaching contents, the pronunciation teaching/learning activities suggested by the syllabi and curriculum standards have been extended, in an accumulative fashion, from mere imitation and reading aloud to a range of increasingly complicated, challenging and real-life-context-based activities. As a result, the latest curriculum standards include almost all the oral activities that one can think of in relation to language learning: imitation, reading aloud, reciting, story-telling, singing, dialogue performance, drama performance, speech contest, English corner, class meetings, role play, in-class group discussions, debating, presentations, situational dialogues, and everyday communication.

The activities involving real-life contexts that were added later reflect the increasing influence of the CLT approach since 1986 (Wang & Zhang, 2015, p.182). However, among all the activities, imitation, though once absent in the curriculum standards during the fourth phase, has been given first priority and taken as the most fundamental to develop desirable pronunciation abilities, especially for the first few years, including primary school years and junior high school years. After all, listen and repeat is a “time-honored technique” for pronunciation learning, involving learners’ imitating the teacher or a recording, and is “still widely used in coursebooks which are accompanied by CD-ROM or tape (Seidlhofer, 2001, p.62). Behind this is the ever-lasting influence of the direct method and the audiolingual method.

#### ***Requirements for pronunciation abilities and implied pronunciation goal***

As to the requirements for pronunciation abilities in all the English syllabi and curriculum standards from 1949 on, a general upward tendency can be identified. To begin with, the requirements set off rather high, then swung lower and maintained relatively stable for a while and then abruptly went up to a level that was even much higher than the initial one and has been maintained till the present. From the 1951 curriculum standards to the 1980 syllabus, “correct pronunciation” and “natural, fluent intonation” were key descriptors; from the 1986 syllabus to the 1996 syllabus, “basically correct pronunciation” and “basically correct intonation” were key descriptors (without requirement about fluency). The 2000 syllabi saw the coexistence of “correct” and “basically correct” modifying pronunciation and intonation in different contexts, as well as the return of requirement for fluency (in reading aloud). Then the requirements in the 2001 curriculum standards became highly demanding in all aspects, with “pronunciation” modified with “clear”, “correct”, “fluent” and “natural”, “intonation” depicted with “appropriate”, “natural”, “fluent”, and “tone” and “rhythm” described with “appropriate”. Meanwhile, the dimensions covered by the requirements were gradually extended from just segmentals and intonation to more and more suprasegmental features. In addition, the requirements were initially set for pronunciation of individual words and such context-free oral activities as imitation and reading aloud, and then went to cover, in an accumulative fashion, a wide range of increasingly complicated, challenging and real-life-context-based activities, as pointed out in the previous section.

Besides the requirements of “(basically) correct pronunciation and intonation”, in both the 1988 and 1992 syllabi, it was noticeably emphasized that “records can provide **standard pronunciation and intonation** for students to **imitate correctly**” (emphasis added). Furthermore, all the 2001, 2003, 2012 and 2022 curriculum standards advocate that “natural and normative (*guifan de*) pronunciation and intonation will lay a good foundation for effective oral communication” (emphasis added) (MOE, 2003, p.64; 2012, p.45; 2022, p.85).

However, the notion of “correct” or “standard” or “normative” pronunciation and intonation assumes there is a language variety or accent used as a reference point, namely, a “pronunciation model” (Seidlhofer, 2001, p.60), which “provides examples of how sounds and words are normally pronounced” (Pennington & Rogerson-Revell, 2019, p.129).

The common standards and expectations in China have been that teachers of English ought to act as language models and should thus be equipped with “at least near-native-like pronunciation”, same as the case in Poland (Jarosz, 2019, pp.18–19). In fact, the 1963 syllabus required English teachers master “correct pronunciation”, able to “tell and correct students’ pronunciation errors”, and the 1978 syllabus went further, emphasizing that teachers should “to play the role of a model” for students. The same requirements for teachers were repeated in the following 1980, 1986 and 1990 syllabi. These requirements have not only directed English teachers’ teaching but also served as requirements for English teacher recruitment. In fact, those teachers who sound native-like are usually respected and admired by students, while those who do not are often made fun of behind their back and are not perceived as role models but as “incompetent teachers and incapable users” of English, which is quite similar to the case in Poland as Jarosz’s (2019, p.18) research reveals.

As to which English variety or accent is the assumed model, no specifications can be found in any of the syllabi and curriculum standards, except that the 2001, 2003, and 2012 curriculum standards suggest that students “should basically master one of the English accents, such as the British accent and the American accent”. But the textbooks compiled in compliance with them suggest the answer: RP and GA. RP had been the dominant pronunciation model used most widely in China’s English textbooks and their supporting audio or visual materials till the end of twentieth century (Zhang, 1998, p.2). Especially, with the issuance of the 1992 and 1993 syllabus, new sets of unified textbooks were compiled and published jointly by the People’s Education Press (PEP) and Longman Group Ltd., first *Junior English for China* (1993) and then *Senior English for China* (1996). The accompanying audio materials are mainly based on RP. However, GA’s influence started matching RP’s in China’s school English teaching with the popularization of the textbook series, *Go for it!*. The series were originally developed jointly by the PEP and Thomson Learning (renamed Cengage Learning since 2007) in 2004 (and revised in 2011), and their accompanying audio materials are mainly based on GA. Since the 2001 English curriculum standards, students’ exposure to various English accents has been emphasized so as to lay a foundation for their development of communicative competence. Newly published school English textbooks and relevant audio and/or video materials may present the diversity of English accents, but the dominance of RP and GA still remains.

As a result, the requirements for pronunciation abilities and the consistent salience attached to imitation as the main way to learn pronunciation in China's English syllabi and curriculum standards, together with RP and GA being used as pronunciation models in textbooks and other teaching materials, easily lead to the impression that the nativeness principle has been advocated, with a target of native-likeness suggested for learners, though never explicitly.

### ***Target interlocutors***

Although it has never been specified, in any of the English syllabi and curriculum standards since 1949 in China, with whom students are supposed to communicate with in English when they can, it has always been clear that the intended interlocutors will not just be NESs. That is shown by part of the descriptions about the purpose of learning English in the syllabi and curriculum standards (except the 1951 syllabus curriculum standards, which did not mention the purpose of learning English). With English consistently depicted (with varying phrasings in different syllabi and curriculum standards) as a widely used language in the world and an important tool to learn from and to introduce China to the rest of the world, Chinese English learners are expected to communicate with both NESs and NNESs, from every part of the world. Especially, the specific depiction of "English as a lingua franca" in the 2003 and 2018 curriculum standards calls for greater awareness of the possibility that Chinese English learners may use English for communication in international settings, often with a variety of other NNESs.

### **Conclusions**

On the basis of the careful examination of the guidelines and requirements for pronunciation teaching and learning in the syllabi and curriculum standards issued by the MOE in China since 1949, we can now return to the title of this paper, addressing the nativeness vs intelligibility issue with reference to the national English syllabi and curriculum standards.

### **The long implicit dominance of the nativeness principle**

As revealed in Table 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and particularly in 3.6.4, the nativeness goal or principle has never been proposed explicitly in the syllabi and curriculum standards, nor has the notion of "native" or "near-native" or "native-like" pronunciation and intonation. However, an overriding impression has long been left in them that the nativeness principle was and is advocated. Three factors contribute to the long implicit dominance of the nativeness goal. Firstly, the notion of "(basically) correct" or "standard" or "normative" pronunciation and intonation has been repeatedly used in the syllabi and curriculum standards. Secondly, imitation has been consistently suggested as the main or even "the most fundamental" way to learn pronunciation and intonation. In particular, the combination of these two factors was enhanced in the 1988 and 1992 syllabi, proposing that "records can provide standard pronunciation and intonation for students to imitate correctly". Last but not least, RP and GA have been used as pronunciation models in textbooks and other teaching materials.

However, it has proved problematic to reach a consensus in terms of what goal the teacher should set for his or her students, and that is largely due to the attempt to

accommodate a multiplicity of learner goals in one teaching context (Hodgetts, 2020, p.58). The same should be true with the syllabi and curriculum standards. After all, Chinese English learners in schools may have different purposes in mind (as we listed in the opening paragraph of this paper), and some even have no clear or specific idea of a purpose simply because it is too early for school students to decide or to know, still at the beginning stages of their life.

The nativeness goal may make sense only to those learners who will be dealing mainly with NESs, and/or ultimately may want to integrate with the native speaker community (Seidlhofer, 2001, p.59; Pennington & Rogerson-Revell, 2019, p.132). In contrast, sounding like a native speaker may be far less relevant for those learners who primarily aim to use English as a lingua franca for communication in international settings, often with a variety of other NNEs (ibid). For them, an instrumental-pragmatic goal of developing a more limited degree of phonological competence, which is good enough to ensure intelligibility between speaker and hearer, even with a distinctive mother tongue accent, will be more realistic and meaningful (Derwing & Munro, 2011; Jenkins & Leung, 2019; Pennington & Rogerson-Revell, 2019; Seidlhofer, 2011).

#### **Increasing room for the intelligibility principle**

According to the CLT approach, the main purpose of learning a language is to communicate, so the speech produced by the learner should above all be intelligible enough for the listener to understand (Jarosz, 2019, p.13). Although the CLT approach began to influence China's English teaching around 1986, prevailed in the 1990s and 2000s, and is still one of the most influential approaches in China, the intelligibility principle that it favors has been given little attention, in sharp contrast with the impressive dominance of the nativeness principle, in all the examined English syllabi and curriculum standards. Nonetheless, there has always been potential room for the intelligibility principle in the syllabi and curriculum standards. Evidence can first be seen from the target interlocutors assumed by the syllabi and curriculum standards, which have included both NESs and NNEs, as we discussed in 3.6.5. Besides, the view of English as an international language has been increasingly explicitly depicted in the syllabi and curriculum standards, with the 2003 and 2018 curriculum standards explicitly referring to "English as a lingua franca", a concept that definitely favors the intelligibility principle over the nativeness principle (Jenkins, 2007; Ketabi & Saeb, 2015; Walker, 2010 pp.184–185). This tendency coincides with or goes in resonance with the spread of the ideas advocated by Jenkins and her supporters about teaching English as a lingua franca (TELF), which have been exerting increasing influence around the world as well as in China.

Furthermore, RP and GA are used in China's English teaching as pronunciation models rather than as norms. According to Seidlhofer (2001, p.60), a norm is a particular native speaker variety "which has to be imitated independently of any considerations of language use", while a model is "used as a point of reference, to which learners can approximate more or less closely, depending on the needs of the specific situation". The descriptors for different levels of pronunciation proficiency required for different stages of learning, modified by "basically correct", in all the syllabi and curriculum standards repeatedly convey this message: RP or GA is expected to serve as a model for students to imitate; the more closely students can approximate it, the better, but they may stop

striving for perfect pronunciation or native-like pronunciation, when their pronunciation does not hinder them from expressing meaning effectively. In fact, different levels of academic requirements have been outlined in the national English syllabi and curriculum standards with the goal of meeting the varying needs of different students while still raising the English levels for all students (Liu, 2015a, p.106). This, altogether, allows the possibility of a compromise between the nativeness principle and the intelligibility principle in the national syllabi and curriculum standards in China.

### **Possibility for a compromise solution**

Our analysis thus far has revealed the hidden fact that China's national English syllabi and curriculum standards issued since 1949 encompass both the nativeness principle and the intelligibility principle, despite the enduring debate concerning the two goals of pronunciation teaching among researchers and teachers around the world (Hodgetts, 2020; Jarosz, 2019; Pennington & Rogerson-Revell, 2019). Somehow, the two have been cohabiting so peacefully, though with dominance indirectly allowed to the nativeness principle, that a happy marriage between them can be proposed, in the same vein as Szpyra-Kozłowska (2015) proposes a compromise solution to address the EFL versus ELF controversy about pronunciation instruction.

For one thing, although the nativeness principle and the intelligibility principle disagree with each other, they are by nature non-incompatible. Generally speaking, proponents of the nativeness principle argue that a native-like goal is attainable (Hodgetts, 2020, p.55), while those who favor intelligibility as the overriding goal argue that native-like production is such an unrealistic goal in most cases that adherence to it often leads to learner disillusionment and that native-likeness is not a necessary condition for intelligibility in communication (as discussed in the Introduction). The fact is that the intelligibility principle, claiming that native-like pronunciation is unattainable in most cases, does not stand as an absolute opposite of the nativeness principle.

For another, it is important for learners to have clear models for pronunciation (Pennington & Rogerson-Revell, 2019, p.126), for “without a stable model, learners will have nothing to base their attempts at pronunciation” (Walker, 2010, p.53). Meanwhile, without clear models in mind, teachers are left to make their own judgements which may vary, “depending on how tolerant they are or how well equipped they are with knowledge about English phonetics and phonology” and that “will, undoubtedly, introduces confusion into the language learning process” (Jarosz, 2019, p.19). Furthermore, it does not really matter that native-like pronunciation is “virtually unattainable for the vast majority of ESL learners” (Morley, 1991, p.498); rather, aiming at a native-like pronunciation can ensure that even if students fall short of the model their pronunciation is still good enough for intelligible communication (Jędryka, 1996; cited in Jarosz, 2019, p.21). AS Jarosz (ibid) puts, “aiming high provides the possibility of achieving a ‘decent’ pronunciation, whereas expecting less leads to very low standards and may contribute to communication breakdowns due to lack of comfortable intelligibility”. That goes pretty much the same as the Chinese philosophy of learning: Those who seek the top may get the average, those who seek the average may get the bottom, and those who seek the bottom may get nothing.



Now, everything seems ready for the combination of the nativeness principle and the intelligibility principle to be made explicit in China's English syllabi or curriculum standards. To sum up, this proposal is well justified along three dimensions. First of all, the two principles are compatible and have been encompassed in China's English syllabi and curriculum standards. Secondly, in the reality of English teaching and learning, the nativeness principle has long been followed, while there has been increasing awareness among Chinese English teachers and learners of the priority of intelligibility over native-likeness with the increasing use of English as a lingua franca. Last but not least, the legitimate combination of the two can meet the various needs of learners "who wish to learn English in order to communicate in it with other speakers of this language, both native and non-native, without excluding any of these two groups of potential interlocutors" (Szpyra-Kozłowska, 2015, p.23) or "who cannot overtly point to one particular group of interlocutors they intend to communicate with" (Jarosz, 2019, p.20).

With the nativeness principle and the intelligibility principle going hand in hand, English pronunciation teaching and learning in China can be better adapted to the reality of "many serviceable and respected Englishes existing throughout the world" (Morley, 1991, p.498). In accordance with the nativeness principle, a native pronunciation model (be it RP or GA or any other variety) provides learners a basis on which they may develop their own mode of pronunciation and intonation, which is unavoidably influenced by a broad range of English pronunciation varieties, both native and non-native, due to the uncontrollable and/or uncontrolled diversity of input they are exposed to throughout their English learning experiences. Learners, who are determined to approximate the native model and feel confident and good in the process, can go as far as they wish or can towards the target of natively-like pronunciation.

Meanwhile, with the direction of the intelligibility principle, most learners can be saved from the tortuous path striving for native-like pronunciation. Teachers can timely remind themselves and their students that native-like pronunciation "is not a realistic expectation for the vast majority of ESL learners, nor a necessary condition for effective NNS communication with NSs or other NNSs" (Morley, 1991, p.498), and that it even "is not likely to be a key or deciding factor" among the "many factors that go into positive assessments of speakers" (Pennington & Rogerson-Revell, 2019, p.146). Both teachers and their students should be aware of "the fact that a high level of proficiency and performance, in terms of intelligibility and fluency, and of social acceptance, can be achieved regardless of accent" (ibid, p.134). Students will then not be misled to be discouraged, ashamed or demotivated when they find their pronunciation is not native-like or decide to stop striving for the target of native-like pronunciation simply because it is too hard or impossible or just unnecessary for them to achieve it.

### **Implications and limitations**

This paper, on the basis of a thorough analysis of all the national English syllabi and curriculum standards issued by the MOE after 1949 in China, has revealed the history and the status quo of the official guidelines and requirements for pronunciation teaching and learning in China. It made clear two important facts. First, the English national syllabi and curriculum standards have encompassed both the nativeness principle and the intelligibility principle, though implicitly giving dominance to the



former one, which in part accounts for the favor for the nativeness principle in formal English education, especially in schools, in China. Second, with the notion of English as a lingua franca adopted in the syllabi and curriculum standards, the intelligibility principle has been gaining more and more weight. Consequently, it is proposed that the current curriculum standards go further to take balanced attitudes towards the two principles so as to lead Chinese English teachers and students to set more realistic and instrumental-pragmatic pronunciation goals, in line with varying English learning purposes.

These findings and the proposal could be adopted in schools and thus change the school reality. Well-informed departure from nativeness as a goal in English pronunciation teaching and learning may enable learners to spare more time and effort to enhance intelligibility. Meanwhile, this paper provides insight for future relevant revisions of the current national English curriculum standards and may shed light on teaching material development, teacher training, and pronunciation teaching methodology research, which are all guided by the national curriculum standards in China (Liu, 2015a, p.95). Hopefully, practitioners in other language teaching and learning contexts could also find inspiration in this study.

However, this paper, based mainly on documentary research, is limited in nature. Given the purpose of the present study, a few relevant things are left unattended, but are of critical importance for the implementation of the proposed compromise solution. For instance, the combination of the two principles can be seen as an opportunity for teachers to make choices which are most appropriate for the specific learners they are working with, but also poses challenges for teachers to make the right choices. Then what explicit directions and goal-related participatory guidelines should the national curriculum standards provide to help teachers and even teaching material developers to understand what they should do, how, and why? Another issue is concerned with how to reinforce intelligibility without underestimating the social value of pronunciation. Speakers' accents inextricably express their social and individual identity, relating to face and self-esteem, confidence and autonomy (Hismanoglu & Hismanoglu, 2010; Jenkins, 2004; Seidlhofer, 2001) and certainly influence listener's value judgements about their intelligence, education, friendliness, and social attractiveness (Eisenclas & Tsurutani, 2011; Lindemann, 2003, 2017). It is by no means an easy job for the national curriculum standards to do justice to the social significance of pronunciation while emphasizing intelligibility in the effort to strike a balance between the nativeness principle and the intelligibility principle. Endeavors to deal with these issues are of an empirical nature and will require the collaboration of the professional experts in curriculum standards design, implementation and administration.

#### Abbreviations

CLT	Communicative language teaching
EFL	English as a foreign language
ELF	English as a lingua franca
GA	General American pronunciation
GB	General British pronunciation
IPA	International Phonetic Alphabet
MOE	The Ministry of Education (China)
RP	Received pronunciation

TBLT Task-based language teaching

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### Author contributions

YW contributed the theoretical and methodological overview of the article, the collection and analysis of most of the materials, and the related research conclusions and completed the first draft of the article. XW further analyzed the related materials based on the existing framework, made important changes to the summary of the five phases of China's English curriculum development, and refined some of the research conclusions. Both authors revised the subsequent versions of the manuscript and approved the final manuscript prior to its submission. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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