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Original Research

Parental engagement in children's English learning under China's Double Reduction policy

Qianying Xuan[1], **Wei Ye**[2*]

[1] Center for Linguistics and Applied Linguistics, School of English Education, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, Guangzhou, Guangdong, China
[2] College of Art and Social Sciences, The Australian National University, Australia

[*] Corresponding to: Wei Ye, Email: Wei.Ye@anu.edu.au

Abstract: China's Double Reduction policy seeks to reduce excessive homework and off-campus academic tutoring, but its implications for parents' everyday support of children's English learning require closer examination. This qualitative interview study explored the experiences of 11 parents in South China: 10 parents of primary-school children and one parent of a kindergarten child. Semi-structured interviews were analysed inductively and interpreted through the ecological model of agency. Parents described difficulties in understanding English tasks, sustaining children's attention, allocating time, and reconciling academic expectations with broader developmental goals. Their responses included supervision, parent-child communication, selective adjustment of learning tasks, provision of home English-learning resources, and use of older siblings' experiences. These practices connected parents' educational histories, present resources, and expectations for their children. The findings suggest that support for English learning can involve substantial interpretive and emotional work even when formal burden reduction is a policy priority. The study contributes a contextual account of how parents mediate English-learning demands and identifies priorities for clearer school communication and differentiated family support. By applying an ecological agency perspective, the study shows how parents negotiate competing educational demands and highlights the need for clearer school communication and differentiated family support.

Keywords: Parental engagement, English learning, Double Reduction policy, Parental agency, Primary education, Preschool education

1. Introduction

China's Double Reduction policy, introduced in July 2021, sought to reduce excessive homework and off-campus academic tutoring during compulsory education. Its measures include limits on written homework, stronger school-based after-school provision, and restrictions on commercial subject tutoring. The policy also states that schools should not assign homework to parents or require them to mark children's work (General Office of the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee & General Office of the State Council, 2021). These provisions make the relationship between school expectations and family responsibilities a central issue for examining implementation.

English provides a useful subject-specific perspective on that relationship. Families may seek additional English exposure through tutoring, reading, listening, or digital

Received: Aug. 21, 2026; Revised: Oct. 13, 2026; Accepted: Nov. 11, 2026; Published: Nov. 16, 2026
Copyright © 2026 Wei Ye, et al.
DOI: https://doi.org/10.55976/rppe.420261710167-178
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materials, but parents' ability to judge and support these activities depends partly on their own language knowledge. Research on English private tutoring already identifies parents as decision makers whose actions are shaped by local opportunities and constraints (Zeng & Yung, 2023). Research on home language environments also links literacy practices and language use to children's English development (Dong & Chow, 2022; Zhang et al., 2023). Parental perspectives therefore matter both for understanding language-learning support and for identifying demands that may be difficult to see through homework volume alone.

The policy does not remove the need for English learning, and changes in tutoring regulation coexist with curriculum and assessment expectations. The 2022 compulsory education English curriculum emphasises language ability, cultural awareness, thinking capacity, and learning ability (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2022). These curricular aims should be distinguished from Double Reduction: the two reforms are related parts of the educational context, but neither establishes that the other caused particular family difficulties. Parents may experience both through the same daily decisions about assignments, additional practice, and children's confidence.

Existing studies examine educational anxiety, family language policy, and parents' decisions about supplementary education. The present study does not claim to be the first to recognise parental agency or to represent a more demographically diverse population. It examines how a bounded group of parents explains the work of supporting early English learning and connects their difficulties to concrete responses, including selective adjustment of learning demands. The ecological model of agency directs attention to the interaction of remembered experiences, present circumstances, and imagined futures (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Priestley et al., 2015). The study uses this framework to interpret parental accounts in the post-policy context, without treating those accounts as a causal evaluation of the policy.

2. Literature review and theoretical framework

2.1 Ecological parental agency and conceptual boundaries

An ecological account treats agency as something achieved through interactions between people and their circumstances, rather than as a fixed personal attribute. Its iterational dimension concerns accumulated experiences and habits, the practical-evaluative dimension concerns judgments about what can be done in present circumstances, and the projective dimension concerns imagined future possibilities (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Priestley et al., 2015). These dimensions provide a way to connect parents' English-learning histories, current forms of support, and expectations for their children.

The framework has already been extended to Chinese parents' decisions about English private tutoring (Zeng & Yung, 2023). Family language policy research likewise shows that parents' beliefs about the social value of languages shape the opportunities they create or restrict at home (Curdt-Christiansen & Wong, 2018). The present analysis draws on these approaches to examine everyday English-learning support across school and home. Agency can include reducing, postponing, or adapting a demand as well as increasing educational investment.

Parental involvement and engagement are related but not identical. Goodall and Montgomery (2014) describe a continuum from involvement with schools towards engagement with children's learning. Here, involvement refers to reported activities such as supervision and homework assistance, while engagement also encompasses parents' reasons, interpretations, and relationships with children. This distinction avoids treating the amount of visible participation as a sufficient measure of its quality.

Self-determination theory offers a complementary distinction between supporting children's autonomy and exerting control (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Liang et al. (2024) examined combinations of autonomy support, psychological control, and behavioural control in relation to second-language motivation and engagement among seventh-grade students. Their findings sensitise the present discussion to the quality of parental support; they do not supply a diagnostic classification of the parents interviewed here or direct evidence about preschool children.

Two further concepts require boundaries. Parentocracy describes educational arrangements in which parents' resources and choices shape children's opportunities (Brown, 1990). It is not a synonym for parental engagement. Meritocratic aspiration is used here only as an interpretive possibility when parents connect academic performance with future opportunities. Concern about homework, effort, or English proficiency alone does not demonstrate belief in a fair meritocratic system. Neither concept was measured as a participant trait in this study.

2.2 Double Reduction and English-learning support

Double Reduction regulates institutional practices, but the relationship between these measures and parents' experiences remains an empirical question. Policy analysis identifies tensions between burden reduction and continuing examination pressures (Chen & Lin, 2026). Research on shadow education also locates parental responsibility within a competitive environment that predates the policy (Liu & Bray, 2022). It is therefore necessary to distinguish longstanding pressures from changes parents explicitly associate with reform.

Survey research examines relationships among policy perceptions, educational anxiety, and parental involvement (Zhang et al., 2025). Qualitative studies add accounts of uncertainty about children's progress and of attempts to locate alternative resources or communicate with teachers (Wang & Yoon, 2025). These studies establish the relevance of parental interpretation. They do not warrant assuming that every reported problem with English homework is a new consequence of Double Reduction.

The early-years boundary is also important. The policy's compulsory-education homework provisions do not apply identically to kindergarten. Its separate preschool provisions restrict online training and offline subject training, including foreign-language training (General Office of the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee & General Office of the State Council, 2021). The single kindergarten case in this study is consequently treated as contextual evidence about early engagement, not as evidence of primary-school homework reduction or as a basis for comparing educational stages.

2.3 Family resources and the scope of the research gap

Recent syntheses associate children's English development with home literacy activities, language use, and parental beliefs, while also showing variation across contexts (Dong & Chow, 2022; Zhang et al., 2023). These syntheses are useful for identifying broad patterns. Original qualitative studies help explain how those environments are produced. Tao and Xu (2022), for example, examined parental support for primary pupils' online English learning, and Wang and Liddicoat (2026) investigated how socioeconomic conditions shape parental agency in family language policy. Such work cautions against reducing differences in support to differences in commitment.

Home-school relationships also shape whether parents feel able to act. Lyu and Zhong (2023) describe how migrant parents' understandings of their involvement can change through encounters with institutional barriers. Their population differs from the locally registered families studied here, but their analysis challenges explanations based only on parental willingness. It provides a useful point of comparison for considering how parents interpret expectations and assess their capacity to respond.

The remaining research gap concerns how parents connect English-specific tasks, perceived constraints, and choices within their everyday accounts. The study addresses this question through interpretation of a small sample, not through a claim to broader demographic coverage than previous research. Its attention to "filtering", selectively interpreting and adjusting learning demands, develops a practice already described in the interviews into a bounded analytical focus. Whether that practice improves learning or reduces burden remains outside the evidence available.

2.4 Research questions

The ecological framework informs three research questions (RQs):

RQ1. What difficulties do these parents describe when supporting their children's English learning in the post-Double Reduction context?

RQ2. How do parents draw on previous experiences, present resources, and future expectations when responding to those difficulties?

RQ3. What implications do these accounts suggest for school-family communication and support for early English learning?

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design and scope

This qualitative interview study used an experience-centred narrative orientation to elicit parents' accounts of supporting their children's English learning. Narrative inquiry foregrounds how people make sense of experience in social and educational settings (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). The analysis reported here is thematic across interviews. It does not reconstruct complete individual life histories. Its purpose is to develop a contextual interpretation, not statistical generalisation or an estimate of policy effects.

The evidence consists of one-off retrospective interviews. Accounts of academic schedules beyond English are used only where they clarify the time and priorities surrounding English support. Reports about other caregivers are distinguished from participants' own experiences and are not treated as independently observed cases.

3.2 Participants and sampling

Purposive sampling recruited 11 parents in South China: 10 parents of primary-school children in Grades 1–5 and one parent of a kindergarten child. Eligibility required participants to have a child at one of these stages who had experience of English learning and to residence in China with local household registration (hukou). The registration criterion bounded the sample. It did not create variation in education, income, occupation, or family structure. Research identifies Hukou as relevant to school access (Xu & Wu, 2022), but the present design cannot compare local and migrant families.

Variation was sought in family and school circumstances. The achieved sample nevertheless had limited educational diversity: five parents reported

postgraduate qualifications, one a BA, one an associate degree, and four an adult undergraduate programme. An associate degree denotes a sub-bachelor tertiary qualification, the precise credential awarded through each adult programme was not established in the reported information. Adult Undergraduate Program (AUP) is therefore retained as an educational route, not recoded as a confirmed bachelor's degree. Education, reported English confidence, available time, and school context are discussed separately. None is treated as a validated composite measure of socioeconomic status. The study therefore examines differences in reported resources without clarifying class differences.

P1 is included as the parent of a kindergarten child who had begun learning English. The child's setting was described as part of an educational consortium. With only one kindergarten case, the findings principally concern primary-school families. Table 1 presents the reported characteristics and identifies the missing lesson-frequency entry explicitly.

3.3 Interviews

Each parent took part in one semi-structured interview lasting approximately one to two hours. The interview domains concerned the child's school English provision, parents' perceptions of Double Reduction, difficulties in supporting English learning, responses to those difficulties, and reflections on educational reform. After the first round of coding, analytical attention narrowed towards parental engagement and agency.

Participants gave permission for audio recording. The student researcher transcribed the interviews. Audio recordings were deleted after transcription and collation. Participant identifiers P1-P11 are used throughout. The interviews were conducted by two researchers, neither of whom had any prior relationship with the participants. Five participants reviewed their transcripts and reported no concerns, the remaining participants indicated that they did not need to review them. This feedback concerned transcript accuracy, rather than endorsement of the themes or interpretations.

The research team comprised a student researcher and a researcher with a doctorate and eight years of teaching experience. Both had backgrounds in English education, were native speakers of Mandarin and Cantonese, and had passed the Test for English Majors, Band 8 (TEM-8). The researcher holding a doctorate also held a Level 2 qualification in the China Accreditation Test for Translators and Interpreters (CATTI).

Table 1. Reported characteristics of participating parents and focal children

ID	Education/route	Parent gender	Child gender	Children in family	School setting	English lessons per week	Grade/stage
P1	PhD	Male	Female	1	Consortium	NR	Kindergarten
P2	PhD	Female	Male	2	Consortium, private	5	Grade 4
P3	PhD	Female	Male	1	Consortium, private	5	Grade 3
P4	MS	Male	Male	2	Ordinary public	2	Grade 1
P5	AUP	Female	Male	2	Consortium	2	Grade 1
P6	AUP	Female	Female	2	Ordinary public	3-4	Grade 5
P7	AUP	Female	Female	2	Ordinary public	2	Grade 2
P8	BA	Male	Male	1	Ordinary public	Grades 1-2: 1-2/week Grades 3-4: 3+/week	Grade 4
P9	Associate Degree	Female	Female	1	Ordinary public	2	Grade 2
P10	AUP	Female	Female	2	Consortium	3+	Grade 2
P11	MA	Male	Female	1	Consortium	5	Grade 5

Note. PhD = Doctor of Philosophy; MS = Master of Science; MA = Master of Arts; BA = Bachelor of Arts; AUP = Adult Undergraduate Program, recorded as a study route rather than a confirmed awarded degree. Associate degree = a sub-bachelor tertiary qualification. Consortium refers to a school group or alliance (jituan); the labels are participant descriptions, not independently verified indicators of school quality. Gender and stage refer to the focal child. Lesson frequency is parent-reported; NR = Not Reported, not zero. P8 described different frequencies at different grades

Analysis was conducted in Chinese before selected quotations were translated into English. The two researchers collaborated on translation and cross-checked the English renderings against the Chinese excerpts. They discussed differences in meaning using their English-education expertise and consulted official reference materials where wording remained uncertain. This process focused on semantic correspondence between the source accounts and the English quotations.

3.4 Data analysis

The interview material was organised in NVivo 14. Analysis proceeded in two stages. The first inductive stage organised material into six descriptive coding domains: children's attitudes and behaviours; parental constraints and challenges; parental beliefs and imagined futures; parental resources; engagement practices and strategies; and school English-learning contexts. These are broad organisational domains rather than six equally developed final themes. In the second stage, the material was interpreted through the iterational, practical-evaluative, and projective dimensions of ecological agency.

The findings are organised around three connected analytical themes: demands and constraints in English-learning support (Section 4.1), adaptive practices (Section 4.2), and the interaction of family experience and future expectations (Section 4.3). Table 2 shows where each descriptive domain contributes. Children's behaviour, school contexts, and resources operate as conditions within these themes rather than appearing as unsupported standalone findings.

An illustrative coding pathway makes the interpretive steps explicit. P11's statement, "You know she's wrong, but she refuses correction because her teacher said it's right," supports the descriptive code "negotiating teacher authority during parental correction." That code connects the domains of constraints and engagement practices and is interpreted as practical-evaluative agency because the parent is describing an immediate judgment about how to respond. P3's statement, "We just sit beside him, stopping him from being distracted or allowing him to ask any question any time," supports "maintaining attention through parental presence," likewise connecting a reported difficulty to an available response. These mappings explain the interpretation of the displayed excerpts.

The analysis does not assign each excerpt exclusively to one agency dimension. A present strategy may draw on past experiences and future hopes, but those connections require supporting narrative evidence. The quoted correction episode, for example, does not by itself establish a meritocratic aspiration. This distinction helps prevent the theoretical framework from supplying meanings that the excerpt cannot sustain.

Both researchers coded the material independently and then compared their codes. The researcher with a doctorate and eight years of teaching experience led the initial coding and theoretical interpretation. Analytic discussions began after the third interview, and comparison and discussion informed the subsequent reintegration of codes and themes. An analysis log was maintained. These procedures supported scrutiny of interpretations against the interview material. The transcript checks addressed participants' recorded accounts rather than validation of the thematic findings. No claim of saturation is made.

Table 2. Relationship between descriptive coding domains and the final findings

Descriptive domain	Empirical focus	Finding location	Ecological interpretation
Children's attitudes and behaviours	Attention, response to correction, confidence as described by parents	4.1.1–4.1.3; 4.2.1	Conditions of present engagement
Parental constraints and challenges	Language confidence, time, competing priorities, limited information	4.1	Practical-evaluative; iterational where recalled experience is explicit
Parental beliefs and imagined futures	Developmental aims and expectations for educational opportunities	4.1.2; 4.3	Projective; no fixed meritocratic classification
Parental resources	Reported English knowledge, time, materials, and family experience	4.1.3; 4.2.3–4.2.4	Present resources informed by past experience
Engagement practices and strategies	Supervision, communication, filtering, home resources, sibling-related support	4.2	Practical-evaluative; links across time where evidenced
School English-learning contexts	Reported provision, assignment types, feedback, and expectations	4.1.1; 4.1.3; 4.2.2	Contextual affordances and constraints

Note. The domains are organisational categories, not six equally developed final themes. This table makes the revised presentation explicit; it is not a transcript-level coding export. Examples of quotation-to-code interpretation are provided in Section 3.4

Table 3. Types of English-learning assignments reported in the interviews

Task	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	P10	P11
App-based exercises	NR	—	—	—	—	—	—	√	√	—	—
Dictation	NR	√	√	—	√	√	√	—	—	—	√
Workbook exercises	NR	—	—	—	—	√	√	√	—	—	√
Extracurricular reading	NR	√	√	—	—	—	—	—	√	√	√
Listening	NR	—	√	√	√	—	—	—	—	√	—
Phonics	NR	—	√	—	√	√	—	—	—	—	—
Preview and review	NR	√	—	—	—	—	—	—	√	—	—
Project	NR	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	√
Recitation	NR	√	√	—	—	√	—	√	—	—	√
Transcription task[a]	NR	√	√	√	√	√	—	√	√	√	—
Creative writing	NR	√	√	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—

Note. √ = the parent reported the task; — = not reported in this table, not verified absence. NR = no task endorsements recorded for P1; it must not be read as "no homework." The table does not establish task frequency, duration, whether each task was school-required, or change following Double Reduction. [a]The original task label was "Transcribe"

4. Findings

4.1 Demands and constraints in English-learning support

4.1.1 Varied tasks and the work of homework assistance

Parents described several forms of English homework, including dictation, recitation, workbook exercises, reading, listening, phonics, and digital activities. Table 3 retains the participant-level task reports. The table describes the kinds of tasks mentioned, not their frequency, difficulty, duration, or change since 2021. P1 has no recorded task endorsements; this does not establish that the child had no homework. Nor does a reported activity establish whether it was compulsory school homework, an optional task, or additional family-selected practice.

Different tasks could require different forms of support. Parents might need to check written work, help access an application, explain language, or sustain attention while a child read or listened. Written and oral demands therefore cannot be reduced to a single measure of homework quantity. The accounts also cannot establish whether particular assignments complied with policy limits because their provenance and duration were not systematically documented.

Homework assistance could involve negotiating the authority of the teacher as well as explaining English. P11 described a disagreement during correction: "It is really challenging. You know she's wrong, but she refuses correction because her teacher said it's right." P3 emphasised the need for continuing availability: "We just sit beside him, stopping him from being distracted or allowing him to ask any question any time." These excerpts illustrate the relational and supervisory work described by parents. They do not independently verify the correctness of a parent's or teacher's answer.

Some participants also expressed concern about other caregivers' difficulties with digital assignments. Such observations provide context for their perceptions, but they do not establish the experiences of a separate suburban or digitally excluded population. The direct evidence concerns the interviewed parents' reported efforts and uncertainties.

4.1.2 Competing priorities and limited time

Parents situated English support within wider family schedules. P2 stated, "while we hope our children will develop holistically, we parents have little influence over their in-school activities." This account expresses a tension between a developmental aspiration and perceived scope for action. It provides context for decisions about English alongside other activities.

Time and emotional capacity were equally important. Parents described balancing employment, household responsibilities, commuting, and children's learning. For some families, English support involved sitting beside the child, repeatedly redirecting attention, reading or

Table 4. Challenges described by participating parents

Reported challenge	Description	Participants
Academic attainment and broader development	Difficulty balancing academic learning and broader development	P2, P3, P4, P6, P8, P9
Children's attention maintenance	Parents describe difficulty sustaining children's attention during learning tasks	P1, P4, P6, P11
Limited available time (child)	The child's schedule leaves limited time for additional learning activities	P5, P9
Limited available time (parent)	The parent's schedule restricts time available for engagement	P1, P2, P5, P7, P9, P10, P11
Limited English proficiency	Parents feel insufficiently confident or proficient to provide English guidance	P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, P10
Limited information	Parents report insufficient information about children's school-based English learning	P2, P3, P6, P7, P8
Challenging school expectations	Parents experience school-based English expectations as difficult to support at home	P2, P3, P4, P5, P7, P8, P9, P10, P11
Parent-reported emotional wellbeing or learning-support concerns	Parents describe concerns about children's wellbeing or support needs; no diagnosis is established	P2, P3

Note. Identifiers show which parents were linked to each challenge in the reported summary; they do not provide population prevalence. Child behaviour and wellbeing are parent-reported, without independent child, teacher, or clinical assessment. The labels "parent" and "child" distinguish whose available time was constrained

translating materials, and managing frustration when children resisted correction or struggled to keep pace. These accounts show that parental engagement included substantial emotional and care work in addition to academic assistance.

Reports of limited parental time came from families in several school settings (Table 4). This matters because sustained supervision may remain demanding even when it requires little direct language teaching. Accounts of one to two hours of evening accompaniment, attributed in the interviews to P2, P5, and P9, refer to reported supervision and should not be read as an English-only time measure or a before-and-after policy comparison.

4.1.3 English confidence and information about school learning

Several parents reported limited confidence in providing English guidance. Educational qualifications did not provide a sufficient account of their language confidence. Parents' recollections of their own schooling included limited access to English instruction in rural or suburban settings. These recalled experiences help explain the resources they felt able to draw on in the present. The evidence supports an iterational interpretation of perceived capability, rather than an objective assessment of English proficiency.

Parents also described uncertainty arising from curriculum expectations, assessment practices, and the information available from schools. The interviews indicated that participants considered these conditions together when deciding how to support English learning. Table 4 summarises the reported challenges.

The reported challenges in Table 4 are descriptive categories. In particular, P2 and P3 described concerns about children's emotional wellbeing or learning support. These concerns are treated as parental accounts without assigning psychological or neurodevelopmental diagnoses.

4.2 Adaptive engagement practices

4.2.1 Supervision and parental presence

After describing these challenges, parents also explained how they adapted their engagement. Their strategies ranged from direct assistance to less intensive forms of support, including supervision, communication, selective adjustment of learning tasks, the construction of home English-learning environments, and the use of family members' experiences as reference points. The analysis below focuses on engagement occurring primarily in the home.

Supervision emerged as a widespread form of engagement. It was less linguistically intensive than direct tutoring but could still require substantial time and

emotional regulation. Parents described sitting beside children, keeping them on task, remaining available for questions, and negotiating situations in which children trusted a teacher's answer over a parent's correction.

These accounts show that supervision extended beyond simple monitoring. It involved emotional self-regulation, negotiation of authority, repeated reminders, and adjustment to children's attention and confidence. In ecological terms, supervision illustrates practical-evaluative agency: parents responded to immediate learning demands by using the resources they had, including time, physical presence, and knowledge of the child, even when their own English proficiency was limited.

The correction and accompaniment excerpts in Section 4.1.1 show why presence could matter to parents even when they lacked confidence in teaching English. They also indicate a possible tension: close supervision may provide reassurance while increasing dependence or conflict. The interviews document parents' intentions and experiences, but do not reveal how children experienced the support or whether it improved learning.

4.2.2 Communication and selective adjustment of demands

Everyday parent-child communication was another important form of engagement. Participants described talking with their children about school life and English learning not only to maintain the parent-child relationship but also to gather information about what children were learning, where they were struggling, and how they felt about school expectations. Such conversations therefore functioned as an informal feedback channel between school experiences and home decisions.

The term "filtering" is used here as an analytical label for parents' selective appraisal of learning demands and their decisions to select, defer, or seek to adjust an activity. To make this interpretation explicit, the accounts below connect each decision to the information used by the parent and distinguish school-required work from optional supplementary learning. The three examples concern two parents, P3 and P4, who illustrated decision making rather than its prevalence in the sample.

P3 described school-required English recitation, with completion recorded on a classroom checklist by a group leader. At a parent meeting, she noticed that her child had no completion marks. She then asked him about it and learned that he found the recitation difficult and became nervous when the group leader required a restart after a single error. On that basis, she sought an alternative way for him to complete the required task:

Then I asked, "Could he recite it to me?" I would have him recite it again and record a video for the teacher. The teacher reluctantly agreed, but whenever I sent a video, the teacher might not have had time to watch it. My child was still told to recite to the teacher in person. (P3)

This was a request to change how a school requirement was met. P3's account indicates initial agreement followed by continuing difficulty; it does not establish a lasting accommodation.

P3 also used her observations of the child's difficulty and evening preparation time to ask for lower recitation requirements:

Having to memorise those things was too difficult for him, particularly in Grades 1 and 2. He would spend about half an hour or an hour reciting every evening. Was that necessary? I felt it was too difficult for him. Could the requirements be lowered a little? (P3)

The activity was the same school-required recitation, including preparation at home. The excerpt documents a request for adjustment. P3 subsequently described continuing tension with the teacher, so it cannot be treated as evidence that the requirement was reduced.

A different decision concerned optional supplementary English tutoring. Asked whether his child attended, or was expected to attend, such tutoring, P4 replied: "I do not have any plans at the moment; perhaps from Grade 3." Asked why he identified that stage, he explained his view of early English learning:

In Grades 1 and 2, he mainly follows the lessons, reads along, or sings, things like that. In those first two years, I think the school should focus mainly on speaking, or on letting them become familiar with spoken English. (P4)

P4 did not plan to arrange additional provision at present, informed by his interpretation of the child's current stage and learning needs. The decision concerned optional tutoring. His possible start in Grade 3 remained tentative.

At the same time, "filtering" should not be romanticised as an unproblematic form of agency. Parents' ability to interpret curricular expectations depended on their own knowledge, English proficiency, and access to information. Greater school transparency could therefore reduce unnecessary guesswork while still allowing parents to exercise child-sensitive judgment.

Together, these accounts show selection, deferral, and attempted negotiation rather than a uniform reduction of learning demands. P3 sought changes to the way required schoolwork was completed; P4 did not plan to arrange additional tutoring at present and tentatively considered a later start. Filtering is therefore used as a bounded interpretation of parental decision making. These accounts do not establish that parents could unilaterally waive school requirements, that teachers accepted every request, or that the decisions improved learning or reduced burden.

4.2.3 Home English-learning resources

Parents described using reading materials, additional English exposure, and selected extracurricular resources to support learning at home. Other accounts emphasised difficulty finding suitable materials or time for additional activities. These differences are interpreted as variation

in the resources parents reported being able to mobilise. Without a defined socioeconomic measure or systematic comparison, they cannot be attributed to discrete social classes.

School provision and home resources were consequently intertwined. A parent's decision to add materials could reflect confidence in selecting them, concern about progress, or aspirations for additional opportunities. Conversely, relying mainly on school materials need not indicate indifference. These accounts identify different possible forms of engagement; they do not establish the relative quality of each home learning environment or its effects on achievement.

4.2.4 Older siblings and family experience

Six participating families had two children. In two accounts, parents reported that an older child encouraged additional support or English instruction for a younger sibling, drawing on the older child's own educational experience. These are parents' reports of family conversations, not interviews with the siblings. They suggest a route by which remembered opportunities and difficulties can inform decisions about a younger child.

These accounts connect the iterational and projective dimensions of agency. Experiences accumulated by one child became part of the family's remembered educational history and informed parents' imagined futures for another child. Parental agency was therefore not only individual and present-oriented; it was socially embedded within family relationships and layered across time.

4.3 Family histories and expectations for the future

Across the accounts, the ecological dimensions overlap. Recollections of limited English instruction inform parents' judgments about what they can teach; present schedules and school information constrain what they can do; and hopes for educational progress or broader development orient their choices. The family experiences described in Section 4.2.4 connect past and future, while P2's account makes a developmental aspiration explicit. Together, these examples support interpretation across time without requiring each parent to fit a fixed agency type.

The evidence for a stronger claim about shared meritocratic beliefs is limited. Parents' concern with school progress and future opportunities can be consistent with an achievement-oriented outlook, but it does not establish that they regard educational competition as fair or believe effort guarantees social mobility. The findings therefore retain future expectations as part of projective agency and reserve meritocracy for a qualified discussion of the wider literature.

5. Discussion

5.1 English-learning demands within the policy context

The findings identify forms of parental work that are poorly represented by counts of written assignments: interpreting tasks, maintaining attention, negotiating correction, and judging when additional support is appropriate. This complements policy research that distinguishes institutional measures from the competitive pressures surrounding their implementation (Chen & Lin, 2026). It also accords with Liu and Bray's (2022) account of parental responsibility in a changing tutoring environment. The contribution here is an English-specific description of how such responsibility is experienced in everyday activity.

The timing and design of the study place an important limit on that interpretation. Similar difficulties could predate Double Reduction, arise from curriculum reform, or vary with children's age and school setting. The interviews provide no baseline from which an increase in burden can be calculated. The claim is therefore that parents described continuing demands in the post-policy context, not that the policy necessarily intensified those demands. The policy's allocation of homework responsibilities to schools provides a relevant point of comparison, but the task reports alone cannot demonstrate institutional noncompliance.

The uncertainty described here is consistent with Wang and Yoon's (2025) findings about parental educational anxiety. Survey associations between policy perceptions, involvement, and anxiety also provide useful context (Zhang et al., 2025). The present interviews extend that discussion by showing what uncertainty can involve at the level of correction, supervision, and decisions about practice.

5.2 Filtering as mediation between school expectations and family circumstances

The accounts of filtering position parents as interpreters of learning demands. P3's requests to change the recitation arrangement or lower its requirements drew on the classroom checklist, the child's account, and observations of difficulty and preparation time. P4's tentative postponement of tutoring reflected his interpretation of the child's current stage of English learning. These cases concern judgments about how to meet existing requirements and whether to add optional provision, without establishing that schools implemented requested changes. In this sense, filtering links the uncertainty described in the findings to the exercise of practical-evaluative agency.

This finding extends understandings of parental engagement that focus primarily on participation frequency

or home literacy activities. Engagement in the present study also involved translation between institutional expectations and the child's everyday capacity. Such mediation is closely aligned with the practical-evaluative dimension of ecological agency because parents made situated decisions under imperfect information rather than simply implementing school instructions.

This interpretation can be placed alongside Lyu and Zhong's (2023) account of involvement imaginaries. Their work shows that parents' perceived room to participate is shaped by institutional encounters, rather than willingness alone. The present locally registered sample does not reproduce their migrant-family setting, but likewise suggests that school information helps define what parents believe they can usefully do. Filtering may be understood as everyday mediation across the home–school boundary: parents select and interpret expectations in relation to a particular child. It remains an interpretive description, not a validated brokerage model.

The distinction between agency and autonomy support is helpful here. Agency concerns how parents achieve a course of action; autonomy support concerns how that action relates to the child's perspective. Drawing on Deci and Ryan (2000) and Liang et al. (2024), selective adjustment could support autonomy when it responds to the child's concerns and provides understandable reasons. It could also be controlling if the parent decides unilaterally or uses pressure. Because only parents were interviewed, neither filtering nor supervision can be assigned a uniformly beneficial motivational quality. Child perspectives are needed to examine this distinction.

5.3 Resources, aspirations, and the limits of parentocracy claims

Family language policy research demonstrates that parental beliefs and resources interact in shaping language opportunities (Curdt-Christiansen & Wong, 2018; Wang & Liddicoat, 2026). The present accounts are consistent with that interaction: parents describe different capacities to explain English, select materials, and sustain participation. They add detail about English-related decision making, but do not support a ranking of the families' socioeconomic positions. The removal of the unsupported class categories is consequently an analytical correction, not merely a change to table labels.

Brown's (1990) concept of parentocracy directs attention to how family resources can affect educational opportunity. Yung and Zeng (2022) show its relevance to English tutoring within an examination-oriented setting. The current findings identify a plausible concern about uneven capacity to support learning, but do not demonstrate that parentocracy increased after Double Reduction or that engagement itself constitutes parentocracy. Such claims would require defined resource measures and evidence of unequal opportunities or outcomes.

Projective agency also permits aspirations that extend beyond competitive attainment. P2's concern with holistic development and the family histories reported in the sibling accounts illustrate different ways of imagining a child's future. Unlike a typology separating English into global, career, and examination purposes, this interpretation allows those purposes to overlap and remains close to the evidence presented. Future research could examine when parents explicitly endorse or question meritocratic ideals, rather than infer those beliefs from the fact that they support schoolwork.

5.4 Implications for school and family support

The findings have several implications for early English education. First, schools should provide parents with clear, non-ranking-based information about learning goals, typical task demands, and age-appropriate forms of support. This recommendation is aligned with the shift from school-directed parental involvement towards more collaborative parental engagement with children's learning (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014). Such communication can reduce uncertainty without encouraging parents to recreate excessive academic pressure at home. In particular, when assessment is reported through broad categories, parents may benefit from concise explanations of what those categories mean and what kinds of home support are unnecessary as well as useful.

Parent support should also accommodate differences in English confidence, available time, and familiarity with digital tasks. Tao and Xu's (2022) research on online English learning provides a relevant comparison for understanding differentiated support. Schools could explain how parents can encourage reading or listening and help with routines without being expected to reteach English or judge every answer. The interview evidence does not test these measures; they are practice implications to evaluate with families and teachers.

Communication should clarify which activities are required, which are optional, and what support is appropriate for the child's stage. This would make it easier to distinguish a school demand from a family's decision to add practice and to discuss workload without relying on rankings. For preschool settings, the single case offers insufficient evidence for a programme recommendation. Developmentally appropriate family engagement should be considered separately from the homework practices of compulsory schooling.

For policy and school practice, this means that asking families to become more engaged cannot be treated as a neutral solution. Engagement demands can advantage parents who possess more time, language knowledge, and educational capital. Equity-oriented school-family partnerships therefore need to consider what forms of support parents are realistically able to provide.

6. Conclusion

In response to RQ1, the interviewed parents described difficulties involving English confidence, task interpretation, attention, time, and competing developmental priorities. For RQ2, their reported responses connected past learning and family experiences with present resources and expectations. They supervised, communicated, selected activities, and sought or created English-learning opportunities. For RQ3, the accounts suggest a need for clearer school information and support that recognises what different families can reasonably provide. These implications concern the conditions of engagement rather than a demand for greater parental effort.

The study includes only 11 parents in South China, all within a locally registered sample with relatively high educational attainment, and only one kindergarten case. The school categories are participant descriptions rather than independently verified measures of school quality. Socioeconomic status and children's English outcomes were not systematically measured, and parent-only retrospective interviews cannot verify children's experiences, clinical needs, institutional practices, or changes caused by the policy.

Future research should follow families over time and across the kindergarten-to-primary transition, include migrant families and parents with less formal education, and compare accounts with teacher interviews, children's perspectives, and examples of assigned work. Distinguishing compulsory tasks from optional practice and recording the time and assistance each requires would help identify where demands arise. Examining both the benefits and tensions of filtering would also test whether this form of mediation supports children's learning and autonomy. These steps would allow stronger conclusions about the relationship between burden-reduction measures and family English-learning support.

Ethical approval

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the relevant ethics committee at Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, China. The research was conducted in accordance with the ethical requirements of the approving institution. The study involved voluntary participation, informed consent, and the protection of participants' confidentiality.

Informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all participating parents before the interviews. Participants were informed about the research and voluntarily agreed to participate. Permission was also obtained for audio recording. To protect participants' confidentiality, identifying information was removed from the reporting.

Declaration of GenAI usage

OpenAI Codex was used to assist with language revision, manuscript organisation, reference checking, and drafting English renderings of selected Chinese transcript excerpts supplied in the thesis appendix. It did not access the original interview recordings or NVivo project.

Author contributions

Wei Ye contributed to the preparation and writing of the original manuscript draft. Qianying Xuan contributed to the theoretical conceptualisation and development of the manuscript, undertook major revisions, and was primarily responsible for strengthening the theoretical framework, refining the arguments, and critically revising the manuscript for important intellectual content.

Funding

This work was supported by the National Social Science Fund of China under the National Education Sciences Planning Programme entitled "The Dual Effects of Cognitive Offloading on Adolescents' Critical Thinking and Stratified Interventions in the Digital Intelligence Era".

Data availability

The audio recordings were transcribed and collated by the researcher and subsequently deleted.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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