

College English Teaching in China: Development, Characteristics and Prospects

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Abstract

This paper presents the development process and characteristics of college English teaching and puts forward a prospect for the future college English teaching pertaining to three aspects, including colleges, students, and teachers. It is aimed to ruminate on the success and failure during the development of college English teaching, provide a reference for deepening reform in the transitional period, and also contribute to the continued research in related fields.

Keywords

College English; English teaching; Development.

1. Introduction

Upon entering the 21st century, the three bases for formulating and revising curriculum objectives have changed, namely, the needs of discipline development, social development and students' development are no longer the same with the passing of times (Wen Qiufang, 2012). Against the backdrop of globalization, the function of "English" as an international language is diversified and the new teaching concept of "English International Language" becomes increasingly prominent. The improvement of China's comprehensive national strength and the rapid expansion of overseas business puts higher demand for specialized foreign language high-end talents with international vision. Up to the fall semester in 2010, the English Curriculum Standard for Ordinary Senior High Schools (Experiment) has been fully implemented in middle schools, and the English level of freshmen in colleges and universities has been generally improved. An analysis of recent studies on college English teaching in China shows that college English teaching in colleges and universities experienced many stages of development. This paper focuses on the development and characteristics of college English teaching in China, looks forward to the future college English teaching, and makes an overall summary of the evolution process of college English curriculum in order to provide a supplement for further research in related fields.

2. The Development of College English Teaching

College English courses are English courses offered to non-English major undergraduates in mainland China. It is a compulsory basic course for college students and an important part of higher education. After 1986, the predecessor "Public English" was renamed College English, and the name was gradually unified (Yan Jia, 2020; Hao Chengmiao, 2012).

In order to better review the development of college English, the segmentation of previous studies is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. The main segments of the research on the development process of college English teaching in the past

Number of stages	Researcher	Status of each stage
"Two-stage theory"	Li Jian (2008)	The recovery of public English teaching in the early stage of reform and opening up (1976-1982) The Prosperity and Development of College English Teaching in the Period of Socialist Modernization (1982)
"Three-stage Theory"	Shen Ting (2010)	The first stage (from the founding of the People's Republic of China to the end of the 1970s) The second stage (from the early 1980s to the end of the century) The third stage (early 21st century to present)
	Cai Jigang (2009)	The first stage (1978-1986) The second stage (1987-2001) The third stage (2002 to present)
	Wang Shouren (2008)	Recovery phase (1978-1984) Stable development stage (1985-2001) Reform stage (2002 to present)
	Cen Jianjun (1998)	Recovery phase (1979-1985) Development stage (1985-1994) Improvement stage (after 1994)
"Four-stage Theory"	Yan Jia (2020)	Recovery phase (50s to 1970s) Initial stage (early 1980s to early 1990s) Leapfrog development stage (mid-1990s to late 20th century) Deepening the reform stage (entering the 21st century)
	Hao Chengmiao (2012)	Stage of start and setbacks (1949-1977) Stage of recovery and development (1978-1984) Stage of development and stability (1985-2001) Reform and promotion stage (2002 to present)
	Wei Fangju (2009)	Recovery phase (late 1970s to mid 1980s) Development stage (mid-1980s to mid-1990s) Improvement stage (1990s) Reform stage (since the 21st century)
	Chen Hong (2008)	Recovery stage (1980-1984) Development stage (1985-1993) Consolidation stage (1994-2001) Improvement stage (2002 to present)
"Five-stage Theory"	Chu Ruili (2011)	The embryonic stage (1962) Initial stage (1980) Development stage (1985/1986) Exploration stage (1999) Maturity stage (2007)

It can be seen from previous studies that the research on the development process of college English teaching mostly focuses on the post-reform-and-opening-up period, with the "three-stage theory" and the "four-stage theory" as the main ones. There is still a gap in the division of the development process before the reform and opening up. Dai Weidong and Hu Wenzhong (2009) divided the development of college English education into two major stages: before the reform and opening up (1949-1978) and after the reform and opening up (after 1978), but with no further exploration for each stage. Li Jian (2008) divided the period before the reform and opening up into three small stages: the shrinkage of public English teaching during the "learning

from the Soviet Union" period (1949-1956), the restoration of public English teaching during the construction period (1956-1966), and the discontinuation of public English teaching during Cultural Revolution (1966-1976).

In addition, it is not difficult to find that the "three-stage theory" and the "four-stage theory" have similarities. The three stages divided by Cen Jianjun (1998) basically coincide with the first three divided by Wei Fangju (2009) and Chen Hong (2008). Most important time points include the year 1978, 1980, 1985, 1986, and 2002. These years are important because the reform and opening up happened in 1978 and the English Teaching Syllabus (Undergraduate of Science and Engineering in Colleges and Universities) was published in 1980, and the two syllabuses of "College English Syllabus (for undergraduates in science and engineering in universities)" and "College English Syllabus (for undergraduates in liberal arts and sciences)" were published in 1985 and 1986, and the Higher Education Department of the Ministry of Education started to reform college English teaching in 2002.

In light of the existing literature, the author believes that college English teaching roughly experienced five periods of burgeoning, setback, recovery, upgrading and transformation. The five periods will be introduced as follows:

2.1. Burgeoning Period: 1949 to the Mid-1960s

After the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, Sino-US relations were tense. The Ministry of Education issued a notice in 1954 that there would be no English courses in primary and secondary schools, and English teaching in colleges and universities must also be converted to Russian teaching (Cai Jigang, 2020). After 1956, colleges and universities gradually opened college public English courses. English teaching began to return as the Sino-Soviet relations deteriorate in the early 1960s. The number of college students taking public English courses continued to increase. In June 1962, the Ministry of Education issued the English Teaching Syllabus (Implementation Draft) which became the first college English teaching syllabus since the founding of New China (Li Liang you et al., 1988). In the embryonic period, there was no unified and publicly published textbook for public English courses. Each school used the handouts compiled by the teacher according to the corresponding situation. The teaching requirements and content of each university varied, featuring a model of "Technical English" combined with professional English. There is a grand occasion of "a hundred flowers blooming" in different majors of the same school using different public English textbooks (Cai Jigang, 2007). At that time, reading was the main focus; grammar-translation method is mostly adopted. It was aimed to lay a foundation of language use and to help students read professional English book.

2.2. Setback Period: The "Cultural Revolution"

Four years after the announcement of the English teaching syllabus, the 10-year "Cultural Revolution" broke out. Political slogans dominates in textbooks and classroom teaching. English teaching and learning was under general frustration; related research was not taken seriously.

2.3. Recovery Period: After the Reform and Opening up to the Mid-1980s

In August 1978, the Ministry of Education held a National Forum on Foreign Language Education in Beijing. Vice Chairman Liao Chengzhi delivered an important speech on "Stepping Up the Cultivation of Foreign Language Talents". Although the focus was on the training of foreign language professionals, it involved foreign language education in universities, middle schools and primary schools (Wang Shouren, 2008). In April 1982, the establishment of the Public Foreign Language Teaching Research Association and the convening of the Public English Class Teaching Experience Exchange Meeting in Colleges and Universities marked that

public English teaching entered a new stage. Public English teaching as a subject has received extensive attention (Yan Jia, 2020).

The "College English Syllabus (for undergraduates in science and engineering)" published in 1985 and the "College English Syllabus (for undergraduates in liberal arts and sciences)" published in April 1986 are the first complete and detailed syllabuses since the founding of New China. Although the syllabus still emphasizes reading, it increased the requirements for listening, translation, writing and speaking compared with the burgeoning period. It began to pay attention to language communication skills. As for teaching method, it puts forward measures for graded teaching and provides quantitative and qualitative standards that aim to develop students' communication skills in writing and speaking.

2.4. Upgrading Period: The Middle and Late 1980s to the Beginning of the 21st Century

After 1985, the idea that "integrating liberal arts and science and focusing on the core of language" (Dong Yafen, 1986) was put forward and soon dominated. In November 1986, the China Public Teaching Research Association was renamed as the China University Foreign Language Teaching Research Association, and Public English was renamed as College English. Especially after the implementation of CET-4 and CET-6 in 1987, college English entered a period with standardized and unified basic English teaching.

In 1999, when colleges and universities expanded their enrollment, the College English Teaching Guidance Committee issued the "College English Syllabus (Revised)", which unified the "College English Syllabus (for undergraduates in science and engineering)" in 1985 and "College English Teaching in 1986" Syllabus (for undergraduates in liberal arts and sciences)". For the first time in the country, the Syllabus put forward unified teaching goals and requirements. The formulation of "College English Syllabus (Revised Edition)" is also the second major reform in the history of college English teaching in China. This syllabus does not distinguish between liberal arts and sciences; it emphasizes "adapting measures to local conditions and classified guidance". It is also the first time to actively promote the rational use of Internet and multimedia teaching methods (Zheng Shutang, 2008).

In the same year, the National College English Examination Committee began to implement the College English Test Band 4 and Band 6, which was the most significant reform result in this stage. Great progress has also been made in the compilation of textbooks such as "21st Century College English", "New College English", "New College English", and a multimedia CD-ROM.

2.5. Transition Period: After the Beginning of the 21st Century

Since the 21st century, with the continuous changes in the international and domestic situation, the development of high technology, and the popularization of network technology, society has placed higher demands on the English proficiency and language application ability of college students. The syllabus that "emphasizes students' reading skills" and once cultivated a large number of "dumb English users" is seriously out of touch with the actual demand for college students' English ability in today's society (Shen Ting, 2010). Cai Jigang (2007) also pointed out that college English teaching is entering a period of historical transformation. In addition to the transformation of teaching methods and teaching models, the transformation of teaching content is more important.

In order to adapt to the new situation of China's higher education development and meet the needs of the country and society for talent training in the new era, a new round of college English teaching reform was launched in early 2002. In July 2007, the Higher Education Department of the Ministry of Education promulgated the "University English Course Teaching Requirements", which aimed to promote the cultivation of students' comprehensive application ability of English, independent learning strategies and comprehensive cultural literacy. "New

Era Interactive English", "New Vision College English", "New Experience College English", "New Idea College English", "New Standard College English" and several well-received textbooks were launched one after another. Among them, the "New Vision College English" and "New Standard College English" of FLTRP took the lead in introducing computer network technology into college English teaching (Yan Jia, 2020; Shen Ting, 2010).

In February 2017, the Department of Higher Education of the Ministry of Education promulgated the "University English Course Guide" which listed English for specific purpose (ESP) and cross-cultural communication courses as college English courses for the first time. It was aimed to improve students' professional quality and cross-cultural communication skills. At present, college English teaching inherited and innovated the ideas of "University English Curriculum Teaching Requirements" in terms of teaching mode and teaching methods. For example, the classroom teaching mode develop from a network-integrated course mode to a mixed teaching mode such as a flipped classroom based on offline courses and online courses; More mobile English learning platforms are built for more diversified teaching methods; English learning is more mobile, autonomous and flexible; Curriculum setting and teaching evaluation are also more specific. The promulgation of the Course Guide marks that college English teaching has entered a new period of development with a qualitative leap (Yan Jia, 2020).

3. The Characteristics of the Development of College English Teaching

In analyzing the characteristics of the development of college English teaching, the changes in the syllabus serve as an important reference (Wen Qiufang, 2012; Chu Ruili, 2011). The syllabus is a programmatic and normative document that guides teaching. It embodies the training goals and educational concepts of English teaching. It also stipulates the curriculum setting, teaching requirements, teaching methods and methods, examinations and evaluations. According to related research, the main features of college English teaching are summarized as follows from different aspects:

3.1. Momentum of Development: Inherently Slow but Gradually Gained Momentum

Due to changes in the political environment, it was not until June 1962 that the Ministry of Education promulgated the first college English syllabus since the founding of New China -- "English Teaching Syllabus (Implementation Draft)." Four years after the syllabus was announced, it survived in name only. The 10-year "Cultural Revolution" broke out, and English teaching was in vain with textbooks and classroom teaching only emphasized the teaching of political slogans, which caused the inherent deficiency in the beginning of development. It can be seen from the evolution of the key policies that the number of relevant policies for college English teaching has gradually increased. Vacancy at the beginning was then compensated by a gradual recovery after 1985 and 1986 and more policies at the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the 21st century. Various measures have been taken, and relevant policies, academic research and discussions have emerged one after another, which shows that the importance of college English has been increasing prominently.

3.2. Teaching Objectives and Content: More Emphasis on Listening and Speaking

Seen from the contents of the "Syllabus", "Guide" and "Requirements" of the college English courses, the 1962 syllabus only emphasized reading abilities and still emphasized "Technical English" and "Professional English" reading (Cai Jigang, 2007; Chu Ruili) , 2011) in 1980. In 1985, the dominant position of reading was reaffirmed. In 1999, the teaching goal of cultivating reading ability was changed, but for the first time, it proposed to cultivate "a certain listening

and speaking ability" (Chu Ruili, 2011). In 2007, it emphasized the cultivation of listening and speaking skills so that students "can effectively speak and write in English". In 2017, it is required to cultivate English application skills and enhance communication skills. Under the condition that the overall level of students' language foundation is in need of enhancement, it is required to pay attention to grammar and reading capabilities, to consolidate the language foundation. With the development of the times, the basic level of students' English proficiency continuously improved, social needs constantly changing, and the English proficiency of college freshmen divided greatly, the shortage of high-level foreign language talents with global perspectives has increased. In the past, the communicative effectiveness of English as the international language was not paid enough heed to in college English teaching, which resulted in large investment but low efficiency (Wen Qiufang, 2012; Cai Jigang, 2007). The requirements of English teaching are gradually changing with more emphasis on practical application and comprehensive literacy. The training objectives and focus of college English are changing accordingly.

3.3. Teaching Methods: Diversification and Mobilization

Wu Qidi (2004) once pointed out the construction and reform of college English teaching in China actually took the road of standardization of foreign language teaching. Since the mid-1980s, it has gradually established and improved unified College English Teaching. The Syllabus and a unified testing system indeed played an active role in promoting college English teaching. It can be said that it is 'indispensable'. However, due to the unification of the high standard of college English teaching under the syllabus (which even limits the range of vocabulary that students should master) and the testing system, the development of English teaching in colleges and universities is to a certain extent restricted, which obviously disagree with the development requirements of the diversified and individualized era of higher education. In the middle and late 1990s, a series of reforms in college English teaching were carried out. However, these measures did not thoroughly changed the state.

Although there are criticisms over "over-unification", college English teaching continues to be explored continuously. In terms of teaching theory, college English teaching has introduced foreign linguistic theories, and the teaching content is still mainly based on imparting language knowledge with teaching quality, methods and theoretical level improved. Communicative teaching method tend to be frequently adopted. As an independent subject, college English teaching equipment is greatly improved, and audio-visual teaching methods continue to receive popularity. Tape recorders, slide projectors, campus broadcasts, free listening rooms, weekend theaters and other tools are used to create an English learning atmosphere. To improve teaching effects, modern educational technologies such as computers have aroused widespread discussion and attention (Yan Jia, 2020). More mobile English learning platforms are being built to make English learning more autonomous and flexible.

Cai Jigang (2007) pointed out that it was time to "break the dominance of basic English teaching". In the new "College English Test Band 4 Syllabus" promulgated in November 2006, the purpose of the test was changed into accurately measure the comprehensive English application ability of Chinese college students, which signified that the era of rigid and unified teaching requirements and emphasis on individuality was over and the post-college English teaching era of globalization and diversification is now arrived.

3.4. Teaching Positioning and Curriculum Setting: "Specialization" or "Generalization"

From the founding of New China to the mid-1960s, there was no unified and publicly published textbook for public English courses. Schools used handouts prepared by teachers according to their professional situation. The teaching requirements and content of each university were

different but usually combine technical English with professional English (Cai Jigang, 2007), namely, college English serves the professional studies. The implementation of CET-4 and CET-6 in 1987 provided a commonly used paradigm and standard for college English teaching. Over the past 30 years, China has adopted a unified and comprehensive basic English teaching mainly to consolidate the language foundation of college students. In 2017, English for special purposes and cross-cultural communication courses were listed as college English courses in the "University English Course Guide" for the first time, aiming to improve students' professional quality and cross-cultural communication skills (Yan Jia, 2020). The development path of specialization or generalization may become a hot topic for future college English related research and discussion. Nowadays, although many may agree with the continuation of the college English curriculum, there are arguments on which one of comprehensive basic English, English for special purposes, and general English may dominate (Yang Xiaobin, 2013).

4. Prospects for College English Teaching

College English teaching is in a transitional period. The level of English in middle and junior education is improving, and high-level foreign language talents are in great need. It is required to learn from the experience and look forward to the future reform of college English.

4.1. Tailor the Curriculum Based on Specific Circumstances

In 2007, the "University English Curriculum Teaching Requirements" pointed out that all colleges and universities should refer to the "Curriculum Requirements" and respond to their actual conditions in view of the differences in the teaching resources, student enrollment levels, and social needs. This requires universities to formulate a syllabus suitable for their own school based on their own characteristics and positioning (Wang Chunmei, 2014). Tsinghua University only provided 4-6 credits of compulsory college English courses in 2009, and the total number of credits dropped sharply. Zhejiang University and Tianjin University even abandoned the original college English system. Courses such as English for special purposes, Academic English and Industry English were opened. Sichuan University has no distinction between English majors and non-English majors in terms of curriculum and elective courses, while some colleges and universities retain the traditional "College English" courses for students in the lower grades or with a weak foundation in English (Wang Chunmei, 2014; Cai Jigang, 2007). Hubei University professor Yang Xiaobin (2013) believes that it may be feasible to customize college English courses by the college, and expand English courses that meet the needs of students' professional and international development on the basis of ensuring the necessary basic skills training. It can be seen that the requirements for college English curriculum settings cannot be "one size fits all". Colleges and universities with different foundations and levels of English learning should adapt to local conditions.

4.2. Cultivate Students' Abilities According to Their Needs

Students' needs should be studied as freshmen's English proficiency and learning needs vary (Yang Xiaobin, 2013; Wen Qiufang, 2012). Wen Qiufang (2012) pointed out that under the premise of compulsory English, students should be given more choices such as optional skill targets and choice of course types. Students are not required to become all-round English learners. Students who are type English learners should be encouraged to take more courses but not under rigid requirements. Considering that the society's demand for students' English proficiency is equally diverse, the requirements for more of the five skills of listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translation often have specific preference. In consideration of students' hobbies, special expertise and career development plans, students should be provided with a variety of options and sub-level standard requirements to give full play to their own strengths. It is necessary to strengthen the application and transferability of special skills and teach

students in accordance with their aptitudes to make the idea of "enhance the weaker" and "make the stronger stronger". It is conducive to effectively improving students' English ability and competitiveness so that they can truly demonstrate English communication and application skills and provide solutions to social problems.

4.3. Improve the Level of Teachers and Provide Multiple Evaluations

Study found that most students tend to take good courses taught in English (Yang Xiaobin, 2013). Freshmen with high English proficiency can choose difficult courses (Wen Qiufang, 2012). Some higher-level colleges and universities adopt internationally popular ESP (English for specific purposes, EAP (English for academic purposes), and EOP (English for occupational purposes) system, which put higher requirements on the teaching team. For students and the course itself, strengthening the training of the teaching staff, focusing on the diversification of the teaching staff, and improving the level of the teaching staff are of great significance to the future development of college English teaching so that high-level English learners can accept first-class English education. In teaching evaluation, it is necessary to focus on the combination of formative and summative evaluation, scientifically arrange the ratio of usual and final scores, written and oral test scores, classroom learning and online learning, and adopt a diversified perspective instead of a single standard. It is pivotal to form a two-way relationship in college English teaching by strengthening self-evaluation, teacher-student evaluation, and peer evaluation.

5. Conclusion

The development of college English teaching has traversed various periods -- burgeoning, setbacks, recovery, upgrading, and transformation. From the slow development in the early stage to the rapid improvement in the follow-up, continuous discussions and reforms emerge in response to the requirements of the times such as the shift of focus from grammar and reading to listening and speaking, and from standardized and unified teaching methods to autonomous and diversified ones as well as the heated discussion over specialization and generalization in recent years. According to the current situation, the author discussed prospects for future college English teaching from three aspects: colleges, teachers and students. Colleges and universities should improve the curriculum, understand the needs of students, and cultivate application skills. Teachers should improve teaching skills and provide multiple evaluations. Students should adapt to the progress and requirements of the times and meet the need for high-level talents with global vision from the society.

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