

Talents-Oriented Action on Chinese College English Educational Reform

Huang Chi

School of Foreign Languages, Chengdu University of Information Technology, China

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Abstract With the publication of “College English Teaching Guide” by Chinese Ministry of Education, College English Educational Reform becomes imminent. Before the introduction of the “Guide”, college English teaching General English as the mainstream has been going on for more than 30 years. With the deepening of China’s reform and opening up, the importance of foreign languages (especially English) has been recognized by the common Chinese people. Nowadays, the English level of college freshmen has improved significantly at the time of their enrollment. Therefore, how to change the previous College English Curriculum system so as to properly meet the new educational situation becomes an urgent and tough issue for the common Colleges of Science and Technology. This paper puts forward the curriculum of compulsory courses with modular teaching of General English, Cross-cultural Courses, and English for Specific Purposes, together with various individualized optional courses. Taking into account the double role of instrumentality and humanity of English, the compulsory courses not only help students to learn general English in order to master basic knowledge and win some necessary certificates, but also help improve students’ communicative competence and specialized English proficiency. Meanwhile, optional courses should fully reflect the educational idea of teaching according to students’ individual aptitude, personal interests and development. With the on-going nation-wide discussion about the setting up of standard or individualized English curriculum, hopefully, this paper makes an acceptable and feasible suggestion to help Colleges of Science and Technology to cope with this hot issue.

Keywords College English Teaching Guide, College English Educational Reform, Compulsory Courses, Optional Courses, Colleges of Science and Technology

1. Introduction

In 2016, Chinese Ministry of Education officially promulgated the “College English Teaching Guide” (hereinafter referred to as the “Guide”), which was formed after multiple rounds of research, discussions and revisions by the National College Foreign Language Teaching Guiding Committee. The publication of the “Guide” is considered as a big event since the “Guide” will be a leading document in college English teaching for the next one or two decades.

2. Previous Discussions about the Reform of College English Teaching

Before the introduction of the “Guide”, college English teaching General English as the mainstream has been going on for more than 30 years. The Ministry of Education began preparations in 1986 and officially implemented Grade 4 (CET-4) and Grade 6 (CET-6) national exams of College English Test in 1987. The passing rate of CET-4 and CET-6 examinations was virtually considered as the core criterion for identifying the quality of teaching in each school. The passing rate of English test has also become an important indicator in the evaluation of undergraduate teaching level. As a result, colleges across the mainland China compete to significantly improve the number of hours of college English teaching, and the corresponding general English teaching has become the best choice for college English courses. In other words, the mainstream of general English teaching as a college English course is in line with the actual needs of English teaching in China at that time. In the next 30 years, with the deepening of China’s reform and opening up, the importance of foreign languages (especially English) has been recognized by the common Chinese people. The English level of college freshmen is not the same as before, and many students in

those entitled 985 or 211 universities have reached the level of CET-4 at the time of enrollment. At the same time, China's comprehensive strength, economic development, and national cultural awareness have undergone earth-shaking changes. On the one hand, people began to doubt the excessive attention to English learning, and on the other hand they regretted the lack of highly qualified international talents. The questioning and expectation of the society for college English teaching has also led to the thinking and hot debates in the foreign language teaching circle. Many experts and scholars have published plenty of papers and lectures on college English teaching in recent years. The discussion on the direction of college English teaching reform is vigorous and inviolable. Experts represented by Professor Cai Jigang from Fudan University encourage to popularize English for special purpose (ESP) in order to cultivate students' academic ability in their future professional study and research in English. Professor Hu Kaibao from Shanghai Jiaotong University does not think academic English should be the future core of college English teaching while the focus still should be General English. The experts represented by Professor Wen Qiufang of Beijing Foreign Studies University believe that ESP and General English should coexist and complement each other, and further elaborate on the complementary English teaching concept.

No matter whether general English and specialized English can replace each other or which should become the mainstream of college English courses, the situation of only general English teaching that has remained unchanged for 30 years must be changed. Although well-known influential domestic experts and scholars have different opinions on the positioning of college English in various speeches and papers, many colleges and universities have independently initiated various trial reforms. Undoubtedly, the college English courses offered by most colleges and universities in the past 30 years have reached a point where they must be changed. The direction of reform must be to abandon the general English (including listening, speaking, reading, grammar, etc.) taken by almost all the colleges. The common curriculum system is likely to be replaced by a personalized curriculum with the characteristics of each school and set according to different professional requirements. At the same time, the emphasis on specialized English is not the same as focus on the instrumentality of language, but both the instrumentality and humanity of language should be taken into account. The Outline of the National Medium- and Long-Term Education Reform and Development Plan (2010-2020) clearly states that it is necessary to "train a large number of international talents with international vision, international rules, and ability to participate in international affairs and international competition." The development of these abilities is difficult to achieve

simply by the General English and ESP English courses alone. Under the background of the country's emphasis on "Chinese culture going out" and cultivating students' international awareness and world vision, the opening of intercultural communication courses is extremely urgent. In the past, foreign language learning was mainly to learn advanced foreign science and technology. In addition to traditional purposes, foreign language learning today covers spreading Chinese thought, custom, and culture, and opening up international markets.

3. Impact of the "Guide" on College English Teaching

After many twists and turns, the new "Guide" that everyone is looking forward to is finally available, setting the tone for the trend of college English reform and becoming the symbolic document of the critical period of college English teaching reform.

3.1. Background and Function of the "Guide"

The "Guide" "responds to the various disputes, doubts and confusions that have emerged in the college English teaching community for a long time. It provides a new standard for the reform of college English teaching and provides a broad platform for the national college English teaching. It finally returns to the original element, repositioning according to the national development strategy and social needs, and determines the new university English content system, organizational system, practical system, and guarantee system according to the new attributes and new features of college English teaching in the coming period." (Wang Shuting, Wu Yizhen, 2019) At this point, the various disputes about the function of college English in the foreign language community have temporarily subsided.

Prof. Wang Shouren, Chairman of the Foreign Language Teaching Guiding Committee, in his "Interpretation of the Key Points of the College English Teaching Guide" published in *Foreign Languages*, elaborated on the development process and basic principles of the "Guide", and the value of the course of college English. The teaching objectives, curriculum system, teaching evaluation, teaching methods and means, and teacher development were deeply interpreted. The article points out that the "Guide" combines the spirit of the "National Medium- and Long-Term Education Reform and Development Plan" and the "Ministry of Education's Several Opinions on Improving the Quality of Higher Education". With regard to the history of college English curriculum construction and teaching reform, and the widespread discussions and consultations, the Guide provides programmatic guidance for college English and will become an important document for

college English teaching in China for a long time. The "Guide" is undoubtedly the basis for the development of English syllabus for individual universities, the construction of college English courses, and the implementation of college English evaluation in the new era. It plays an important role in promoting educational innovation, deepening the reform of college English teaching, and improving the quality of teaching.

3.2. Dilemma Faced by Colleges of Science and Technology

Based on this, all colleges and universities are moving in the direction of the program, and under the guidance of programmatic documents, they will discuss the English curriculum system of the respective colleges, and strive to promote the reform of college English teaching under the new situation. Compared with other universities, the reform of ordinary science and engineering colleges is particularly difficult. The English level of the students in these colleges is no equal to those from the entitled 985 or 211 universities. It is usual that English course can draw no special concern from the leaders in ordinary colleges of science and technology, and English teaching is difficult to get rid of its marginalized status in the whole teaching stage. However, it is undeniable that with the full implementation of the reform of English teaching in high school in China, the overall English level of freshmen has been greatly improved. At the same time, the compulsory credits of college English have been continuously reduced. Many colleges have reduced from the past 16 credits to the present 8-12 credits. Even so, the college English reform in ordinary science and engineering colleges is still struggling, actively adapting to the new requirements, and closely focusing on the theme of talent cultivation, in order to meet the new challenges.

3.3. Key Ideas of the "Guide"

The "Guide" clearly clarifies the value of college English courses, pointing out that "the main content of college English teaching can be divided into three parts: General English, Cross-cultural Courses, and English for Specific Purposes (ESP)", clearly suggesting that college English plays the double role of instrumentality and humanity. How to build an efficient and reasonable college English curriculum system is a big problem in front of the relevant teaching management. "The knowledge structure presented by the curriculum system is organized according to certain teaching objectives, according to the development logic of subject knowledge or the growth process of students' learning ability." (GaoNing, Zhang Meng 2018) The concept of "College English Curriculum System" itself reflects the consensus of the society on college English education, that is,

college English is not a simple language tool, but a systematic project composed of a series of related courses to serve the goal of talent training. The personalities, learning habits, learning abilities, learning expectations, and the expectations and requirements for future work of science and engineering students are different from those of other types of students. The college English curriculum system tailored to them must meet the requirements of the "Guide" and related program documents, and be beneficial to students, while employment is a big concern for them.

In view of the fact that the "Guide" clearly requires that the main content of college English teaching be general English, ESP and English for intercultural communication, three corresponding compulsory courses should be formed accordingly. Through a series of reforms such as college English curriculum, teaching model, content, and evaluation methods, the curriculum of compulsory courses can take modular teaching with General English, Cross-cultural Courses, and English for Specific Purposes. Optional courses can fully reflect the idea of "teaching according to their aptitude, classification guidance, personalized development", further improve students' listening, speaking, reading, writing and other language application skills, improve students' humanities quality, encourage students to learn independently, and comprehensively improve the quality of college English teaching. All colleges and universities should follow the language teaching and learning rules according to the type, level, source of students, school orientation, talent training objectives, etc., reasonably arrange the corresponding teaching content and class hours, and form a dynamic, open, scientific and reasonable college English curriculum system that reflects the characteristics of individual schools.

3.4. General Actions Taken by Colleges

As is known to all Chinese people, before going to college, freshmen have been learning English for at least 6 years, or even 12 years, and have been laying a quite solid foundation. For those with higher basic levels, if they have to take another two years to continue to learn the basics of general English, it is extremely unfair and extremely unbearable. At the same time, although the overall English enrollment level of students has improved, the level is quite uneven. For students with weak foundations, it is still important to lay a solid foundation for language learning. In addition, CET-4 and CET-6 are still recognized as constant indicators for testing the quality of college English teaching and the English level of students. Some colleges and universities even regard it as one of the criteria for students to graduate; and CET-4 and CET-6 certificates have become the threshold for many employers. Although the call to cancel the two national exams has emerged in recent years, its position in

many college leaders and teachers is rock solid. Therefore, the basic course, that is, the general English course will surely go along with CET-4 and CET-6. However, the expansion of the general English course should be limited, and it is better be limited within two semesters.

The "Guide" proposes that "the college English course has both the dual nature of instrumentality and humanity". On the one hand, it improves students' English listening, speaking, reading and writing skills, cultivates intercultural communication skills, and helps students master English as a communication tool. On the other hand, instrumentality is also reflected in specialized English, which allows students to study academic or professional English related to professional or future career work. In terms of humanity, it helps students understand the social history and culture of foreign countries and enhance international understanding. It can be seen that the college English course is of great significance for China to participate in global activities and have its voice heard. Proficiency in English is the basic ability for international talents, but the English ability of international talents cannot be cultivated only through basic courses. To participate in international affairs, we must participate in international dialogues and exchanges. When people use language as the medium to communicate, they actually communicate with culture. Therefore, cultural factors play an important role in the success or failure of communication. "Intercultural communication studies believe that there are many countries and nations in the world, each of which constitutes a group with a specific language and culture. Members of these groups interact or talk with each other, which is the communication between different cultures." (Ma Yuan 34) Therefore, it is imperative to offer Intercultural Communication English Course in order to enrich students' social and cultural knowledge at home and abroad, help students understand the differences between Chinese and foreign world views, values, ways of thinking, customs and so on, cultivate students' cross-cultural awareness, and improve students' social language ability and intercultural communication ability. This course is designed not only to enable students to master the necessary common sense of cultural communication between the East and West, but also to cultivate good intercultural communication habits and skills. At the same time, it is necessary to train students to convey Chinese culture in English and to tell the stories of Chinese in English. This course can be offered in the third semester, after General English.

The third component of the main content of college English teaching proposed in the "Guide" is English for specialized purposes. Today, as higher education becomes more international, the demand for professional learning and professional communication in English is increasing. Shu Dingfang (2011) believes that the teaching goal of

college English in China is to serve "internationalization of higher education, and to cultivate students' realistic or potential academic communication skills". Cai Jigang (2013) conducted a survey of the needs of teachers and students in universities of Shanghai and concluded that "specialized English can improve the international competitiveness of students in their professional fields and their competitiveness in future studies or work." It is undeniable that with the improvement of the overall English level of freshmen in China, with the increasing international exchanges and the advent of economic globalization, technology integration and cultural pluralism, ESP teaching will become a very important part of the university English curriculum system. For ordinary science and engineering colleges, English for specialized use is inseparable from scientific and technical English. Scientific and technical English generally refers to English used in research papers, books, textbooks, scientific reports, academic lectures, and academic conferences in the fields of natural sciences and engineering technology. Scientific and technical English is presented in a large amount of scientific and technical literature with its relatively stable, professional and repetitive vocabulary and more rigorous, well-defined, compact, and objective sentences. Technical English has become a specialized area of modern English in many countries. With the further development of science and technology and the gradual deepening of global economic integration, scientific and technical English has increasingly demonstrated its importance and application value. As for science and engineering college students, it is necessary to understand the specific English language in their relevant fields, to read and write English articles, and to express relevant ideas in the field of science and technology in English.

However, it is far from enough to offer just three courses in general English, intercultural communication and ESP. Intercultural communication and ESP should extend more branches from the main trunk. With the improvement of students' English entrance level, most colleges and universities have gradually reduced the college English credits from 16 to 12, or to even 8 credits. In view of the actual situation of students in ordinary science and engineering colleges, it is more practical to set up 12 credits for college English courses. It not only helps students to learn general English in order to win the necessary certificates (such as Certificates of CET-4, CET-6, and IELTS, TOEFL, etc.), but also considers students' communicative competence and specialized English proficiency. It is necessary to face the status quo of compulsory credits and to cultivate qualified international talents, while taking into account the instrumentality and humanity of English. Then, college English courses can be incorporated with a combination of compulsory and optional courses.

4. Suggestive Setting of English Curriculum System in Colleges of Science and Technology

Semester	Compulsory (8-12 credits in total)	Optional (2 credits per course)
1	General English 1	English Speech
2	General English 2	English Debate
3	Intercultural Communication English	English Practical Writing, Anglo-American Society and Culture, Communicative Speaking, Media English Listening and Speaking, Appreciation of English and American Literary Works, English Newspaper Reading, News English, Translation Foundation, Brief History of Western Civilization, Comparison of Chinese and Western Culture, International Etiquette, Workplace English, Business English, Computer English, Technical English writing
4	Scientific and Technical English	
5	none	
6		
7		

From the analysis above, colleges of science and technology should set up an English curriculum system that is student-oriented, talent-oriented, and innovative. “College English should serve the internationalization of higher education. Learners should use English to think and communicate. The versatility, practicality and effectiveness of language in communication are the goals of language learning, and thus students will form a solid base when they will go abroad for further study or academic exchanges.” (Gao Yuying, Liu Xiaoyan, 2019) Therefore, the college English curriculum system of ordinary science and engineering colleges is suggested to adopt the above modes.

In this system, General English is offered to the first-year university students, with emphasis on common English, grammatical correctness, fluent expression, and vocabulary accumulation, and the students will be helped to obtain various relevant English certificates with high social recognition. In the second year of the university, intercultural communication English is to be set up. From the perspective of quality training, students’ international vision and the ability to use English to communicate effectively are considered. They should understand the core cultural ideas of both the West and China, and develop their skills of spreading Chinese culture in English. In view of the different academic advantages of science and engineering colleges, the second year students should select the scientific and technical English suitable for school-based characteristics, so that they can develop the habit of reading English literature in professional fields, understand the common related terms of their majors, and learn to write English academic papers in their professional fields. In addition to the compulsory course system, a relatively independent optional course system is established to meet the individual development needs of students. In the first year, colleges will provide courses related to English speeches and debates. They may select outstanding talents with good oral English, strong logical thinking skills and broad knowledge, and then further expand their English knowledge, improve

their English skills, and encourage them to participate in various related activities. Offering multiple optional courses from the second year to the third can not only meet the individual needs of students, but also improve students’ interest in English learning, and also ensure their continuity of students’ English learning. The setting up of academic English in the seventh semester will provide useful guidance for students with good foundations to further study their own subject areas and publish English academic papers, and lay a solid foundation for students with academic potential to enter postgraduate studies.

5. Conclusions

In general, the instrumentality of a college English course determines that English must be combined with another discipline or major to function better. The humanity of the college English course guides the majority of English teachers to continue to innovate and advance with the times by cultivating a new generation of college students with rich international knowledge, international perspective, international rules and international responsibility. Under the guidance of the official “Guide”, therefore, it is highly suggested that the curriculum with “General English + Cross-cultural Courses + English for Specific Purposes” as the compulsory courses and various individualized subjects as optional courses should be offered to the future scientists and engineers in Colleges of Science and Technology. Of course, the new curriculum system is inseparable from the innovation of teaching methods, the reformation of curriculum design and the three-dimensional evaluation, and the improvement of the management system, which requires further consideration by relevant university senior executives.

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