

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The implementation of English as a compulsory subject in Mongolia: EFL teachers' perceptions and experiences

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Abstract: In responding to neoliberal globalization, the importance of English language education has been strongly emphasized in many Asian countries, including Mongolia, during the past several decades. Despite the nationwide prioritization of English language education in Mongolia, little research has examined the experiences and challenges of English teachers in teaching English as a compulsory subject in Mongolian secondary schools. This study aims to address this gap by exploring teachers' perceptions of teaching English and the challenges they encounter, by interviewing forty-three private and public-school teachers. The findings indicate that although teachers had positive attitudes about the nationwide emphasis on English education, they also have experienced a variety of challenges, including workload, lack of professional development and support, lack of shared vision and supportive leadership, and other tensions related to low pay and the social status of schoolteachers in that country. Furthermore, the study recommends that the Mongolian government must create initiatives to reduce educational inequality associated with access to quality English language education, for instance, by increasing funding for public schools, raising awareness of teachers about their importance for the future of the country, and improving the quality of pre-service and in-service teacher education.

Keywords: English language teaching; teachers' perceptions and experiences; English as a foreign language; secondary schooling; Mongolia

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1. Introduction

In the context of globalization, English has been largely viewed as a medium of global communication, and the importance of English education has been increasingly emphasized in many countries in Asia, including Mongolia, where English is used as a foreign language (Kirkpatrick and Liddicoat, 2019). Since 1990, when Mongolia transitioned from socialism to democracy, the

country has been experiencing changes across many domains, and opening its economy to foreign investment and domestic entrepreneurs. Mongolia's pursuit of a free-market economy and extensive privatization has strongly emphasized the role of English as a medium of communication in international and domestic markets and English language education in both national and individual success (Cohen, 2005; Dovchin, 2018). The advancement of digital technologies, along with the process of globalization, also has posited English as an important tool for communicating internationally and interculturally. Unlike the past, when Mongolians had limited exposure to foreign languages and cultures except for Russian, there has been an increasing demand for learning English among Mongolians, especially among the younger generation (Dovchin, 2015, 2018; Marzluf, 2012; Marzluf and Saruul-Erdene, 2019). As English has been increasingly seen as "a prestige international language bearer of modernity" (Billé, 2010) in Mongolia and "a paramount skill for upwardly mobile Mongolians to achieve academic and professional success" (Cohen, 2005), the Mongolian government began to actively implement various English education policies and practices. In 1992, the Mongolian government introduced English as a compulsory subject at the secondary level. In 1997, the government mandated English to be taught as a primary foreign language at all levels of educational institutions in Mongolia.

During the initial years of introducing English as a compulsory foreign language in schools, one of the major challenges was the shortage of English teachers. Because the dominant foreign language studied during the period of socialism was Russian and most of the foreign language teachers were Russian teachers, there was a limited number of qualified English teachers across the nation (Cohen, 2004, 2005). To resolve this issue, the Mongolian government initiated an intensive teacher training program in 1992, through which Russian language teachers received a year-long period of training and then worked as English language teachers in public educational settings. Some major universities in Mongolia also began to design and provide both in-service and pre-service teacher programs designed for English teachers (Cohen, 2004).

In addition to a shortage of qualified English teachers, the abrupt implementation of nationwide English language education has presented other challenges in Mongolia, including a lack of teacher training and professional development (Janchiv and Kang, 2018; Namsrai, 2001). As an attempt to enhance the quality of English language education, the National Policy on Improving the Quality of English Teaching (Government of Mongolia, 2001) was issued in 2001. The policy aims to improve both in-service and pre-service teachers' English language proficiency and teaching skills, to increase the number of qualified English teachers across the nation, particularly in rural areas, and to develop locally appropriate English textbooks and materials. In 2004, the Mongolian government generated a set of curriculum and evaluation standards for public English education to ensure the quality of foreign language education nationwide (Government of Mongolia, 2004). In problematizing traditional language teaching methods that mostly focus on form and structure, the new standards emphasize the importance of providing students with interactive English language learning environments and using communicative language teaching (CLT) approaches and student-centered language teaching practices.

After the first decade of incorporating English into the school curriculum, the National Program for English Language Education (Government of Mongolia, 2008) was released so that it could be implemented from 2009 to 2020. Its main goal was to redesign national curriculum standards and provide adequate teacher training and teaching resources for both in-service and pre-service English

teachers in Mongolia. In recent years, the Mongolian government has actively worked to ensure the quality of English education in public school settings by standardizing curriculum and evaluation tools and increasing the availability of digital technologies for English teaching and learning (Marav et al., 2022). While the Mongolian government has attempted to improve the quality of English education, the combination of these challenges has placed Mongolian English teachers in a precarious position, one in which they must actively navigate policy implementation in schools having large student populations and limited budgets and resources (Marav et al., 2022).

Despite the nationwide emphasis on English language learning and teaching in Mongolia, little research has examined the experiences of and challenges to Mongolian English teachers in launching nationwide English education while introducing English as a mandatory subject. The recent study by Marav et al. (2022) revealed that English teachers in public schools face challenges related to inadequate teaching and learning resources, poor textbook quality and teachers' lack of English proficiency. Thus, expanding their study, this study aims to explore English teachers' perceptions of and attitudes¹ toward teaching English as a mandatory language in Mongolia and the challenges they encounter not only within but also outside of schools. By analyzing qualitative interview data from forty-three Mongolian English teachers, the study addresses the following research questions:

- 1) What are Mongolian English teachers' attitudes toward and perceptions of the recent emphasis on English and the implementation of English as a compulsory subject in Mongolia?
- 2) What are some challenges and difficulties that Mongolian English teachers encounter while introducing English as a compulsory subject in schools?

2. Implementing English language policies and practices: English language teachers in Asia

In responding to neoliberal globalization, the importance of English and English language education has strongly been emphasized in many Asian countries during the past several decades. As English has been widely seen as a medium of global communication and a means to enhance national competitiveness in the global market, many Asian countries have begun to introduce English as a compulsory subject (Kirkpatrick and Liddicoat, 2019). These new English language initiatives have highlighted the role of English language teachers who must prepare themselves for successful implementation of new policies and practices while simultaneously working within the realities of the classroom. Hamid and Nguyen (2016), who examined English language policies and practices in Asia, pointed out that these new policies and reforms tend to place a burden of responsibility on English teachers in Asia by requiring them "to perform, often beyond their means, to deliver social and policy expectations and account for how well they do what they do".

Recent studies also have shown that the gap between English language policies and the reality of the classroom often makes it difficult for English teachers to successfully carry out the requirements of policy implementation and effectively teach students. Some major challenges that have been reported by English language teachers in Asia include their limited English language proficiency (Freeman et al., 2015; Lee, 2015; Rao, 2013) and pedagogical skills (Liyanage, 2022; Nunan,

¹ We used the word "perceptions" to indicate teachers' views or interpretation while using the word "attitudes" to indicate their own beliefs.

2003), tests and examinations focused on linguistic competence (Glasgow and Paller, 2016), examination-oriented teaching (Low, 2022), as well as classroom-level constraints such as limited teaching resources and materials and large-classroom size (Butler, 2011; Rao and Yu, 2019). Moreover, unequal access to quality English language education, which is attributed to many factors including socio-economic status of families, and unequal teaching and learning resources in public and private schools and in urban and rural contexts, has become a critical issue in many Asian countries (Bhatia, 2022; Choi, 2021; Hamid and Erling, 2016; Li, 2020; Marav, 2020; Sah and Li, 2018). Mostly, due to the abovementioned challenges, it has been hard to implement English language curricula that aim at communicative competence in various school settings.

In addition, although teachers' pedagogical knowledge and skills are crucial, teaching is a "complex cognitively-driven process" (Richards, 2011: 10) influenced by many factors, such as teaching contexts, teachers' beliefs and values, and job satisfaction, given that teachers do not live and instruct in a vacuum. Therefore, it is necessary to investigate the contextual factors that influence English language teachers' professional lives. For example, the working conditions and wages of primary school English teachers in Vietnam have a direct impact on their professional development and their ability to provide quality learning experiences for their students (HTM Nguyen, 2011; CD Nguyen, 2017). Moreover, the case studies about school teachers' perceptions of English education in South Korea (e.g., Chung and Choi, 2016) indicate how teachers' beliefs about and perceptions of English teaching and learning play key roles in implementing curricula and policies at the micro level. Some teachers in these studies, for instance, modified some parts of the curriculum when this is incompatible with their teaching contexts based on their perceptions of the curriculum, attitudes towards English language education and the contextual factors.

These previous studies all highlight the importance of exploring both macro-level and micro-level policy implementation. That is, while it is important to implement English language policies and practices that respond to changes in society, it is equally important to understand the challenges of English teachers in implementing these policies and practices in classroom settings and beyond. Because teachers as curriculum enactors "are at the heart of education reform and change" (Kwek et al., 2020), English teachers are crucial actors for the successful implementation of English language policies and practices. Therefore, it is important to understand English teachers' perceptions of English language policies and practices, as well as their own challenges and struggles that they encounter while implementing new policy initiatives. However, there has been limited internationally available study in this regard in the context of Mongolia.

3. The study

This paper aims to investigate public and private school English teachers' perceptions of English language education in their schools in Ulaanbaatar, the capital city of Mongolia, in addition to their attitudes about their jobs. Thirty English teachers from 17 different public schools (11 urban and 6 suburban) and 13 teachers from 8 different private schools voluntarily participated in the study. They were recruited by using snowball sampling. Thirty-eight are female, as women predominate as English teachers in Mongolia. Their English language teaching experience ranged from 0.5 to 33 years and their mean age was 34.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant. Research participants read and

signed informed consent forms prior to being interviewed. They also were made aware that all their responses would remain anonymous. Interview questions concerned participants' perceptions of and experiences with teaching English in Mongolian public or private schools, including any challenges they may have faced in their everyday lives. Specifically, they were asked about their thoughts on English language education in their schools, their students' interests and needs to learn English, challenges in teaching English, workload, how they develop themselves professionally and how school management supports them. Participants were interviewed in their native language to enable them to speak freely and confidently. The interviews were later translated into English for further analysis. Each interview lasted 30 to 60 minutes and was audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and later translated in English by the first author, who is fluent in both languages.

Drawing on the elements of the thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998; Clarke and Braun, 2017), researchers read interview transcripts repeatedly to familiarize themselves with the data and identified codes that are the "smallest units of analysis that capture interesting features of the data (potentially) relevant to the research question" (Clarke and Braun, 2017). Multiple discussions followed to group the codes into recurrent patterns or themes that emerged from the data. For example, the theme "challenges teachers face within a school setting" includes codes such as "heavy workload", "dissatisfaction with colleagues", "conflict between senior and young teachers", "bribery" and "political intrusion". In this study the trustworthiness of the research findings was preserved through using elements or means recommended by researchers such as Bassegy (1999), Lincoln and Guba (1985), and Nowell et al. (2017). The researchers were engaged with research data for a prolonged period, the records of all data have been retained, and the strategy of member checking was used by inviting participants to review the interview transcripts. Further, to enhance research credibility, the analysis was conducted independently by the researchers. Regular peer-led debriefing sessions helped authors evolve their thoughts and ideas, and ensure thorough analysis of data, as Nowell et al. (2017) suggest.

4. Findings

4.1. Teachers' perceptions: Teaching English as a compulsory subject in Mongolia

During the interview, all participants agreed that English has become an important capital in contemporary Mongolian society, and thus the nationwide implementation of English as a compulsory subject was both timely and necessary. Because English is largely seen as an important form of linguistic capital around the world (Nunan, 2003; Park and Wee, 2012), these teachers stated that a good command of English can help their students and the nation successfully compete on the global stage. For example:

Our students need to learn English language really well to further study abroad and get well-paid jobs. (Teacher 9, public school)

English language has become a necessity for our students as it is a global language. (Teacher 7, public school)

There are societal demands to learn English as most jobs require the knowledge and skills of the language [English]. (Teacher 30, public school)

It is worth mentioning that none of the participants gave negative comments about the nationwide emphasis on English in Mongolia. Furthermore, 27 participants stated that their students had become more interested in learning English, as they reported a desire to study or work in the future and take standardized English proficiency tests such as International English Language Testing System (IELTS) and the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) to earn scholarships or to have better academic and professional opportunities:

Nowadays, most schoolchildren want to take IELTS and TOEFL exams as soon as they finish their high schools and study abroad. They have understood how important English language is, thus, they go for their dreams. (Teacher 18, public school)

I teach in a high school. Most of my students are aiming to take IELTS or TOEFL exams. They want to take one of the exams when they are in grade 11 to apply for colleges or universities overseas. As they know what they need to do, they push themselves to improve their English. Some of the students had already got sufficient TOEFL scores. Also, parents consider English class as one of the most important subjects for their children. (Teacher 6, private school)

Evidently, there is an increasing trend for taking standardized English proficiency tests among young Mongolians, which has become one of the motivating factors for learning English. They also pointed out that the implementation of English as a compulsory subject reflects social demands and changes in contemporary Mongolian society, while simultaneously meeting parental expectations and aspirations for their children. For example, Teacher 16, an experienced Mongolian English teacher who worked in Mongolian public schools for about 21 years, claimed that many Mongolian parents are increasingly investing in their children's English language education to secure their future success:

Nowadays the parents care a lot about their children's English education and take them abroad. For example, some parents get scholarships to study in English speaking countries such as the USA and Australia not only to develop themselves but also to give opportunities to learn English to their children. (Teacher 16, public school)

As Mongolian parents, especially those from affluent families, began to intensively invest in their children's English education (Marav, 2020), some teachers expressed concerns about the possible English divide between the rich and the poor, which can potentially maintain social and class inequality in contemporary Mongolian society:

Most private schools implement international curricula. For example, our school use GrapeSEED curriculum. Thus, teachers and students are satisfied with the teaching materials, and we teach communicatively. However, there is a different scenario at public schools. The teachers there mostly stick to the English textbooks designed in Mongolia and the teaching and learning environment is totally different from private schools. For example, there are too many students in a classroom, lack of teaching resources and teachers cannot reach every child. (Teacher 9, private school)

It is clear that the quality of English education in public education settings needs to be enhanced to prevent from further deepening educational inequality associated with English education in the country.

4.2. Teachers' perceptions: Challenges and difficulties in teaching English as a compulsory subject in Mongolia

While Mongolian English teachers agreed with the implementation of English as a compulsory subject, they have experienced a variety of challenges and difficulties as they teach English to their students in both public and private school settings. Five issues emerged from interviewing participants regarding the major challenges and difficulties in teaching English as a compulsory subject in Mongolian schools: (a) heavy workload, (b) lack of professional development and support, (c) lack of shared vision and supportive leadership, (d) low pay and (e) poor reputation of the teaching profession.

4.2.1. Heavy workload

During the interview, 17 of the 30 public school teachers and 9 out of 13 private school teachers pointed out their excessive workload as one of the major challenges that they have experienced in schools. As the shortage of qualified English teachers has been a continuing issue in Mongolia (Cohen, 2004; Marav et al., 2022), many Mongolian English teachers have experienced large classes and high teaching hours. While the required teaching hours for Mongolian English teachers are 19 hours per week, most of the teachers during the interview said that they instruct up to 25 hours per week. In addition, 13 public school teachers complained about their administrative workload:

What I really need is the time to develop myself. There are quite a few students who speak English well in Grades 10–12. We are going to lag behind them. Besides preparing for classes and teaching, there are other things to do such as taking or filling in a variety of surveys by the authorities and lots of other paperwork which take our time. (Teacher 4, public school)

Regarding private school teachers, 12 of the 13 teachers in the present study stated that they generally teach more than 25 hours per week, while they were initially asked to work a maximum of 22 hours per week. Some of them also reported that they teach more than 30 hours a week. All the teachers pointed out that excessive teaching hours made it difficult for them to have enough time to prepare for class and provide adequate feedback for students' homework. Those English teachers who work in private schools expressed their frustration with their inability to provide more individualized English language learning opportunities for their students, whose English language proficiency varies greatly. Here are some comments from the teachers:

The workload is a lot for us, English teachers. We teach over 30 hours a week, prepare our students for the English language Olympiads and run English speaking clubs for the students. Our school is in need of skilled English teachers. However, we cannot find the teachers who meet our requirements. (Teacher 12, private school)

I teach 35 hours per week. And if one of the colleagues gets sick, I need to make up her classes which makes my teaching hours 40 sometimes. I teach starting at 8 a.m. and finish at 3 or 4 p.m. The workload is really heavy. After I finish teaching, I prepare for the following day's classes and check my students' homework. I mostly go home at 7 or 8 p.m. (Teacher 13, private school)

They, along with other teachers in public and private schools, further stated that an excessive workload made it difficult for them to engage in professional development, which in turn potentially lowers the quality of English education in Mongolian schools. Although many Mongolian English

teachers mentioned that their teaching hours are excessive, their attitude was generally positive as they aspired to teach effectively:

Besides teaching 28 hours per week, I prepare for my classes. Although I taught those classes in the previous year, I always strive to improve my lessons and teaching. We cannot teach what we taught last year again this year. There is always something to update. (Teacher 8, private school)

Workload is too much. Actually, we have to work for 8 hours per day. But most days we work for 12 hours on a daily basis. I prepare for my classes, deliver them and I have a discussion with other teachers about improving our lessons. I always try to improve my teaching. (Teacher 6, public school)

The main problem that private school teachers reported was overloaded teaching hours. For instance, for one of the teachers the only issue that she was dissatisfied with was the workload related to excessive teaching hours. Two other teachers said that they had to remain in their schools during business hours, from 8 a.m. till 5 p.m., whether they were teaching or not, which makes it difficult for them to attend professional development courses or workshops. In general, it seems that there is a need for additional qualified English teachers in private schools to reduce current teachers' teaching hours so that they may work without time constraints and develop themselves professionally, a sentiment in line with that expressed by participants from public schools.

4.2.2. Lack of professional development and support

Thirty teachers of the 43 interviewees expressed their concerns about the overall quality of English teachers in Mongolia. These teachers pointed out the lack of professional development and continued support as one of the major problems that could potentially lower the quality of English education in Mongolian schools. As professional development helps teachers further their necessary knowledge and pedagogical skills regarding teaching their students (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017), offering teachers adequate professional development is essential when implementing new policies and instructional practices (Heineke et al., 2015; Knapp, 2003). Twenty-six teachers, however, reported that they felt that they have not been given sufficient professional development opportunities or support to enhance their professional practice or English language proficiency to become more competent English teachers. It is noteworthy that both experienced and novice Mongolian English teachers pointed out the immediate need for professional development, so English teachers could improve their English language proficiency. Here are some comments in that regard:

The English language skills of schoolchildren got much better due to the environment where they are living in. For example, some families speak only English at home as they lived abroad for a while and the children are growing up by watching TV and YouTube channels in English from the young age. However, the proficiency level of English teachers is questionable. I think there are not many teachers in Mongolia who can teach the children who are highly skilled in English. Actually, when our school wants to employ skilled English teachers, there is not any candidate to meet our requirements. There is a big demand for good English teachers in Mongolia. (Teacher 6, private school)

After my graduation, I worked in a public school for a year. The English teachers there taught focused on the grammar. I think this is related to their lack of English skills, particularly, speaking, listening, and writing skills. Their pronunciation was also not good. How can teachers who

have the same level of English skills support each other in developing their English? Thus, the government needs to do something to develop English language skills of teachers whose English proficiency level is low. (Teacher 8, private school)

It is interesting to note that many Mongolian English teachers said that they felt that their or their colleagues' English language proficiency needs to be improved through constant professional development. This might be relevant to the recent implementation of CLT as a curriculum innovation in Mongolia, which emphasizes interaction in the target language and students' development of communicative language competence (Celce-Murcia, 2007). As CLT generally requires teachers to have high proficiency in English, many teachers during the interview stressed the need for receiving adequate professional training opportunities to increase their English language competence and simultaneously strengthen pedagogical skills needed for implementing CLT in classes.

4.2.3. *Lack of shared vision and supportive leadership*

One-third of the teachers expressed their dissatisfaction with their colleagues and school management. One of the reasons for this level of dissatisfaction could be different teaching values and beliefs held by teachers, as evidenced by the following comments:

I try to attend the teaching methodology workshops for English language teachers... Other teachers do not want me to attend the workshop... They don't develop themselves and they do not want other teachers develop themselves. It's awful. When I want to share what I have learnt, there is nobody to listen to me. (Teacher 3, public school)

There are some teachers here who don't like to develop and change themselves. Can they prepare future citizens open to reforms? In fact, all such teachers should be fired. The current amount of salary matches with the work this kind of teachers do. (Teacher 9, public school)

As shown above, there seems to be lack of shared vision and supportive leadership among Mongolian English teachers, especially those who work in public schools. It is noteworthy here that one of the participants had stopped teaching in a public school just before the data collection due, for those very reasons:

I left my teaching position in a public school. I could not work with the teachers who do not know basic English grammar and who teach only in Mongolian language. When I criticized those teachers, the people in the school management or administration did not like me. Those teachers may have bribed the management to get employed. Who knows? (Teacher 14, public school)

Another teacher also expressed her intention not to continue working with her current colleagues in a public school:

There are many teachers in public schools who do not want to develop themselves, teach using only textbooks and their English proficiency levels are really low, may be at the same level as the private school 4th or 5th graders. I feel sorry about this kind of teachers who are even in this school. So, as a young person, I do not want to continue teaching in a public school. (Teacher 21, public school)

Throughout the data, it is noticeable that there are exacerbated tensions between senior- and junior-level Mongolian English teachers. Indeed, some young teachers were critical of the senior teach-

ers and vice versa. According to Teacher 3 (public school), senior teachers in his school boasted that they had worked there for 10, 20 or 30 years, looked down on him, and acted as though they could do anything and knew everything. He said he really felt sorry about those teachers since, for him, the outcome of teachers' work is more important than years worked. On the contrary, one of the senior teachers (Teacher 8), who worked there for more than 15 years, was critical of young teachers, as she claimed, their knowledge and skills had been deteriorating in recent years, which negatively affected the quality of English education in her school.

In addition, four participants expressed their dissatisfaction with the school's management. One of them stated that the school principal took a bribe for employing a teacher:

In recent years, most of the novice teachers in public schools are the graduates who completed the schooling in rural areas. To get teaching positions in Ulaanbaatar, they bribe school principals for at least MNT1,500,000. And they are under the protection of a principal. And if we criticize them, the management will oppress us. I think education reform has to start from replacing school principals. (Teacher 14, public school)

This shows that some persons in school management held biased attitudes toward teaching staff, which should not be acceptable in a school system. Another teacher (Teacher 12) highlighted that the person who could give money to the ruling party was appointed as a school principal or an education manager. Other teachers were critical that school principals and persons in management positions were replaced too soon and did not show any desire to develop themselves professionally. This clearly indicates the fault in human resources policy in public schools, a problem related to political intrusion into the public education system.

4.2.4. Low pay

Most of the teachers (nearly 90% of the public school teachers and 38% of the private school teachers) were dissatisfied with their respective salary levels. They commented that compared with the workload and the growing importance of English and its place in the educational system, they earn less, which is not enough to meet their standard of living. Some of them even stated that they are not motivated to do their job well due to the low pay scale:

Generally, I teach English in Mongolian language, may be just 10% of a class in English. Why? I do not want to make an effort since my salary is very low, not enough to feed my family. I want to do work which matches the salary. (Teacher 30, public school)

Teachers' salary is not enough. I think, thus, most of the teachers do not work from their heart. If the teachers had earned well they would have worked differently. (Teacher 25, public school)

However, some teachers expressed their willingness to remain in the profession despite financial difficulties:

Our salary is really bad, though we are investing in the future of the country. I earn over MNT500,000 after tax which is not sufficient for my family. As a head of a household, I need to earn more. I also speak some English! I can get MNT1,200,000 just by working as a receptionist at a nice hotel. Or I can work as a guide by earning more money than working as a teacher. But why am I here? I'm here for the only reason of making my students better human beings. We

don't have to teach English only for a few hours, we have to create human beings. (Teacher 3, public school)

Clearly, teachers' salaries need to be increased to strengthen their professional wellbeing. For instance, CD Nguyen's (2017) study in the Vietnamese context demonstrates that raising teachers' salaries assists them in alleviating their degree of financial burden and contributes to innovation in English language education.

4.2.5. *Poor reputation of the teaching profession*

In addition to financial struggles beyond the school setting, 23 participants expressed their views about negative attitudes toward schoolteachers throughout Mongolian society, which can be one of the demotivating factors affecting their level of job satisfaction and desire for professional development. For instance, the following extracts show that how teachers' reputations have been tarnished in recent years:

Some people hold disrespectful attitude towards teachers in the Mongolian society. The teachers' social status in Mongolia needs to be raised. I was asked quite a few times why I had become a teacher while I could do other worthy jobs. (Teacher 4, private school)

I've heard many times people say that "instead of being unemployed or doing nothing at least get a teacher's job". What does it mean? This is the tragedy in the Mongolian society. The value and reputation of teacher's profession is on the floor now. Over a decade ago, when I started teaching, teachers had good reputation. Recently I asked my 12th graders, who were preparing for the entrance exam, if any of them wants to become a teacher, but nobody wants. This is an example of the fact that how teacher's job is valued in the Mongolian society. Without developing teachers and increasing their values and reputation in the society, Mongolia will not develop. (Teacher 8, public school)

In the old days, a teacher's reputation was high, but now it has fallen. I think this happened because of some incompetent teachers. I am also working with such teachers. There is a saying in the society that "instead of doing nothing become a teacher". Mongolia needs to prepare very well qualified teachers for the sake of its development. (Teacher 9, public school)

One of the participants (Teacher 10, public school) even linked the fact that her students had not done their homework to the abovementioned negative attitudes toward teachers in society. She also was critical of some parents: "I think some children disrespect us by not obeying, for example, not doing their homework. This is related to teachers' reputation in the society and their low salary. Even some parents play main roles in ruining teachers' reputation instead of collaborating with teachers for the education of their children". These accounts indicate that the teachers encountered negative attitudes about their position, as teaching in a school was not highly valued in Mongolian society.

5. Discussion and conclusions

The transition from socialism to democracy and capitalism in the past three decades has acted to strongly emphasize the role of English and English education in Mongolia. Consequently, this has generated various English language policies and practices. These policies and initiatives related to

English language teaching and learning in Mongolia has highlighted the important role that English language teachers play in helping students equip themselves with a good command of English, which in turn can serve as a key factor in determining individual and national success in contemporary Mongolian society. However, there is a gap between the policy at the macro level and practice at the micro level as revealed in this study like in some Asian countries (Kirkpatrick and Liddicoat, 2019; Low, 2022). Extending the study of Marav et al. (2022), this study further depicts other challenges both public and private school English teachers faced not only at school setting but also beyond school setting.

Findings show that Mongolian English teachers have positive attitudes about the nationwide emphasis on English education. They believed that their students' English language proficiency would contribute to accessing different types of resources for their leisure, future academic studies, and employment as "a resource with exchange value" (Heller, 2010) that increases people's employability, level of social participation, and ultimate position in society, as in many other contemporary Asian countries. However, most Mongolian English teachers felt that they had not received respect and appreciation they deserved due to the status of the schoolteachers throughout Mongolian society. In addition, that they are underpaid negatively affects their levels of job satisfaction and motivation. Clearly, there is an immediate need for the Mongolian government to increase public school teachers' salaries to positively affect the quality of their teaching, and to recruit and retain high-quality teachers, actions that may well eventually enhance their reputation in society (c.f., CD Nguyen, 2017).

Furthermore, this study clearly indicates that there is a need to reduce the workload of public- and private-school English teachers since most of them need time for professional development and class preparation. As Kim (2019) states, the administrative workload of public-school teachers indeed hinders their teaching activities by decreasing their time on instructional preparation and providing feedback to students. In addition, that several teachers expressed their anxiety about their level of English proficiency means that they face insecurity when they must teach students at higher English proficiency levels. Thus, for Mongolian English teachers, they must pursue their professional development by engaging in a variety of professional development activities to advance their language and pedagogical skills.

The study also notes that there is a lack of a supportive teacher-to-teacher and teacher-to-principal relationships in some school contexts, which was another demotivating factor for several public-school teachers in particular. Colleagues and school authorities play a vital role in the development of teachers, given that the school or the teaching context forms a learning community that has a shared goal of working and learning together through participation in a variety of professional development activities to improve the quality of language education (Richards, 2011). Therefore, school management should aim to recruit competent and motivated teachers, and ongoing professional development opportunities must be incorporated so that teachers' motivation and instructional skills can be further developed.

Even though the study did not aim to compare English language education at public and private schools or the opinions of their respective teachers, it is noteworthy here that there have been considerable differences between teaching contexts, professional development opportunities, and attitudes and beliefs among some teachers. Evidently, the Mongolian government must take the

initiative in reducing educational inequality associated with access to quality English language education in the country, for instance, by increasing funding for public schools, raising teachers' awareness about their importance for the future of their country, and improving the quality of pre-service teacher education. It is also time to conduct additional studies of the current situation of English teaching and learning in Mongolia, based on the perspectives of key stakeholders who are involved in implementing policies and curricula. This is true not only to assess the outcomes of policies, but also to create plans to improve the quality of English education.

As with most empirical research, the study has limitations. For example, the study relies only on interview data. If different types of data such as observation, survey and field notes had been used, the study would have made more valid. Further, involving students or parents as research participants to gain different perceptions and perspectives on English education in the context of Mongolia would have strengthened the study by expanding the range and scope of the data. The findings of this study not only contribute to the understanding of the realities of English language education in Mongolia but also explore educational practitioners and policy makers in both domestic and international settings to see the importance of examining micro-level and macro-level implantation of language policies and practices.

Conflict of interest

The authors declared no conflict of interest.

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