

# The Review of College English Education History in China and the Reflections

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**Abstract:** The paper has a review on the historical development of English education in higher education from the late of 19<sup>th</sup> century to 2020. Different stages feature variously in course objectives, teaching focus, methods and concepts. This reveals College English education is closely related to the national economic, political and social development and changes with social changes. The return from the role of college English as a tool to the humanity nature stresses the turning point for today's College English education. New perspectives of classroom teaching, cultural teaching and teachers' core qualities have been discussed and some suggestions have been proposed to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of English teaching.

## 1. Introduction

Since the late Qing dynasty, there are higher education institutes emerging in order to improve and boost the development of backward economy and technology at that time. To seek for advance and quick changes, learning from the West was the way for those people who wanted to change the backwardness so that they intended to build up higher education system to borrow advanced knowledge and technology from the West. So from then on English has become the vital part of higher education in China. Through about one hundred years, College English education in university has been through different stages and in each stage it reveals different features and focuses of educational goals, the nature, teaching philosophy and methodology, which are closely related to the changes and demands of society, national and international development. Therefore it is meaningful to review the history of College English education and reflect profoundly on the enlightenment from the history review in order to get access to better insight into the current College English education and how the College English Course should develop in this highly internationalized and informationalized age [9].

## 2. The Different Stages in College English Education

Since School of Combined Learning was found by Qing Dynasty in 1860s, which was the first modern school in China and the first Specialized foreign languages school in Chinese educational history, there were increasing number of new schools and new educational forms emerging. Thought later nearly 140 years, English education has been always playing an important part in all kinds of education. Especially in higher education, English courses have been required courses and laid great emphasis on. However, the English courses reveal varied features in different historical periods which reflects the need and social changes of China. In each stage, English courses possessed unique purposes and methodology. Today when it dates back to the different periods, some nature and guidelines can be traced so that current educators and College English teachers can get better understanding of the nature of the courses, of what the teachers should teach to the students and how these essential teaching contents can be taught to the students effectively. Therefore when facing the more diversified globe and more complicated world situation today, the historical perspectives and reflections are needed to enlighten all English educators.

### 2.1. Initial Stage: from 1900s to 1950s

In this phase, higher education just emerged in China but in old and traditional form. Learning from the West was the fundamental goal in higher education. Therefore, English as the important tool to learn from the west became very important for both college instructors and students. Some navy, shipping and other engineering schools run by the Qing government recruited preferentially the students with some English competence or made English as the basic course and freshers must take English at the beginning year. However, most institutes and reading rooms (traditional high and junior school in that time of China) run by civilians did not take English seriously and some set English courses yet without much cares and focus. During the period, primary and secondary English education were laid more attentions to English education.[1] In 1903, Qing government released a document ,Official Schools Guidelines, in which English and Japanese education had been set as the required courses for higher education. 20 percent of class hours were for English or Japanese. In the document, it stated the situation faced by Qing government and the significant meaning to know a foreign language for talents to work, communicate with and learn from the west. Some courses except English or Japanese could use foreign textbooks with some adaptations [2]. In this period, on one hand, English education became an important required course in higher education and nearly had equal class hours as Chinese. On the other hand, traditional Chinese classics and related learning were stressed and still the top priority. It specially highlighted that it must not over weigh English to Chinese classics. After the abolishment of the Qing ruling, modern schools started. Since then, more and more attentions were given to English. In 1910, the Qing government had a policy for English education beyond the high school education, which officially named English as required course for higher education and after the graduation; official recruitment exams held by government should test candidates English. Therefore, English exerted greater influence in China. During this period, translation skills are the top skills the students should acquire. In some colleges, oral English was also stressed, such in Nanyang Public School (later named as Jiaotong University) [3]. In Nanyang Public School, all students should speak and use English in the class. If not, the students should be fined some amount of money. After school, there were some English clubs such as Speech clubs and Debate clubs for students which all students should join in to create a better language learning environment [4].

Before the founding the People's Republic of China, the specified foreign languages school or colleges and foreign language departments in university had been developed. The more qualified teachers could teach college students. English is one of the required subjects for College Entrance Exam. There was a craze for studying abroad so that more foreign culture imports and impacts conflicted Chinese traditional culture ,which led a xenocentric trend in university.[5-8]

## **2.2. The Gradual Development Stage: 1979-2007**

After decades of stagnation, the English education in PRC came back to life. In 1978, the Ministry of Education Department held a conference on English education and soon after that a document which set English as a required important course for college students and universities should increase the class hours of English and take one or two courses besides English course taught in English. From then on, English for non-English majors became more popular and gain more and more attentions. In 1987 and 1988, there were two national College English exams held all over the country, which last until now and become the most influential national wide English tests in China , known as CET 4 and CET 6. The national tests have exerted great impacts to boost the development of English teaching since the recognition of the tests both by students and social public. During 1979 to 2000, although English was increasing popular gaining weights, the teaching of English in university still stayed in traditional stage, featuring in teacher-centered, rotations, repetitions and translation and grammar teaching dominated classrooms. With the development of China, more and more international interactions and rapid growth of demands for international talents boost the advance of the whole College English course. In 1998, national syllabus by the ministry of Educational Department was officially published. Before the next version in 2007, this syllabus has been guiding the College English education. The goal of the course was to make students achieve good reading ability, moderate listening and translation ability and basic speaking

and writing ability. In the syllabus, the focus of teaching was language skills. No cultural and intercultural teaching was stressed. Comparably the requirements of language levels were much lower than that of latter version. Based on this, the teaching methodology of this period was mainly traditional translation-grammar method and speaking and listening ability were not attached much attentions [10].

### **2.3. Diversified Development Stage 2007-2017**

In 2007, the new national syllabus was officially published. In this version, the goal of the course was to improve students' competence and comprehensive quality from the perspective of the needs of global development. Not only communicative competence but also intercultural awareness and communicative competence had been proposed. To meet the future needs of social and national development and demands of increasingly internationalized workplace, speaking, listening, translation, reading and writing skills as well as intercultural awareness and communicative competence as a whole were core goals for the course. At the same time, with the development of information technology, network assisted teaching including mobile teaching and online courses, the centers of autonomy emerged and greatly changed the concept and methodology of the College English teaching. So in this syllabus, suggestions on building diversified systems of college English courses, NAT, informationalized learning process management, formative assessment and learners autonomy were proposed to improve classroom teaching and change the situation of teacher-centered teaching. Through nearly ten years, with the more repaid development of globalization and greater degree to Chinese international interactions, the global horizon and international communicative competence have become essential parts for qualified talents which can contribute to advanced economic development and national renaissance of China. So in 2017, the Ministry of Educational Department of China published the National Guideline of College English Course. Guideline has replaced the syllabus, which shows the courses have diversified forms and individual features in different universities, institutes and colleges based their own characteristics and levels of schooling. The publication starts the new phrase of College English development.

### **2.4. Key Competencies Focused Development 2017-2020**

The guideline emphasized the humanity nature of the course and stressed the influence which includes enhancing the humanities accomplishment, building a world view, improve all-round development and highlighting the value of human. Besides these, it is clearly stated that the design and practise should conform to the needs of social, economic and national development in China and should hold tightly the core value of Chinese characteristics of socialism. The nature of humanity is gaining more weight now. As a tool for students to face future challenges of globalization and new world situation, ESP, EAP, Intercultural and Career English clearly become vital parts of systematic College Courses. To achieve these objectives, more diversified and individual methods are encouraged to practice in the classroom teaching. Learners autonomy has been brought to new level and cultivation of life-long learning ability is the focus for designing assessment and evaluation.

## **3. The Enlightenment from the College English Education Review and Reflections**

When looking back to the history of college English course, focus shifts reveals the needs of current social and national development. The objectives of the courses are always changing with the national status and roles among the world. Facing today's increasing complicated world view, the humanity nature of the course becomes more and more important. How students view the world, human future and national development seem become more important than language skills proficiency. From the seek for national independence and advance to leading the national renaissance and a harmonious community of shared future for mankind, English as a tool and a window to look into the whole world, is playing different part for college students. Therefore, how to manage the teaching of the national culture and foreign culture, how to turn the course into a medium to reflect the value and world views and how to scaffold the deep learning and life-long

learning should be the focus and put into the classroom practise.

Methodology of college English courses has changed a lot. Both the methods of borrowing from foreign countries and experimental outcomes from local practices have been tried and tested. Generally the focus of the methodology is from the teachers and teaching oriented to students and learning oriented. Tech upgrade boosts more ways and perspectives of teaching and learning. Traditional teaching still has its position in today's classroom teaching and upgrade and reformed methods will gradually integrate into traditional teaching.

Teachers will face more challenges to manage classroom teaching. Language competence proficiency, both national awareness and world view, intercultural awareness and teaching competence and information tech competence have form the basic quality for qualified College English teachers. The different views on the role of Foreign language learning may change teachers' teaching habits and modes. Reading, writing, speaking and listening skills are still important but now for the college students something more important should be considered. The real international horizon and the beliefs in community with a shared future for mankind can take place the traditional globalizational outlook. So in college, English can be taught through more diversified ways, transdisciplinary and thinking-provoking. Therefore, English teachers not only need to improve knowledge, skills and teaching skills, but also their world views and horizons, which is the real challenges of The Times.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In 2020, a pandemic is changing the world. Traditional global perspectives have been shocked by the sudden changes such as upgrading cultural conflicts, unilateralism and anti-globalization. Therefore, when facing a new world situation but with some similarity, it is necessary to rethink what our attitudes to the world should be, how we deal with foreign and national culture, how we enhance the mutual understanding to reach the coordination and harmony with the other countries in the world and how we make best use of language teaching to help future talents own better world horizon and ability to deal with international conflicts and cooperation. Some reflections on the English education history of more than a hundred year can help teachers and course designers access better insight into the current and future College English teaching.

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