

## **STATEMENT OF GRANT PURPOSE**

Adam Lax, China, Education

English Language Teaching policy in Kunming, China

Since initiating market reforms in the late 1970s, China's effort to develop and modernize has gone hand in hand with a concerted national government policy to expand and improve English language education. Focusing on curriculum, syllabi and textbooks as well as the pool of qualified English teachers, China's Ministry of Education has sought to standardize quality English Language Teaching (ELT). But the implementation of ELT policy has been a decentralized, unequal process. In a 2003 study, Guangwei Hu categorizes infrastructural resources (teaching facilities, instructional equipment, English textbooks and material, quality of teachers, etc.), sociocultural factors (exposure to foreign culture as well as perceived value and social use of English), and curricular and pedagogical practices as the main factors influencing regional differences in the development of ELT in China. This practice has subsequently favored coastal areas and major cities of China over more western, interior regions. But since the late 1990s, as part of its effort to alleviate regional inequality, the government has sought to improve ELT in less developed areas through greater state investment in training better teachers and expanding the availability of English learning material.

These developments in ELT policy have coincided with an elevation in the status and importance of the English language in modern Chinese society. As a result of government policy as well as greater economic development and job competition, English proficiency has become critical to social advancement. Indicative of this, China's college entrance exam now includes a significantly weighted English section, and graduation from most universities requires passing an English proficiency test. Moreover, many high-paying job positions in the public and private sectors of China often require English proficiency. Consequently, in recent years the demand for ELT throughout the country has boomed to the point where there currently are nearly 400 million English language learners (Wei & Su, 2012).

Through the Fulbright research grant, I want to examine the interaction of central government ELT policy and local policy implementation and practice in a developing area of China. With the support of Yunnan University (YU) and Professor Mei Wu, I will use the city of Kunming as a case study to explore this dynamic in the local education bureau and secondary schools. As the capital of the southwestern province of Yunnan, Kunming is an apt choice for this study. In just the past two decades, Kunming has grown significantly due to foreign tourism and trade. Consequently, the relatively recent direct exposure of Kunming to globalizing market forces has heightened the need for, and importance of, English education. Moreover, as part of the lesser developed western region of China, Yunnan province has, since the late 1990s, gained greater support from central government efforts to spur local development. Based on my three years of teaching English in China, two central questions will guide my qualitative inquiry: (a) To what extent has the central government policy been able to shape the development of ELT in Kunming? (b) What are the challenges and lessons learned for central government policies that seek to expand and standardize quality ELT at the provincial and local levels in developing areas in China?

To test the effectiveness of central government ELT policy and its impact on the local level, I will interview local education officials, administrators, teachers and students and conduct classroom observations in Kunming. In preparation for this field research, prior to my Fulbright year I will examine, translate and analyze post-2001 central government ELT policies aimed at secondary schools. This will shape the questions asked during interviews conducted during the phase one/two field research (addressed below). Also I will have IRB approval before beginning research. The project will be conducted in three phases.

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For phase one (lasting two months) with the assistance of my affiliate, YU, I will meet and interview at least 3 senior officials in the local Yunnan education bureau about their efforts to implement central government ELT policy in the local school system. One question will be: “What are the steps for implementing changes in central government ELT policy within the local school system in Kunming?” The goal of these discussions is to understand how local policymakers in Yunnan have responded to and accommodated changes in ELT policy at the national level. My affiliate YU will help arrange these interviews. I will also collect and examine relevant documents regarding instructions for implementing central government ELT policy produced by the local education bureau.

Using YU connections, in phase two (lasting four months) I will meet with the principal, vice principal, experienced English teachers and students as well as observe English classes at two junior middle schools and two senior middle schools in Kunming. By interviewing different stakeholders in the schools I hope to get a variety of perspectives on English language education and its practice. I will ask the principal and vice principal of each school about what changes to ELT, if any, they have implemented in their school in recent years including materials, resources and teaching methods. I will ask English teachers who have a minimum of 3-4 years of experience about classroom teaching methods, resources and motivation of students as well as any challenges they may face. I will also conduct a focus group with 10-15 students in each school to elicit their motivations for learning English and their use of English in and outside of the classroom. Finally, if possible, I would like to observe at least 3 English language lessons in each school. The overall purpose of these school interviews and observations is to see how changes in ELT policy have filtered into the Kunming school system. In particular I want to see if the communicative ELT approach that has become increasingly emphasized in national policy has become integrated in practice at the local level. In addition to collecting data via formal interviews, I will engage and build rapport with the local community by offering language tutoring to students enrolled in secondary education schools.

For the third and final phase (lasting four months) I will analyze my transcribed interview data, observation notes and other materials gathered and offered from participants and the community like textbooks and curricula. Data will be categorized into themes that best measure the convergence of the aims of national ELT policy with the reality of local political and schooling conditions in Kunming. I will share my findings in both English and Chinese with the local academic community at YU and the local education bureau.

As a second year student currently enrolled in the master’s program for International Education Policy at the University of Maryland, my coursework and research experiences provide a strong foundation for gathering and analyzing data and for understanding and analyzing complex education issues. Moreover, having worked for three years as an English instructor at Guangxi University in Nanning and for a summer as an intern for an education NGO in Shanghai, I have significant firsthand experience with ELT in China. Finally, I am highly proficient in Mandarin Chinese. This year I will take the second highest level test for Mandarin proficiency, HSK 5, and will apply for a Critical Language Education Award.

After completing this project I plan to pursue a career in international education policy research. Doing this research project will provide me with the necessary experience and help to establish a network of professional Chinese academic contacts to support a career that is focused on international education policy issues in East Asia.