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Editorial: Foreign language teaching and learning in Chinese higher education: emerging challenges

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Editorial on the Research Topic

Foreign language teaching and learning in Chinese higher education: emerging challenges

1 Introduction

Foreign-language education has always been a strategic priority in China, but the last decade has seen an unprecedented convergence of pressures: hyper-globalization, the Belt & Road Initiative, the national “Double First-Class” agenda, curriculum-ideology mandates, demographic changes in the student population, and a tidal wave of educational technologies crowned by generative artificial intelligence (AI) (Lei and Qin, 2022; Zhou and Hou, 2025). Amid this turbulence, conventional examination-driven pedagogies, standardized curricula, and one-size-fits-all assessments are increasingly in conflict with learner diversity, labor-market uncertainty, and internationalization agendas.

It is against this backdrop that the current Research Topic invited empirical and theoretical research to interrogate, explain, and ultimately contribute to managing these tensions from the perspectives of learners and teachers alike. Following a stringent peer review, 16 papers were accepted for publication in three Frontiers journals (Psychology, Education, and Language Sciences). Collectively, they offer a panoramic overview of where the field is now, where the gaps lie, and the way it is likely to go.

2 Exploring emerging challenges in language teaching and learning

To provide a coherent synthesis of the findings presented in this Research Topic, and to reflect the multifaceted nature of the research, we grouped the 16 papers into four overlapping clusters: (1) affective–motivational dynamics; (2) policy, ideology, and curriculum; (3) technology-mediated teaching and learning; and (4) classroom environment, pedagogy, and assessment. This thematic organization not only clarifies the main research avenues but also underscores their interconnections. While presented in isolation here, these threads often overlap within single studies—a testament to the systemic intricacy of foreign-language teaching today.

2.1 Affective and motivational dynamics (six articles)

The first cluster highlights the crucial role of affect and motivation in foreign-language learning, an area marked by increasing theoretical and empirical sophistication. [Huang et al.](#) employed a quasi-experimental design to trace self-, co- and socially shared emotion-regulation strategies during project-based collaborative learning (PBCL) in Academic English. Their fine-grained temporal analysis revealed how emotional turbulence—rather than just cognitive load—accounts for success or failure in collaborative tasks. [Jin et al.](#) drew upon positive-psychology approaches to demonstrate that trait emotional intelligence (TEI) predicts perceived language performance via the sequential mediation of academic self-efficacy and foreign-language anxiety (FLA). [Zhao et al.](#) investigated the triadic relation between foreign-language enjoyment (FLE), conscientiousness, and willingness to communicate (WTC), finding that conscientiousness partially mediates the FLE–WTC relationship.

[Wang et al.](#) used multi-group structural-equation modeling with 606 EFL students to demonstrate that a mastery-goal classroom climate promoted engagement indirectly (via self-efficacy) for both genders, but a performance goal climate only helped male students. [Chiang](#) confirmed the use of a 15-item Self-Determination Motivation Scale adapted for Chinese university learners, providing a psychometrically sound tool for future affect research. [Sukjairungwattana, Xu et al.](#) compared Beijing and Macao English majors, finding that “involution” (内卷)—a characteristically Chinese term describing hyper-competition—interacted with anxiety to influence motivation profiles. Collectively, these investigations highlight that Chinese tertiary FLE learners now necessitate gender-sensitive, region-sensitive, personality-sensitive, and culturally sensitive socio-emotional support, including constructs deeply rooted in Chinese culture such as “involution.” Together, this body of research indicates the need for more subtle, context-sensitive interventions that respond to the dialectical relationship between affect, motivation, and learning outcomes.

2.2 Policy, ideology, and curriculum innovation (four articles)

Building on affective-motivational findings, the second cluster turned to the macro-level forces that shape foreign-language education in China today. [Hu et al.](#) leveraged Latent Dirichlet Allocation and Word2Vec analyses of 20 years of policy documents, showing a post-Belt and Road pivot from test scores toward intercultural communicative competence and formative feedback. [Mei](#) offered a micro-implementation of “curriculum ideology and politics” in an English-linguistics course, documenting gains in conceptual understanding, moral reasoning and classroom engagement. [Sukjairungwattana, Hu et al.](#) provided a systematic review of higher-education internationalization in Asia, highlighting English-medium instruction (EMI) tensions between global capital and local identity. [Gu](#) provided the first nationwide audit of Italian language programs, tracing their

growth from the 1950s to 24 current degree-granting institutions but flagging shortages in qualified instructors and up-to-date materials. A cross-cutting insight from these studies is that national policy is simultaneously outward-looking (e.g., EMI, the Belt and Road Initiative) and inward-oriented (e.g., values education), compelling curriculum designers to balance global competence with ideological alignment. This tension between internationalization and ideological conformity highlights the complexity of policy enactment and curriculum reform in an era of rapid change.

2.3 Technology-mediated learning and teaching (four articles)

In response to the digital transformation sweeping through education, the third cluster of contributions examined how technology is reshaping both the practice and perception of language teaching and learning. [Yan et al.](#) used metaphor analysis with 281 undergraduates to reveal ambivalent conceptualizations of generative AI—ranging from “tool” and “brain” to “medicine” and even “addictive drink.” [Tian and Wang](#) adapted the GETAMEL framework to investigate interpreting instructors’ uptake of tablets for digital note-taking, identifying perceived ease of use, facilitating conditions and social influence as decisive factors. [Zhou et al.](#) introduced a Translanguaging-Multiliteracies Learning-Design (LDTMP) via design-based research; pilot data showed significant boosts in student agency across self-efficacy, decision-making and perceived teacher support.

[Wu](#) qualitatively remodels the reading-to-write process, identifying recursive planning and rereading loops that bridge source comprehension with target production—insights valuable for e-portfolio and AI-assisted writing platforms. Technology affordances are expanding faster than pedagogical capacity or infrastructure; success hinges on instructor digital competence, institutional policy, and learners’ critical data literacy. At the same time, the articles underscore the need to resolve ambivalent attitudes toward technology so that innovation translates into meaningful learning experiences.

2.4 Classroom environment, pedagogy, and assessment (two articles)

Finally, the fourth cluster brought its focus back to the micro-level of the classroom, where the interplay of environment, pedagogy, and assessment shapes the lived experiences of students and teachers. [Ye](#) synthesized decades of research on classroom environment (CE) effects on engagement, calling for multi-layered interventions—from seating arrangements to teacher emotional labor—to engineer “positive CE.” [Lo and Shi](#) demonstrated, through mixed-methods data on 310 Hong Kong undergraduates, that reading contemporary English fiction within a content-based ESL course promotes not only language skills but also empathy and reflective thinking. These findings reaffirm the centrality of classroom climate and pedagogical design, while highlighting the

value of literature and content-based instruction in fostering both linguistic and socio-emotional growth.

3 What do we know now?

Across these studies, a number of key conclusions can be drawn. Affective wellbeing emerges as foundational; from PBCL to EMI classrooms, emotion regulation, enjoyment, and self-efficacy consistently trump purely cognitive variables in the prediction of performance and engagement. Policy in Chinese higher education is multi-vector, drawn toward international benchmarks such as global rankings and English-medium instruction but also drawn to respond to domestic ideological imperatives, with the consequence that curricular hybrids are still being developed. Technology appears double-edged: digital note-taking, translanguaging software, and particularly generative AI offer the promise of personalized, multimodal learning but also pose threats of dependency, ethical compromise, and inequitable access. Finally, learner diversity is increasing; regional, gender, personality, and disciplinary differences now forge distinctive motivational pathways (Xu, 2025), so that “massified” higher education can no longer be served by one-size-fits-all solutions.

4 Future directions: confronting the AI frontier

Though numerous contributions touched on AI, the field is still in the exploratory stage, and we outline five high-priority research directions in the near term. First, the establishment of key AI literacy and academic integrity frameworks is crucial (Abuadas and Albikawi, 2025; Dou et al., 2024). Students need to be taught not only how to use ChatGPT-like tools but also how to critique, verify, and ethically incorporate AI-generated content (Batoool et al., 2024), and research in the near term should investigate detection versus education responses to plagiarism and “prompt engineering” concerns (Nugumanova et al., 2025). Second, adaptive, context-aware feedback is worthy of more attention (Ni and Xu, 2025), including research on large-language-model feedback attuned to Chinese learners’ interlanguage levels, particularly for less-resourced languages such as Italian or Portuguese, and exploring teacher–AI co-feedback models concerning workload, trust, and learning outcomes (Huang et al., 2025). Third, the effects of AI on teacher professional identity need to be longitudinally traced as instructors renegotiate roles from knowledge transmitters to learning designers in classrooms with chatbots and auto-grading systems. Fourth, equity and access need to be mapped in detail, investigating discrepancies in bandwidth, hardware, and paid AI subscriptions across Tier-1, Tier-2, and vocational colleges and designing low-cost interventions to narrow digital divides. Fifth, altering governance, data privacy, and localization concerns need to be examined, especially how China’s data security laws intersect with global AI ecosystems and which compliance models can support ongoing innovation and collaboration worldwide.

Methodologically, the discipline can benefit from additional mixed-methods (Mahapatra, 2024), classroom-based experimentation (Oubibi, 2024), cross-regional comparative investigations Sukjairungwattana, Xu et al., and adherence to open-science practices such as preregistration and data sharing, which will hasten cumulative knowledge and incremental progress.

5 Conclusion

The sixteen articles gathered in this Research Topic collectively illuminate the multi-layered challenges—and nascent opportunities—facing foreign language education in Chinese higher education. Together, they show that affective wellbeing, policy alignment, technological agility and culturally responsive pedagogy are not ancillary but central to cultivating the multilingual (Chen et al., 2025), interculturally competent graduates who are in demand from national agendas and global labor markets alike (Kim et al., 2024).

As generative AI rapidly redefines what it means to learn, teach, and use a foreign language, the community must move beyond either-or debates toward evidence-based, ethically grounded integration strategies. We hope the insights offered here will catalyze such work and serve as a reference point for scholars, practitioners and policy-makers committed to navigating the next decade of foreign language education in China.

Author contributions

WX: Conceptualization, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. PW: Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Generative AI statement

The author(s) declare that no Gen AI was used in the creation of this manuscript.

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