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China to downgrade English section of college admissions test

Beijing education authorities plan to de-emphasise English scores on standardised tests, a sign that China's obsession with the language may be waning.

The Beijing municipal commission of education plans to reduce the English section of the all-important college admissions test, the Gaokao, from 150 points to 100 points in major cities by 2016, China's official newswire Xinhua reported.

It will boost the value of the Chinese section from 150 to 180 points. Currently, the test weighs English, Chinese and maths equally.

Officials have spun the proposal as both a practical decision and a matter of national pride. "The change highlights the fundamental importance of mother tongue in the curriculum," a representative from the commission told Xinhua.

Education authorities are also considering scrapping mandatory English lessons before the third grade. They currently begin on the first day of primary school.

Shandong and Jiangsu provinces, as well as Shanghai, may remove English from the Gaokao entirely. Public consultation on the proposal began on Monday, Xinhua reported.

Wu Mengran, a 19-year-old recent high-school graduate in northern China's Inner Mongolia autonomous region, said the change would allow students to spend more time studying oral English rather than blindly copying grammar patterns in preparation for the test.

"In China, you can be really good at English tests but still not be able to use English to communicate," she said. "Very few people study English here just to study English."

Chinese schools currently mandate English classes until university, giving rise to a sprawling £3.1bn private English training industry. Even remote cities are full of test prep schools and tutoring agencies.

Xinhua called the proposals "no more than a minor tweak", emphasising that they would change the way that English is taught without diminishing its importance.

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