

# THE WHOLE LANGUAGE APPROACH IN ELT AT THE LEVELS OF PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN CHINA

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**Abstract:** a paradigm shift in education and focusing on early learning set a new task for methodical science: to develop more effective teaching methods and techniques meeting modern requirements. In recent decades, researches on the applying Whole Language in teaching English a foreign language for young learners have become one of the core directions in English language teaching. In the beginning of 90s a number of scholars brought this methodology in the Chinese education.

Whole Language is an instruction to teach English language, which based on three constructivist principles of integrity of language skills, unity of learning and context, social development of gained knowledge [21]. There is an assumption that Whole Language can fit into the teaching English process in Chinese primary and secondary schools, and establish connection between the objectives and recommendations given in 2011 Curriculum Standards and classroom work, since the principles of Whole Language and objectives of 2011 Curriculum Standards are largely consistent.

This article provides a summary of the theoretical basis and principles of Whole Language, a literature review of scientific works related to Whole Language and the national curriculum in China since 1991, and identifies the main directions of the research on Whole Language, as well as some questions remained for further research. It was revealed that studies on Whole Language started in China relatively late, but despite this a significant number of scientific works are devoted to this theme, but relatively few articles examine to the application of the Whole Language approach to ELT at the levels of primary and secondary schools. Among the main issues highlighted by Chinese scientists are the synthesis and analysis of the theoretical aspects of the Whole Language Approach, discussing the suitability and possibility of implementing Whole Language in English courses in primary and secondary schools, the development of language skills and linguistic knowledge in the framework of teaching the Whole Language Approach, many scientists also touch on the questions of selecting teaching materials and analysis of textbooks.

**Keywords:** the Whole Language approach, ELT, English as a Foreign Language, Primary School, Secondary School, Curriculum Standards.

## ПРИМЕНЕНИЕ МЕТОДА «ЯЗЫК КАК ЦЕЛОЕ» В ОБУЧЕНИИ АНГЛИЙСКОМУ ЯЗЫКУ НА УРОВНЯХ НАЧАЛЬНОЙ И СРЕДНЕЙ ШКОЛ В КИТАЕ

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**Аннотация:** смена образовательной парадигмы и ориентация на раннее обучение поставили новую задачу в методологии лингвистики: разработать более эффективные подходы и методы преподавания иностранного языка, отвечающие современным требованиям.

«Язык как целое» — это концепция преподавания английского языка, которая основана на трех конструктивистских принципах: интегрированного развития языковых навыков, наличия контекста обучения, социального конструирования знаний. Существует предположение, что «Язык как целое» может вписаться в учебную программу английского языка в китайских начальных и средних школах и установить связь между целями и рекомендациями, изложенными в стандартах учебных программ, и работой в классе, поскольку принципы общего языка и цели Стандартов Образования 2011 года в основном согласуются и дополняют друг друга.

В этой статье дается краткое изложение теоретических основ и принципов метода «Язык как целое», результатов литературного обзора научных работ, опубликованных 1991 года, связанных с изучением

данного метода и развитием Национальной Учебной программы в Китае, и определяются основные направления исследований по теме, а также некоторые вопросы, требующие дальнейшего изучения. Согласно полученным результатам, исследования метода «Язык как целое» в Китае начались сравнительно поздно, но, несмотря на это, значительное количество научных трудов посвящено этой теме, но относительно немного работ посвящено применению метода «Языка как целое» в преподавании английского языка на уровнях начального и среднего образования. Среди основных вопросов, освещенных китайскими учеными, - обобщение и анализ теоретических аспектов метода, обсуждение целесообразности и возможности внедрения метода в учебную программу английского языка в начальных и средних школах, развитие языковых навыков и лингвистических знаний в рамках применения метода «Язык как целое». Многие ученые также затрагивают вопросы анализа и выбора учебных пособий и дополнительных литературных материалов.

**Ключевые слова:** язык как целое, преподавание английского языка, английский язык как иностранный, начальная школа, средняя школа, Стандарты Образования.

## **1. Introduction**

Whole language in the 1980s became a philosophy of language teaching that changed the concept of education in English-speaking countries. Since the 1990s, the Whole Language became an approach to teach the second/foreign language. According to the principles of the approach, language is taught as a whole, rather than isolated components of structures, vocabulary, and sounds. Language knowledge and language skills are nurtured as the whole within authentic literacy events.

Since the early 1990s, Chinese educators started to explore the whole language approach. Some studies highlight the theoretical aspects of the Whole Language approach, while others highlight the practical side of the issue.

The most recent Curriculum Standards (hereafter Curriculum Standards), established by the Ministry of Education of China in 2011, has the obvious trends of the downsizing the age of to begin to learn English, and popularization of English education in Chinese society. However, setting new goals by curriculum reform led to some challenges in implementing and readiness of young children to learn broad language knowledge. Thus, it is extremely important to explore the ways to resolve these problems [39]. This study is based on Chinese and foreign literature on this topic, published since 1960s. This article describes the results of literature review of researches on this topic, namely, generalized information on the concept, the content, theoretical foundation and principles of the Whole Language approach.

### **1.1 The concept of Whole Language**

The Whole Language approach was developed in the 1980s by a group of US educators concerned with the teaching of reading and writing for first language learners [31]. The representative advocates of the approach include Carolyn Burke, Jerome Harste, Ken Goodman, Yetta Goodman, Frank Smith, Dorothy Watson, and Constance Weaver [7]. Before the Whole Language approach became widespread, it often could be named "literature - based instruction" [7]. While the approach was originally introduced for teaching literacy skills to elementary school children who speak English as a native language, it was adopted in secondary and adult education, and also in ESL and special education [7]. Whole language is a literacy learning theory, and it contains the variety of explanations and evidence on how children best learn to read and write. From the beginning of 1990's, it was adopted to be used in foreign language teaching [22].

The first feature of Whole Language approach is that the language is taught as a whole, not fragmented into divided elements of grammar, vocabulary, and phonemics [7]. "The language experiences are meaningfully and authentically integrated with students' lives. Decontextualizing language is thought to make language abstract, even changing it into non-language" [20]. Students learn the language and its elements through meaningful reading or writing, and in oral communication [7].

The second feature is authenticity and meaningfulness of the content. The teaching process is based on the activities that are meaningful, interesting and fun for learners [7]. Teaching materials include textbooks, as well as "fiction or non-fiction works, popular books, biographies, encyclopedias, articles, newspapers, TV-guides, signs, handbills, and other resources from the real world [30; 4].

The third feature is student-centeredness of teaching process. Students are considered as a core of teaching-learning process. Target language is the means of communication and thinking in the classroom [22]. Students actively participate in the selection of content and setting purposes which will be consistent with their own standards [7].

### **1.2 Supporting theories of Whole Language**

The theory that has most influenced the Whole Language approach is the theory of social structuralism. In addition, the psycholinguistic theory and the Gestalt psychology constitute the theoretical basis of the approach.

#### **1.2.1 Language theory**

The Whole Language approach views language through interactional, functional and cognitive perspectives, and puts a clear emphasis on the wholeness of language [31].

Interactional perspective “views language as a vehicle for human communication and in which there is an interactional relationship between readers and writers” [30, 140]. Language knowledge be always applied in a social context. This principle addresses to both oral and written aspects of language, and to both first and second language learners [30, 140]. The Whole Language approach emphasizes on teaching language through authentic perspective, which means engagement with authors of taught literature and teaching language through the real-life situations [30, 524].

From the cognitive perspective, language is considered as “a vehicle of internal “interaction”, in other words, as a mean of internal reflection and thinking”. [31] We use language to think: in order to discover what we know, we sometimes write, perhaps talk to a friend, or mutter to ourselves silently” [31].

A functional perspective of language view implies the use of language has meaningful purposes and authentic functions.

The wholeness of language entails integrated teaching of language skills, which linked with authentic context. Vocabulary, grammatical structures, texts are interrelated and merged by a real-life topic [31].

### **1.2.2 Learning theory**

There are two main theories supporting learning theory of the Whole Language approach – humanism and constructivism.

The main principles of the Whole Language approach, such as authentic, personalized, self-directed, collaborative and pluralistic learning, are shared with the terms of humanistic views on education and language learning [31]. Classroom activities based on these principles are believed to help learners to develop and maintain learning interest, as well as intrinsic motivation to knowledge mastery.

Proponents of constructivist learning theory advocate that “knowledge is socially constructed, rather than received or discovered” [30, 141]. Language learning is not a passive, mechanical process of mastering isolated and devoid of social context elements of language, but a process of communication and exchanging language experiences and ideas between students in target language, and generalizing language rules and adopting them for actual use. In this language learning process, the students master a new language on the basis of the comprehension of the known one [22].

Constructivist classroom activities are based on “creating meaning”, “learning by doing” and collaborative work. Students often work together on shared projects. Teachers are the participants of collaboration, they help to create knowledge and to understand it in the social context. Bomengan (2010) believes that “Whole Language is a constructivist approach to education; ...Students learn effectively by analyzing small chunks of a system in order to learn the language... Learning is a cognitive experience unique to each learner’s own experience and prior knowledge, which forms the framework for new knowledge” [31].

### **1.3. Related Language Teaching Approaches**

The Whole Language Approach shares some points of theoretical basis, with a number of teaching language methods that basically developed on the concepts of communicative competence and integrated teaching of language skills [14]. These approaches are Communicative Language Learning (CLT), Cooperative Language Learning, Content and Language Integrated Learning, Natural Approach.

#### *1) Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)*

Communicative language teaching is an approach to language teaching that emphasizes interaction and development of communicative competence as the means and the goal of study.

Language learners learn and practice the target language through the interaction with each other and the teacher, and through the actual language use in the classroom and outside of the classroom. Learners discuss personal experiences, and teachers provide extracurricular materials, in order to improve language skills used in daily life [27].

According to CLT, the goal of language education is the ability to communicate in the target language [10].

CLT approach has strong theoretical basis which includes the theory of language, communicative competence, functional account of language use, discourse analysis and social-linguistic theory [25].

#### *2) Natural Approach was developed by Krashen and Terrel.*

In Natural approach, a language is acquired, rather than learned mechanically, it refers to the first language acquisition, and the way how children learn their mother tongue [22].

Originally Natural Approach was developed on the basis of “Acquisition/ Learning Hypothesis”. “Acquisition” is an unconscious process of learning through understanding and through meaningful use of language [30; 14]. “Learning” is a conscious process of mastering linguistic knowledge.

Formal teaching and learning necessary to maintain acquisition processes. “Learning” cannot guide “Acquisition” [30, 265].

#### *3) Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) refers to the second language teaching.*

The content of teaching is based on content of different subjects such as math, history, chemistry and others. In this way, students are supposed to “learn language and content at the same time, each supporting the development of other [22]. The approach is developed around following principles:

\* Language skills are mastered more successfully, if it used as a mean of learning the content, rather than learning language itself [21, 191].

\* It is believed that CLIL instructions may better reflect learners' needs, in terms its main purpose is to prepare learners for academic studies in English language medium [55].

\* Content helps to support both cognitive and interactional processes of language learning [55].

4) In terms of importance of learning language through actual use, development of communicative competence, authenticity of language and integration of language skills, Whole language shares theoretical basis with such language teaching approaches as Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), Cooperative Language [30; 5, 5].

Whole Language shares sociocultural view of language learning with Content-Based Instructions and Content and Language Integrated Learning approaches, particularly the idea of “scaffolded learning” (when more advanced students help weaker peers) and integrative teaching language skills [31].

Whole Language is also related to Natural Approach since its teaching process is based on the believe that second language can be learned in the same way that children learn their first language. Both Whole Language and Natural Approach have their origins in Chomsky's theory of language acquisition [7, 3].

## 2. Method

A literature review in recent research on the topic in China is conducted using CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure, 中国知网), which is the main national database of scientific information.

The topic of the research is “Whole Language Teaching in EFL at the levels of Primary and Secondary Schools in China”, which can be translated into Chinese as “基于整体语言法中小学英语教学设计“. In terms of narrow scope of this topic, it was expanded to “The Whole Language Teaching” (“整体语言教学”). The searching procedure was conducted at the 12 of November, and gave the result of 353 publications in the period from 1991 to 2019. The first article relevant to the topic of Whole Language was published in China in 1991. The publications are unevenly distributed over the publication time: 2019 (11), 2018 (13), 2017 (13), 2016 (18), 2015 (20), 2014 (20), 2013 (19), 2012 (26), 2011 (24), 2010 (29), 2009 (30), 2008 (33), 2007 (23), 2006 (15), 2005 (8), 2004 (15), 2003 (7), 2002 (11), 2001 (6), 2000 (3), 1999 (2), 1998 (3), 1997 (4), 1995 (2), 1992 (1), 1991 (3).

The chart (Pic.1.1) given below represent the distribution of literature sources by year of publication. The chart shows that in 2006 the number of publications began to increase. The largest number of relevant works were published in 2009. In 2017, there was a sharp reduction, and from 2017 until now, the number of publications has remained at a stable level (about 13 works per year). The chart also reflects scientific interest in the topic of a whole language.

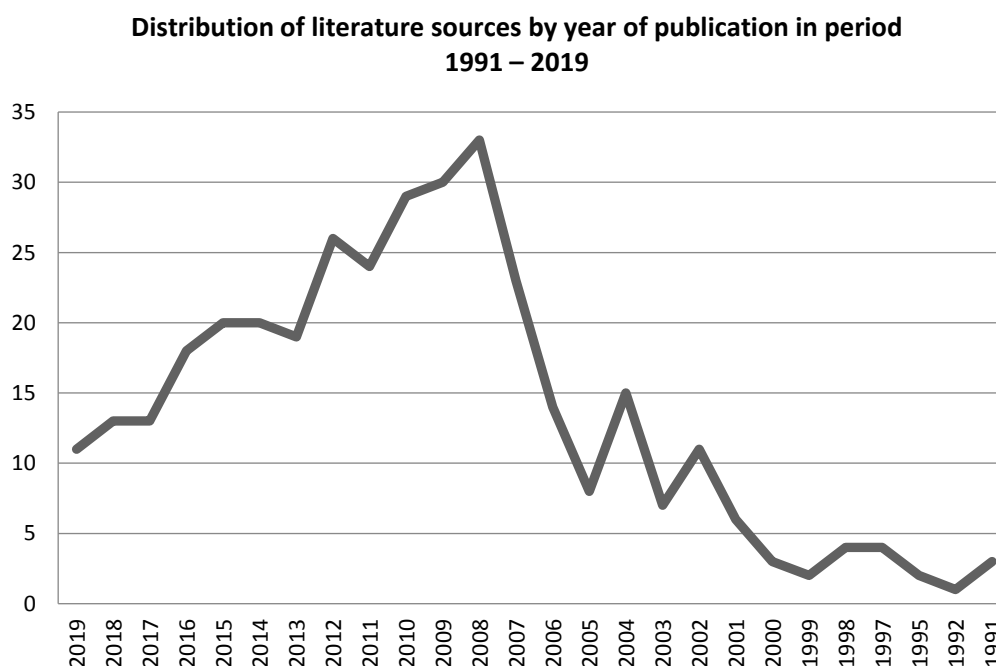


Fig. 1.1. Distribution of literature sources by year of publication in period 1991 – 2019 (Generated by CNKI)

By a type of resources, the obtained result includes 292 journal articles, 50 master's theses, 7 conference papers, 2 doctoral dissertations and 1 article from academic journal (Pic. 1.2). We excluded Master's theses, in

terms of this type of scientific works cannot be considered as a literature source of this study; thus, the number of publications declines to 303.

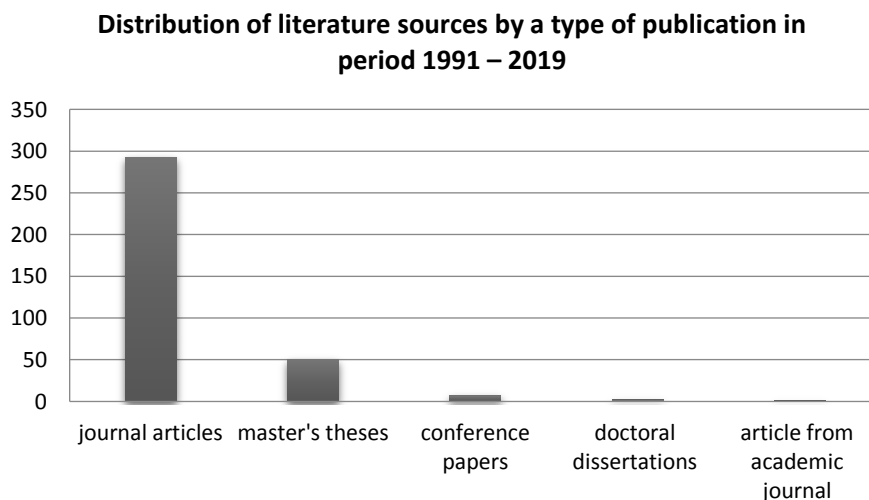


Fig. 1.2. Distribution of literature sources by a type of publication in period 1991 – 2019 (Generated by CNKI)

CNKI also provides the function of sorting literature sources by a descriptor and keywords. The obtained number is distributed on such subjects as Whole language teaching (131), Whole language teaching method (83), English teaching (45), Theory of Whole Language (43), College English teaching (35), High School English (6), Whole language method (29), Language teaching (29), Language learning (28), Sub-discipline teaching method (28), Whole Language (21), Primary English (20), view on Whole Language (18), Learners (17), Language Skills (17), Teaching Method (16), Teaching Models (12), Vocabulary Teaching (12), Language Teaching (11), English Teaching Reform (11), Teaching Methods (11), Communicative Competence (11), USA (10), Educational Reform (10), Teaching Reform (10), Whole language Teaching (10), Comprehensive English (10), North America (10), Whole language teaching (8), Wholeness (8), Language Knowledge (8) Whole Language (8), Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing (8), Application (9), Classroom (8).

The works containing the key words “College English teaching” (35), and “High School English” (6), cannot be included in this study, in terms of focus on elementary and secondary levels, as well as “Sub-discipline teaching method” (28), USA (10), North America (10), because these topics are beyond of the framework of this study. Since many papers may include several keywords, literature sources cannot be sorted automatically by the system. The choice was made mechanically by the authors through brief review of content of the works.

CNKI provides advanced search, which makes possible to limit searching scope by a keyword. After brief reading through the content of some articles the authors decided that such keywords as “vocabulary”, “grammar”, “listening”, “reading”, “writing”, “speaking”, “textbooks”, “history”, “reform”, “primary school”, “secondary school” will be used in searching procedure. The obtained number of works can be sorted by descriptors. In this way, we can pick the articles, which are the most relevant to the topic of the research.

### 3. Results and Discussion

#### 3.1 Historical perspective

The Whole Language in teaching English is a relatively new approach in China. In the mid-80s, some Chinese scholars began research on the study of foreign practices in teaching English and drawing on positive experiences for use in schools in China [56]. Unfortunately, no consistent information on the historical development of Whole Language in China was found. Therefore, the development approach will be addressed in the framework of the history of the development of ELT in China.

Political situation, economic factors, social environment had a significant impact on the development of ELT in China. Generally, five historical periods can be distinguished:

##### 3.1.1 USSR Influence 1949 - 1956

In the first years after the founding of the PRC in 1949, dramatic changes took place in the political, economic, social and educational spheres. In the 50s there was a political rapprochement between China and the USSR, which led to a certain influence of the Soviet Union on the life of Chinese society, including education. Schools and universities began to accept Russian language programs. In 1954, English was expelled from the compulsory primary and secondary school curriculum because of deteriorating political relations with Western countries, a shortage of English teachers and a desire to simplify the curriculum for children. However, English was still taught in some schools. The Direct Method was rejected, and it was replaced by the Grammar-Translation method, established by Russian textbooks [2]. The Soviet model was teacher-centered and

textbooks-centered and abundant in grammar structures and vocabulary. In the 1950s Russian gradually began to lose its popularity, and Chinese society gradually returned to English [13].

### **3.1.2 Experiments and expansion of ELT 1957-1965**

The development of international diplomatic and trade relations and interest in Western technology revives the interest of Chinese society in learning English. In 1957, English was again included in the curriculum of primary and secondary schools [13]. The development of ELT at that time in China was accompanied by certain difficulties, such as the lack of qualified English teachers [13]. Many Russian teachers retrained to teach English. This rapid retraining had a negative effect on the ELT [13]. All kinds of experiments with curriculum and textbooks took place at that time. In a consequence, teachers faced certain difficulties in implementing curriculum [13].

In 1961, English became a required subject for admission to universities. The version of curriculum of 1963 required mastering of speaking and reading. At that time, teaching methods based on a combination of reading, vocabulary and grammatical structures, which can be called prototypes of the Whole Language, were offered. In 1964, the MOE created a seven-year foreign language study program. The main teaching methodologies were the Audio-Lingual method, the Grammar-Translation method, and the Direct method. Comparing to the previous period, speaking and listening got more attention [2].

### **3.1.3 The Cultural Revolution (1966-1976)**

The period of the Cultural Revolution undermined all spheres of life in Chinese society. Broadcasts and books in foreign languages were banned. English has been excluded from curriculum at all educational levels. Universities were closed. The education system was in chaos. English programs appeared in some high schools in the early 70s, but there was no curriculum as such, and the textbooks compiled by the municipal authorities were not based on any linguistic theories, but were full of political propaganda [13]. The negative impact of the cultural revolution influenced the development of ELT for many years after its end.

### **3.1.4 Modernization (1977-1985)**

The policy of "Four Modernizations" ushered in a new era in the life of Chinese society. The rapid growth of the economy, and the development of cultural and scientific exchanges with foreign countries have deeply influenced Chinese education [13]. Language training of young generation for studying of science and advanced Western technologies became the main purpose of ELT. In 1978, the MOE issued a trial version of English Syllabus and unified textbooks for secondary schools. In English teaching, combinations of Audiolingual and Grammar-Translation methods still dominated. But despite this, the society was passionate about the lifestyle of Western countries and learning English. With the growth of educational exchanges in the field of ELT with Western countries, new methods were brought to China. In 1985, the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee announced a nationwide educational reform, which had a great impact on English teaching [13; 2].

### **3.1.5 Educational Reform and Globalization (1986-2000)**

Rapid economic growth in the late 80s and the influx of foreign investment influenced the demand for workers proficient in English. However, English proficiency was still low. The survey study initiated by the State Education Commission in 1986 revealed that majority of students had fragmented knowledge, which was caused by the use of outdated syllabuses, lack of qualified teachers and exam-oriented teaching. The version of Curriculum of 1993 emphasizes teaching through communicative and task-based methods, and aimed on building the educational process on gaining experience, cooperation and communication [13].

Chinese teachers went abroad for learning experiences of Western teachers, and Western educators visited China. New communicative ELT methodologies were implemented in Chinese education. This period can be noted by the desire of society to get quality education. [13] The process of implicating communicative approaches in China has been long and difficult. A large-scale retraining of teachers was required [2]

At that time, "Eclecticism" was widespread in China, that is the way of applying foreign experiences, considering the uniqueness of Chinese culture and the specific characteristics of lifestyle in China [2]. The process of reorienting to communicative methods was constrained by the existing exam system, teaching focused only on linguistic knowledge, the use of outdated teaching materials, limited resources and a lack of teachers, local educational institutions' resistance to changes, and a large number of students in classes (communicative methods are mostly focused on small classes) [2].

### **3.1.6 Strengthen China's International Stature and Quality Education (2000-2010)**

"Quality of education" refers to "the overall development of the whole child in bringing every future citizen to his or her best potential" [11].

In 2001, the MOE released a trial version of the Framework for the Curriculum Reform of Basic Education, as well as the trial version of new Curriculum Standards, which included requirements for 22 compulsory subjects. This version of curriculum was unified. According to Curriculum Standards, English became a compulsory subject from Grade 3 to Grade 9 of Primary Schools. English syllabus was oriented towards improving the country's socio-economic development to meet the national goals of economic modernization and internationalization. Curriculum Standards 2001 were approved that learning English should be based on experiential and collaborative work. New standards also included reform of the assessment system. One of the

important factors that prompted the MOE to include English among the compulsory subjects of elementary school is the public's conviction that an early start in learning English is more effective and beneficial for the further learning. The special feature of this version of curriculum is that the educational goals are not limited with mastering linguistic knowledge, but are expanded by the study of culture and society [39].

In 2001, China joined the World Trade Organization (WTO), and also got the opportunity to host the 2008 Summer Olympics. Held with the support of the government campaign of promoting learning English and other foreign languages, received broad support in society. Encouragement of learning foreign languages was aimed not only at the successful hosting of the Olympics, but also giving everyone the opportunity to interact with foreign visitors in the framework of further integration of China into the global community [6]. This goal has led to holding of various public events to promote and encourage English learning, such as the annual "Foreign Language Week" in Beijing, which includes art performances in English, as well as the involvement of volunteer teachers. With the support of the government, English began to be perceived as a universally necessary life skill in Chinese society in the 21st century [36].

### 3.1.7 Current Curriculum

"Quality of education" is still China's national strategy. In 2010, the Ministry of Education announced the "National Framework for Mid- Long-term Educational Reform and Development (2010–2020)," in which all children will receive equal educational opportunities will be given to each child. The goal of this reform is to turn China "from a country of huge human resources potential to one with strong human resources capacity" [11].

In 2011, the Ministry of Education issued new Curriculum Standards for compulsory education, which included 18 school subjects. The 2011 version focuses on compulsory education. The table below (Table 3.1) shows a list of 9 levels of English teaching and their corresponding school grades [11].

Table 3.1. Curriculum Standards 2011 Source: Gu, 2012, p. 43

2011 Curriculum Standards			
Senior secondary	Grade 12 Foreign language schools	Level 9	External exam
	Grade 12 (Senior secondary 3)	Level 8	External exam Level for university entry
	Grade 11 (Senior secondary 2)	Level 7	External exam Level for graduation
	Grade 10 (Senior secondary 1)	Level 6	
Junior secondary	Grade 9	Level 5	External exam Level for graduation
	Grade 8	Level 4	
	Grade 7	Level 3	
Primary school	Grades 5- 6	Level 2	
	Grades 3-4	Level 1	

According to the Standards, learning English starts from grade 3 of elementary school and continues until the end of senior secondary school [11].

One of the notable features of this version is that it contains a set of agreed objectives for each level. It helps to avoid not to do needless repetitions and learning already covered material again. Another important feature of the new Standards is that the document is not only focused on the development of linguistic knowledge and language skills, but also contains learning strategies, cultural awareness and emotional relationships. Together they form "Five target areas" (Table 3.2), which are essential components of developing general ability of language use [11, 43]:

1. Language Skills – Listening, Speaking, Reading, Writing;
2. Language Knowledge – Phonics, Grammar, Vocabulary, Functions, Topics;
3. Cultural Awareness – Knowledge, Understanding, Awareness;
4. Learning Strategies – Communicative, Resourcing, Meta-cognitive, Cognitive;
5. Affect – International, Perspectives, Patriotism, Confidence, Motivation [11, 43].

Table 3.2. Five target areas Source: Gu, 2012, p. 44

Five target areas	
Target areas	Target standards
Linguistic skills	Can-do statements for all 9 levels
Linguistic knowledge	Levels 2,5, and 8 standards
Affective attitudes	Levels 2,5, and 8 standards
Learning strategies	Levels 2,5, and 8 standards

Cultural awareness	Levels 2,5, and 8 standards
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Mastering language skills is required for all nine levels. Other four areas are supposed to be covered on levels 2, 5, and 8, which precede the levels of graduation (Grades 6, 9 and 12) [11].

The Curriculum Standards 2011 emphasis on employing communicative approaches to foreign language teaching (Communicative Language Teaching, Task-Based English Teaching, Whole Language, and others). Teachers are recommended to develop activities close to real life situations that will be aimed at interaction of students in the process of solving problems and discussing ideas [39].

In addition to general goals and general guidelines, Curriculum Standards contain recommendations for formative assessment in addition to high-stakes summative tests [11].

The shift from “Syllabus” to “Curriculum Standards” in the early 2000s was based on Western theories and experience. This term has been known since the early 1920s. Chinese Curriculum Standards do not differ much from the Standards of some other countries, but the difference is that Chinese Standards are more general and less detailed. This can be explained by the huge number of students across the country, the differences in both social conditions, the level of knowledge and personal characteristics. Therefore, the Curriculum Standards in this case should provide flexibility and balance between the requirements of the national level and regional differences [11].

However, there are still some challenges in implementation of this version of Curriculum Standards, such as too generalized nature of the given recommendations, early-age start of learning English, high demands on teachers and students, limited information on the mechanisms of second language learners of Chinese children. Educators still work on developing adequate implementation measures [11].

From the brief historical review of ELT development, we can conclude that ELT in China has gone through a difficult way full of obstacles. Educators, curriculum developers, policymakers and teachers realized that English proficiency is a necessary skill in achievement national goals in science and technology, social, economic, political spheres and in the field of international relations. Outdated ineffective methods of teaching foreign languages were replaced by new. It should also be noted that the learning objectives and recommendations on the organization of teaching process proposed in Curriculum Standards 2011 are largely consistent with the fundamental principles of the Whole Language approach. Therefore, it can be assumed that this method might be successfully applied in English teaching in primary and secondary schools in China.

### **3.2 The content of the literature review**

#### **3.2.1 The concept and theoretical basis of the Whole Language approach**

In determining the meaning and content of the Whole Language Approach, all authors provide similar information and refer to the founders of the approach (K. Goodman, M. Clay, F. Smith, P. Rigg and others), as well as to the famous western linguists, psychologists and philosophers who worked on general issues of education, issues of teaching foreign/second language, learning theory, language acquisition, curriculum development and so on (Vygotsky, Piaget, Bruner, Chomsky, Krashen and others).

Dai Yuhua (2001) sees Whole Language as an educational philosophy in language teaching. The concept of Whole Language refers to the system of beliefs about the nature of teaching / learning, and how to carry out teaching activities in accordance with the educational philosophy of the approach. It is an educational philosophy that promotes students’ comprehensive learning. Whole Language advocates believe that students who succeed in reading comprehension can consciously use several metacognitive learning strategies to manage their learning. According to Dai Yuhua, Whole Language is a specific manifestation of a broader concept of learning. This model of active learning is sometimes called the transactional model, which implies teaching/learning from the whole to the parts, rather than from the parts to the whole [41, 62].

Lu Di (2015) examines the concept of Whole Language through comparing two different educational paradigms. One of them, called the traditional method of teaching the language, is based on the study of separate aspects of the language with an emphasis on the “method of writing letters” and “grammar-translation method,” the other paradigm, called the Whole Language approach, focuses on discourse and on the integrated development of language skills. The traditional paradigm views language as a hierarchical system of language elements, while Whole Language views it as a means of communication and an instrument of thinking, the first equates language teaching with the subsequent, hierarchical and separate mastering of language skills, and the second encourages the simultaneous development of linguistic knowledge and language skills in a real context, closely related to society and environment [50].

Dai Nalian (2012) provided highly ordered and clear description of the theoretical basis of the full language approach in the literature review. According to Dai Nalian, the Whole Language was formed on the research results of many disciplines, such as:

- \* Structuralism. From this perspective, learners integrate new knowledge with existing knowledge. New knowledge goes through the hypothesis testing process, which occurs in internal mechanisms. and so, learning arises [41].



- \* Cognitive theory. This theory is based on the theory of social structuralism and on the principles of joint, cooperative and anti-competitive training [41].

- \* Humanism in linguistics is a view on language teaching as a process in which the most important factors are human factors, such as people's feelings and thoughts [41].

- \* The Gestalt psychology. The basic principle of Gestaltism is the Principle of Totality, which implies that conscious experience must be considered globally. A perceptual whole is different from what whole would be predicted from the sum of its individual parts. Moreover, the nature of a part depends upon the whole in which it is embedded.

- \* The reading theory of Psycholinguistics. Psycholinguistics is a combination of language system research on how humans acquire, interpret, organize, store, retrieve and apply knowledge. It views reading as a process of language processing in which the reader interacts with the discourse by correcting and negating hypotheses, relying on syntax, semantics, and phonological clues. Goodman (1988), defines the reading process as a "psychological linguistic guessing game". However, sometimes a hypothesis is wrong, which is called reading error or "miscues". Errors are inherent to this process [41].

- \* Sociocultural theory. According to Piaget (1936), the child is an "active scientist" who interacts with the physical environment and independently develops increasingly complex thinking strategies. Vygotsky (1978) emphasized the importance of a social context, in which a large part of the cognitive development of children takes place, and in which more experienced people direct their acquisition of understanding and skills. The approaches of Vygotsky and Piaget do not contradict, but, on the contrary, complement each other in understanding holistic cognitive development [41].

- \* Theory of Social Learning. This theory suggests that human behavior is determined by the constant mutual influence of behavioral, cognitive and environmental factors. Not only the environment factors affect human behavior, but the person plays an active role in creating environmental conditions. A person almost unconsciously repeats the behavior of other people, he/she chooses a model to follow, carefully observes, remembers, evaluates, and decides whether it makes sense to imitate this model [41].

- \* Cognitive Schema theory. The theory was proposed by Barlett (1932). Cognitive schemas are structured groups of concepts that include basic knowledge of events, actions, and behavioral scenarios generated from past experiences. This is a vehicle of memory and learning [41].

- \* Theory of Prototypes. This theory was proposed by E. Rosch (1973). This Theory is a concept of recognition of a stimulus by correlating it with a prototype stored in memory, which is an abstract representation of a set of stimuli embodying many forms of the same class. Lakoff (1982) summarizes Rosch's work applies it to cognitive linguistics.

Thus, the Whole Language approach is gradually developing by absorbing other theories, methods, research results and observations of educators [41].

### **3.2.2 The Principles of teaching in Whole Language Approach**

Xie Fang (2010), Wang Rong (2012), Xu Ying (2015), Zhang Min and Wang Guoling (2019) proposed similar principles of teaching. The principles put forward by them can be summarized in the following provisions:

- \* Integrated teaching of language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing).
- \* The entire process of language teaching should be student-centered.
- \* Use of authentic and real-life aids for the development of the target language in a functional, social and cultural context.

- \* The process of teaching moves from the whole to the part, rather than from parts to the whole.

- \* Fifth, language learning is based on cooperative learning and mutual assistance [47; 48; 50].

### **3.2.3 Linguistic Knowledge**

#### *Grammar*

Throughout the history of teaching English in China, grammar has been the most important element of teaching. Zhu (2009) notes, that in the process of teaching grammar to students, the functions of grammatical structures should be explained in connection with a real-life situation. Grammar teaching can be effective only when grammar teaching is placed in a situational context and practiced in writing, reading, speaking and listening [60].

#### *Vocabulary*

Kong (2008) discusses teaching vocabulary within the analyzing study of English coursebooks for primary schools. Primary school vocabulary is mostly represented by simple words, mainly physical objects, nouns, adjectives and verbs. But over time, vocabulary expands with more complex abstract concepts. Therefore, it is very important to introduce new words in a context, as well as practice their use in a context. The teacher can give have students to guess the meaning of a word based on association with its synonyms or antonyms, to form a new word by adding prefixes and suffixes [45].

Zhang (2009) refers to Zipf's "Law of distribution for word frequencies" and the concepts of Receptive and Productive Vocabulary, and argues that the process of learning vocabulary is a process of moving from passive

to active condition. This dynamic process requires that vocabulary input and output be practiced simultaneously, and not separately. Thus, regardless of the stage of study, the student can replenish the vocabulary with simple concepts and practice its use. The relationship between vocabulary reception and production is not a parallel process, but a process of interaction. Zhang argues that vocabulary can be taught effectively through integrated teaching of language skills [58].

According to Hong Jie (2013), the process of teaching vocabulary should be designed going from the whole to the part, then turning back to the whole. Whole Language reading activities imply “creating meaning”, which basically means guessing. In this way, firstly, the whole text should be introduced to avoid decontextualized vocabulary learning, then discussing of vocabulary follows, and after getting familiar to new words and structures, the text can be read again with better comprehension [44].

### **3.2.4 Language Skills**

#### *Writing*

Hong Jie (2013) discusses teaching of vocabulary to Primary School Students from the perspective of Whole Language. Hong Jie makes emphasis on the idea of mastering writing simultaneously with mastering reading. Teachers may encourage the students to write frequently based on the learned text. The students discover the relationship between pronunciation and spelling of the words through writing, as well as the difference between oral and written language. The form of writing varies. It might be tasks to write a story, diary notes, a letter, a short essay or dialogue [44].

#### *Reading Dialogues*

Di Yanyan (2019) makes accent on teaching Primary School Students through reading and acting out dialogues. Through reading and completing tasks, such as role-playing, drawing up a similar dialogue based precisely on the conversation of the characters, children may unconsciously find the practical use of new words and grammar. Di Yanyan put forward several principles that should guide the teacher in planning learning activities [42].

- \* Select training materials according to age, language proficiency, and interests of students. The dialogues should include cultural and social components.

- \* Assist students to analyze the logic between chunks of related knowledge. Before starting to read a dialogue, the teacher may ask some questions related the topic in order to predict the content of a dialogue, to summarize and organize already existing knowledge regarding this topic.

- \* Help students to observe and control the logical relationship in English conversations. Teachers may ask questions about the content of a dialogue, to help students trace the connection between the events in a dialogue.

- \* Extend the main topic with additional materials in order to create a favorable background for a better understanding and development of critical thinking.

- \* The use of diverse teaching aids. Practice has shown that using of thematic videos, learning chants and nursery rhymes, discussing pictures, games with flashcards efficiently assist teaching process. Multimedia materials help to draw children's attention and simplify understanding by building up a background of the main topic. They also help to dispel the boredom and to show young students that learning a language is not boring [42].

Zhang Min and Wang Guoling (2019) also highlight the issue of teaching English in primary school based on reading dialogs. They provide the recommendations for on how to construct a lesson based on teaching dialogues. The article gives an example of lesson plan based on an English textbook for fifth grade of primary school. In general, the authors put forward the principles for planning educational activities similar to Yan, but in addition to them, the following points can be highlighted in Min's article [56]:

- \* Teaching based on the student's actual foundation. It is strategically important to proceed from the current level of knowledge of the students to create a solid foundation.

- \* Hierarchical method of asking questions on the topic of the lesson. Firstly, a teacher asks questions related to general perception of the topic, secondly, questions about specific details, and thirdly, questions about the personal attitude and experience of students. After that, the main part of the lesson begins - reading the dialogue.

- \* Organization of communicative classroom activities in a real-life, cultural and social context. The content of the teaching materials for elementary school is quite simple, but a teacher should find a connection between the semantic content of the dialogue and real life, and arrange communicative tasks. A teacher may have students to conduct their own research on the topic, like writing a short essay, using additional literature, using learned structures and vocabulary from the dialogue [56].

#### *Listening*

Wang (2013) emphasizes the importance of listening in Whole Language teaching. Wang reveals how combinations of listening - speaking, listening - reading, listening-writing skills can be taught in the classroom. At the beginning of the lesson, the teacher can encourage students to talk about the theme of the lesson, and then let them listen to the audio recording and show a short video. Then, students read the text of the audio recording and track the speech while reading, which can help to improve pronunciation and reading comprehension.

Dictations and writing notes are the tasks combining listening and writing practice. The teacher may show the video or let students listen to the audio, then have the students to retell the story and share their opinion verbally or in writing [52].

Liu (2006) notes that learning any language requires multiple experiences of listening, speaking, reading and writing so that the auditory center and the visual center of a brain can form a mutual connection. Listening and reading are seen as input of information. Speaking and writing are seen as output of information. All four aspects of the language are interconnected and mutually influence on each other. By entering information and receiving feedback, an integrated learning process is formed. Thus, listening cannot be separated from other language skill. It develops in harmony and equally with reading, writing and speaking [47].

### **3.2.4 Textbooks and teaching materials**

Whole Language is an approach to teach language using authentic literary materials. Some educators view Whole Language as a method to teach how to read. Therefore, some authors focus on the analysis of textbooks and choice of teaching materials.

Liu (2005) compares the new versions of English textbooks with the old versions, and discusses what changes in the teaching of English new textbooks require. Firstly, new textbooks contain not only linguistic knowledge, but also general knowledge of other subjects, such as mathematics, arts, literature, medicine, astronomy, etc. On the one hand, new textbooks help to broaden the horizons of knowledge, increases interest in learning foreign languages. On the other hand, broaden content of textbooks requires to develop a habit of "doing something in English", to think and analyze in English [49].

Li (1998) notes on the important of the use of literature works and authentic reading materials as necessary extracurricular materials. Reading materials in textbooks are usually edited and simplified, original meaning and authenticity may be lost. Extracurricular reading may include children's fairy tales, stories, poetry, magazines and newspapers. It is important to collect texts on various topics [48].

Tan Yi (2009) discusses the use of the Cambridge International textbooks. The author provides general information about the features of Cambridge International materials, which are popular in some Chinese schools, and also outlines strategies for combining Whole Language and Cambridge International textbooks [51].

### **3.2.6 Criticism**

Some debates take place around the main principles of teaching of the Whole Language approach. Mainly, some educators keep doubting the effectiveness of the methodology, since it "ignores" to teaching phonemic, which is important in second and foreign language teaching. Ling Pan (2012) summarized advantages and disadvantages of Whole Language [22].

The advantages are:

- \* it is easier to understand the whole text;
- \* integrated mastering of listening, speaking, reading and writing;
- \* through employing informal type of assessments students can get a more objective score.

The disadvantages are:

- \* Teaching of grammatical rules are frequently inconsistent.
- \* It is played a little attention to the word spelling and pronunciation rules [22];

Ling Pan believes that the advantages of Whole Language outweigh its disadvantages, and the approach is worth popularizing. The proponents of Whole Language accepted criticisms directed their efforts to improve and enrich the principles and procedures of Whole Language.

## **4. Conclusion**

From the literature analysis given above, the following points can be concluded:

Whole language is the approach to teaching first, second and foreign languages. It was emerged 1980s. The Whole Language approach refers to "decoding" approach to language, and emphasizes natural way of learning to read and write, its main principles are importance of meaning, integrated learning skills and using authentic reading materials.

Firstly, there exist a lot of problems in teaching of English at the primary and secondary levels of school, and whole language may be employed to resolve some of them. Secondly, Whole language is a unique approach to teach reading, which has rich theoretical foundation. Thirdly, the "whole language" theory has both advantages and disadvantages, it is believed that its advantages outweigh disadvantages.

Last decades, with the deepening international cooperation, proficiency in English has received increasingly important attention in China. Disproved ineffective methods of teaching foreign languages were replaced by new methods. It is noteworthy that the goals set in 2011 Curriculum Standards and the basic principles of Whole Language are similar and complement each other.

However, linguists still doubt the ideology of early-age English learning. Many problems have occurred regarding to the application of the new curriculum in primary and secondary schools [38].

Based on the results of the literature review, the following conclusions can be drawn:

Over the past decade, a relatively small number of scientific papers published in China have been found that are relevant to the topic of teaching English in primary and secondary schools based on the Whole Language

approach. Much of the research on Whole Language focused on the teaching of English in high school or at the university. A large part of articles is represented by literature reviews based on studies of foreign scholars or early studies of Chinese scholars. There are several scientific works, which are devoted to the description of results of experimental teaching in primary and secondary schools. Unfortunately, no information regarded to the application of Whole Language in accordance with the age characteristics of students was found.

Obviously, many gaps remain in the study of the practical application of the approach in primary and secondary schools, in particular. The questions about the choice of teaching materials, about the implementation of the approach into the curriculum of Chinese schools with the regard to cultural and social specifics, as well as the question of the impact of the native Chinese language on the target English language, were not examined. Experimental verification of theoretical assumptions of Whole Language efficiency of English teaching in Chinese schools has not been conducted or has not been described.

Thus, research on the Whole Language approach has a broad perspective. There are many narrow areas and problems that need to be explored and resolved.

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