



# How Pluriliteracies Approaches Have Been Applied in English Classrooms in China

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DOI: 10.32629/jher.v3i3.893

**Abstract:** This article starts with the definition of pluriliteracies approaches (PA) in Second Language Education (SLE) and background on the current state of English education in secondary schools in mainland China. We hold the opinion that PA has been widely adopted by English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) teachers. By providing examples in previous literatures and the document published by the government, we conclude that PA promotes language teaching and assists students in developing a comprehensive and inclusive awareness of languages and cultures. And some implications for language teachers in other countries are offered at the end.

**Keywords:** second language education, pluriliteracies approaches, secondary schools in China

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 An overview of pluriliteracies

Instead of framing it as the cognitive ability to read and write, the definition of literacy took a social turn in the 1990s which Gee (1996, p.22) states as a “socially contested term”[1]. Scholars like Cummins (1978) and Hornberger (1989) also started their discussion about biliteracy (reading and writing in the two languages) in the context of globalization[2][3]. In a highly globalized world nowadays, instead of biliteracy, the term pluriliteracies which emphasizes the usage of more than one language in the literacy development (Meyer et al., 2015), is more precise to describe the complicated and diverse nature of language practices[4]. Although it can also stress the fusion of literary practices with new technologies and semiotic systems (García et al., 2008)[5], in this article, we mainly draw from Meyer’s definition to examine pluriliteracies approaches (PA) applied in English classrooms in China’s public secondary education and their implications for SLE teaching.

### 1.2 English education in China

English has been an important component in China’s secondary education for decades. In 1964, the subject of English was listed as “the first foreign language” by the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China (Chang, 2006)[6]. During the 1980s and 1990s, English became increasingly popular, due to cross-border business and tourism in which a large number of interpreters and translators are needed (Bolton & Graddol, 2012)[7]. And in the early 21st century, English was included as a major subject that should be learned from Grade 3 in elementary school (Wang, 2007)[8]. Ever since then, English has been attached of great importance to the national school system.

## 2. PA in English classrooms

Chinese EFL teachers’ practices do show features of PA, with the most common practice being teaching English in more than one language. For example, EFL teachers utilize Chinese to explain sentence components and make comparisons with Chinese sentence components(Li, 2022)[9].

EFL teachers have also been expected to include cultural connotations in their lessons. For example, there is an example of how to develop an English activity project in Putong Gaozhong Yingyu Kecheng Biao zhun [General Secondary School English Curriculum Standards] (2020), which is officially published by the Ministry of Education (pp. 205-208). With stories, multimodal text, and audiovisual materials related to the theme, EFL teachers are expected to encourage students to integrate information, as well as compare the characteristics of dietary cultures among different nations[10]. Students might develop their language abilities and cultivate a respectful attitude toward cultural diversity while participating in the activity.

## 3. Pros and cons of PA

In our view, PA has been commonly used in EFL classes. In the following, several pros and cons will be discussed in the context of China’s public secondary education.

The significant benefit is the efficiency. EFL teachers may convey English content such as pronunciation and intricate

grammar rules using Chinese, dialects, and other semiotic resources. On the student's end, such methods help them to connect English to their first language, allowing them to better comprehend and assimilate information. With PA, EFL teachers may efficiently go on with their instruction while ensuring that the students receive it correctly.

Another advantage is that PA helps English teachers create an inclusive and welcoming environment for the students. Such an environment can acknowledge and respect the students' backgrounds and identities, leading the students to feel much more comfortable in an environment where there is not simply one distant foreign language dominating the classroom.

In addition, PA could also help students construct multicultural perspectives. With such approaches, the students might notice the distinctive language use between Chinese and English. Discourse divergence might also be a reflection of cultural differences. And through the comparison of Chinese and foreign cultures, students might build up cross-cultural communicative skills. For example, by making meanings in English with Chinese and making comparisons between cultures, the students might easily point out what certain sentences or words mean in English and the cultural settings behind them.

Despite their effectiveness in language education, these methods may jeopardize the use of the target language in various ways. One of the major limitations is that students may experience "mute English." This term act as a label for Chinese English learners "who cannot speak English well and have poor listening comprehension" (Wei, 2011, p. 488)[11]. Students may not have sufficient access to English due to a lack of target-language environment, resulting in weak speaking and listening skills. Furthermore, while teachers and textbook editors make effort to include all Chinese translations for English terms, many idioms and phrases that are specific to English situations cannot be directly translated into Chinese (Wang & Wang, 2013)[12]. And because of the abundant existence of Chinese, the language class resembles other subjects. Students may not regard this course as a language course that will enrich their language repertoire, but rather as a mandatory course that they must pass for pursuing higher education. Students' test-oriented goals and frequent use of L1 in class may help them do well on English exams, but they may not grow their enthusiasm for language acquisition.

Attending gaokao is the principal way to get higher education in China for the vast majority of secondary-school students. In such a test-oriented context, PA is especially useful, where instructors can cover and students can absorb a large quantity of content in a limited amount of time. Thus, we believe that the benefits of PA exceed the drawbacks in general.

#### 4. Implications for SLE in other countries

We argue that how PA has been applied in English classes in China may have reference value for practices in other countries. And we primarily propose two implications:

- (1) Language teachers could invite more languages into the classroom.
- (2) Language teachers should find ways to educate the entire class to respect each other's languages and the cultural features that underpin them.

We feel that these implications are particularly crucial for Western nations with substantial immigrant populations. To maintain an inclusive classroom, teachers must focus more on eradicating ethnocentrism. This is beneficial for students to develop respectful perspectives towards worldwide cultures, strengthen their cross-cultural communication ability as well as promote their own cultural confidence.

#### 5. Conclusion

This article demonstrates how PA is applied by English teachers in public secondary schools in China, their pros and cons, and the implications for SLE in other countries. Through our analysis, we suggest that PA can facilitate students' language teaching and help students develop a more comprehensive awareness of languages and culture. We hope more language teachers around the world can be inspired to adopt such approaches.

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