

College English Reform in the Context of Globalization A Case in Wuhan University

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Abstract

English has been playing the role of world language for it is the most important information carrier and global business language. Faced with challenges from the new century and higher professional and academic demands from students, College English in China should go beyond the traditional teaching mode and course designing as the situation changes. Academic efforts have been made by scholars to research on College English reform both theoretically and empirically. In this paper the case of College English Reform is presented and analyzed with the purpose of exploring an effective path for the reform.

Keywords: College English Reform; Course Designing; English for Specific Purpose

I. Introduction

English is important not only because it is the most important information carrier but also because it is the language most widely used in business. More and more multinational companies are mandating English as the common corporate language—Airbus, Daimler- Chrysler, Fast Retailing, Nokia, Renault, Samsung, SAP, Technicolor, and Microsoft in Beijing, to name a few (Tsedal Neeley2012). Chinese enterprises are increasingly active in world economy. Statistics from Chinese Ministry of Commerce show that in 2013 China's trade in goods amounted to 4 trillion, ranking the first after surpassing the United States, and trade in services reached 5 hundred billion, maintaining the third. When the rapid economic development in China has attracted numerous foreign investment Chinese enterprises are investing overseas. Confronted with globalization and economic integration in the new century, College English should be reformed accordingly to accumulate the human capital for Chinese economic development. It is of necessity that China have a tremendous talent pool who are capable of participating in international affairs and competitions in English from the international perspective armed with professional skills, knowledge of international laws and regulations.

College English is an integral part of higher learning, a required basic course for undergraduate students in China (**College English Curriculum Requirements**, 2007). It has been playing an important role in the economic development in China. But College English itself is a language learning phenomenon with Chinese characteristics because China is the only country in the world where millions of students are learning the same language guided by the same curriculum with the same purpose of passing the same test(CET4 and CET6:College English Test band 4 and College English band 6). Since **College English Curriculum (for science students)** was issued in 1985 and **College English Curriculum (for both science students and arts students)** was issued in the following year College English teaching has achieved fruitful results. The changes in curriculum requirements demonstrate that freshmen have been better English learners, especially in vocabulary and reading speed. The English Teaching Curriculum issued in 1962 required a minimum

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vocabulary of 1400, basic grammar and reading speed of 10 words per minute. The 1986 curriculum for both science and arts students required a vocabulary of 1600 at entry level and the Course Requirements issued in 2007 called for a vocabulary of 4795 words and 700 phrases, understanding broadcast and TV program in English at the speed of 130-150 words per minute and reading at the speed of 70 words per minute. College English learners have been different in the 21st century in vocabulary and skills in listening and reading from those in the 1980s and 1990s. The minimum vocabulary for high school graduates is 3500 by Course Requirements for High School Students issued by Chinese Ministry of Education in 2003, which implies that nearly no gap exists between the English high school students have mastered and that of College English learners. Consequently, the CET4(College English Test band 4) passing rate is increasing steadily.

However, the rapid increase in vocabulary and reading speed and continuously renewed passing rates of CET4 and CET6 don't necessarily lead to enhanced abilities of using English as a tool. It was reported in EF English Proficiency Index by Education First in 2013 that China ranks the eleventh among the twelve countries and area surveyed in Asia, showing low efficiency level. A latest online survey shows that most non-English major students in Chinese colleges spend the majority of their effective study time on College English, but only less than 5% of them have achieved efficient communication without difficulty. Why is there a disproportion between the input of study time and language efficiency? Students are urged to pass CET4 before graduation, in key universities in particular, otherwise they will be deprived of the degree. Under these circumstances College English is test-oriented, focusing on language knowledge and input abilities but ignoring application efficiency. Although writing is an essential part of CET4, the paradigm of three-paragraph in fixed logical pattern fails to help writing for academic or specific purpose. Meanwhile, College English Oral Test, an independent test from CET4, is not pegged to academic degree, leaving students less motivated to improve oral communication skills.

II. Call for Reform

College English Reform demand from students for academic purpose and future career have been echoed in the academia and education authorities. Instead of a matter of to be or not to be, College English Reform is actually a matter of what to be. A survey conducted by the College English Steering Committee in Shanghai on English learning demand among 10,000 college students and 500 teachers shows that neither students nor teachers are satisfied with the present condition of College English teaching compared with an increased demand for learning English for specific purpose(Cai,2013). College English is basically test-oriented, failing to motivate learners and input information (Chen,2008). Given the fact that College English is taught in less than 300 hours, it is impractical to cultivate versatile English masters. Therefore, students should be granted with greater freedom to choose their learning objects and course types (Wen,2013). However, College English has been focused on language knowledge, which neither satisfies the students' academic need and vocational demand, nor meets the human capital strategy of the country (Cai,2012). One suggestion is that , in order to cultivate learners' practical abilities, College English be divided into three modules, namely basic English module, advanced English module and professional English module(Ma,2013) Another suggestion is that College English be reexamined and relocated to transform from English for general purpose to English for academic purpose(Cai,2014)

According to **College English Curriculum Requirements**, a important part of **National Outline for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development** by the Ministry of Education, the objective of College English is to develop students' ability to use English in a well-rounded way, especially in listening and speaking, so that in their future studies and careers as well as social interactions they will be able to communicate effectively, and at the same time enhance their ability to study independently and improve their general cultural awareness so as to meet the needs of China's social development and international exchanges.

Therefore, College English Reform, instead of an issue of to be or not to be, it is an issue of what and how to be. And the priority of the present work is to advance and deepen College English Reform continuously. Colleges and universities are encouraged by **College English Curriculum Requirements** to improve teaching quality and integrate comprehensive English courses, language skills courses, language application courses, language and culture courses and English for specific purpose courses to ensure that students at diverse levels make progress in English application to meet the needs of the country and society for qualified personnel in the context of globalization. Additionally, the extensive use of advanced information technology is encouraged and computer and web-based courses should be developed. The implication of the programmatic document is that different colleges and universities can design appropriate syllabus in line with their teaching resources and College English goals as well as student needs. In some universities, College English teaching hours and credits are reduced, and complementary time is allocated to English courses for general education and English courses for specific purpose. As a result, College English Reform is in progress in the country.

III. A Case in Wuhan University

Wuhan University is a comprehensive and key national university directly under the administration of the Ministry of Education. Although College English teaching is not directly test-oriented for neither CET4 nor CET6 training is included in the syllabus or teaching practice, the passing rates in CET4(above 98%) and CET6(above60%) are impressively high. However, these years have witnessed a strong demand from the students for a change in the course. Many freshmen might have passed CET4 if they are allowed to take the test upon registering with the university. As is stated in the former part, the English level of high school graduates comes very close to that of College English learners, so that for top students who are usually enrolled by top universities, there is no gap in fact. Dissatisfied with the traditional College English teaching syllabus, they hope they can develop the abilities to use English as a tool to achieve academic purpose or facilitate the careers. Wuhan University is not the first one to initiate College English Reform, but it undertakes the reform in a specific way.

College English Reform in Wuhan University, launched in 2004, was marked by two significant events. The first one was that the Self-access Learning Center was established with the capacity for all the learners in the university. New Era Interactive English published by Tsinghua University Press and New Horizon College English by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press are used by regular students and advanced students respectively. The operation of the Self-access learning Center is not only a demonstration of commitment to reform but also a extension of classroom learning to extracurricular activities and a effective provider of interactive learning resources for students, which helps to cultivate habits and abilities of independent learning and life-long learning. The other significant event was that in the same year the International Summer English Program was launched by Wuhan University and Ohio State University, which has been an influential oral English training program. Students are encouraged to participate in extracurricular activities like English paper editing and reading, English language competition, debate in English, which are effectively supplementary to classroom teaching. Consequently, a three-dimensional language learning model has been formed, namely, a combination of classroom teaching, computer-aided learning and extracurricular activities.

No reform can be accomplished overnight. Thorough understanding of **College English Curriculum Requirements** and qualified teachers are indispensable prerequisites of College English Reform. Seminars on curriculum requirements and course design actively involve teachers in the reform process from the very beginning. A bigger challenge comes from qualified teachers. In some universities English teachers are encouraged to teach new courses based on their interest and student need. But teachers in Wuhan University are encouraged to participate in training programs or pursue higher degrees in interdisciplinary subjects years before

the reform actually started, which helps to enlarge the talent pool for the reform. However important computer-aided learning and extracurricular activities are, classroom teaching is the focus of College English Reform. Before a suitable syllabus is designed, relevant questions should be answered. What to teach? How to teach? And Why? In order to understand the demands from students, all the teachers were required to communicate with students about their ideas, suggestions and needs concerning College English teaching and learning, which was also an essential part of Two-way Interviews and Two Innovations initiated by Hubei Provincial Government(<http://www.hbe.gov.cn/content.php?id=8424>).After carefully analyzing the opinions collected through the face to face talks between teachers and students the College English Reform program takes shape.

Table One: English Training Program

Category	Course Name	Credit	Hour	Notes
A Basic English	Basic English 1	3	54	For limited English proficiency learners, four semesters and 12 credits required.
	Basic English 2	3	54	
	Basic English 3	3	54	
	Basic English 4	3	54	
	College English 1	3	54	Learners start from College English 2, three semesters of College English and 11 credits required, free to choose any subject from Category B
	College English 2	3	54	
	College English 3	3	54	
	College English 4	3	54	
	Advanced English 1	3	54	For learners who start from College English 3, two semesters of Advanced English and 10
	Advanced English 2	3	54	
B Advanced English	College English 5	2	36	Optional choice for College English 2 starters
	Advanced English 3	2	36	Optional choice for Advanced English 1
	Advanced English 4	2	36	Optional choice for Advanced English 1
	Practical Skills in English Speaking Skills	2	36	Optional choice for those who have completed Category A courses in their third or fourth semester.
	English Testing Skills	2	36	
	Intercultural	2	36	
	English Movies Appreciation	2	36	
	Appreciation of Classical English Stories and Novels	2	36	
	Hot Topic Speech and Debate in English	2	36	
	Language and Society	2	36	
	Legal English	2	36	
C English for Specific Purpose	English in News	2	36	Optional choice for the students who have completed Category A courses.
	Business English	2	36	
	Economic English	2	36	
	English for Humanities	2	36	
	English for Science and	2	36	
	Medical English	2	36	

College English is divided into three categories, namely basic English, advanced English and English for specific purpose. The new program is scheduled for students enrolled in college in 2013 after 10 years' studies and experimental teaching practice. The Basic English category, similar to the College English in the traditional sense, is geared to different students at ten levels. The placement test freshmen take decides the starting level from any one among Basic English1-4, College English1-4 or Advanced English1-2. The higher level students begin, the shorter learning time they should take in Basic English Category. With the prerequisites of compulsory English learning in four semesters, students may choose any courses that interest them from the category of Advanced English and English for Specific Purpose. The Advanced English courses include College English 5 and Advanced English3-4, English Testing Skills, Hot Topics Speech and Debate in English, Appreciation of Classical English Stories and Novels, Intercultural Communication and etc.. The English for Specific Purpose courses range from Legal English, Business English, Economic English to Medical English and English for Humanities and Social Sciences, and English for Science and Technology.

The English Training program is characterized by learner segmentation and need and interest-orientation. As far as English competence is concerned, College Entrance Examination scores do not make much sense because they may get high scores with adequate exercises in reading despite problems in listening and speaking due to limited teaching resources in high school and lack of practice. And it implies simultaneously that most students have obtained adequate language knowledge and the difference majorly lies in language competence, the ability to use English in listening, speaking, writing and translation. So College English cannot be canceled abruptly, instead, it should be customized to different learners and followed up by need and interest-based courses. All the students spend shorter time on College English except a very small number of limited English proficiency learners, especially those from minority areas and the students enrolled by special admissions for sports or art talents. Most students enjoy greater freedom choosing the courses they have interest in to get ready for further studies and future work. Advanced English courses are designed for intermediate students to help them to become advanced learners and offer better chances to expose them to humanities and social sciences. English for Specific Purpose courses are designed to meet diverse needs of students from different disciplines.

IV. Conclusion

Since the first **College English Curriculum** was issued in 1985, College English teaching has contributed to the talent pool for economic development in China. However, as changes appear continuously in the society and economic structure, and high school graduates become increasingly better English learners, College English Reform is doomed. Many universities in China are exploring suitable ways to reform College English. But there is no almighty way to guarantee absolute success. The case of Wuhan University, with the characteristics of learner segmentation, interest and need-orientation and teaching resources cultivation at first, may throw out a hint.

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