

Development of College English Curricula in China—An Analysis Based on Cooper’s “Accounting Scheme”

Tonghui Xu^{1,*}

¹ School of International Studies, Zhejiang University, Zhejiang, Hangzhou 310058, China

*Corresponding author. Email: 21905030@zju.edu.cn

ABSTRACT

This paper studies the features and trends of evolution of College English curricula based on Cooper’s accounting scheme. By examining the formulation processes and implementation effects of altogether six College English curricula from historical and comparative perspectives, it is found that the actors was the MOE and academic research institutions; the means was the authority of the government; the behaviors developed from English foundation to English application ability; the people changed from science and engineering students to all non-English majors; the ends evolved from discrete language skills training to comprehensive English ability; the process developed from “top-down” to a combination of “top-down” and “bottom-up”. This paper also attempts to analyze the reasons for these features and trends, in order to provide valuable insights for College English teaching reform.

Keywords: *accounting scheme; College English curricula; language policy and planning; China*

1. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, English has achieved an unprecedented status as a lingua franca across the world in this global era, thus “English, as a global language, has become a factor that must be taken into account in any country’s language policy” [1]. In recent years, the development of economic globalization and higher education internationalization has propelled higher education institutions (HEIs) to the forefront of LPP (Language Policy and Planning) research. Therefore, it is of great significance to study English language education policies in HEIs in the age of globalization.

In China, English education in HEIs is called College English, which is an English course for non-English majors. College English curricula are important official language education policies issued by the Ministry of Education (MOE, known as State Education Commission between 1985-1997) to guide College English education. Some prior studies focused on interpretation on certain curriculum [2]. Some focused on contrastive analysis of two or more curricula, examining teaching requirements, teaching objectives, teaching modes, and so forth [3-4]. However, few of them employed theoretical frameworks and provided an overview of the curricula formulation processes.

Cooper’s [5] accounting scheme is one of the classic frameworks in LPP and has been considered as helpful for understanding LPP processes [6-7]. Few studies have adopted this framework to examine College English curricula. An exception is Wei’s [8] examination on college foreign language education policies in China and other countries from the perspective of language-in-education planning based on theories of Cooper and

Kaplan and Baldauf. However, this research only involved limited information on formulation processes of College English curriculum.

Therefore, based on Cooper’s [5] accounting scheme, the present study attempts to examine the development of College English curricula in China from the perspective of its formulation processes and outcomes and answer the following research questions:

- 1) What are the features and trends of the development of College English curricula in China from 1962 to the present?
- 2) How can these features and trends be explained by the variables in Cooper’s accounting scheme?

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Cooper [5] believed that referring to frameworks proposed by other disciplines can contribute to not only the understanding of language planning but also the development of new framework for language planning. In light of such considerations, Cooper integrated frameworks in the fields of innovation, marketing, politics and decision making and advanced the “accounting scheme”. The framework comprises eight important variables in LPP activities: what *actors* attempt to influence what *behaviors* of which *people* for what *ends* under what *conditions* by what *means* through what decision-making *process* with what *effect*?

3. DATA AND METHODOLOGY

This study covers altogether six major curricula since 1949, specifically, the curricula documents issued in 1962,

1985/1986, 1999, 2007 and 2015. According to the six landmark documents, this paper divides the development of College English into five stages: stage (1) from 1949 to 1962; stage (2) from 1962 to 1986; stage (3) from 1987 to 1999; stage (4) from 2000 to 2007 and stage (5) from 2008 onwards.

Table 1. List of curricula documents and their abbreviations

Syllabus/Requirements/Guidelines
<i>English Teaching Syllabus (Trial Draft: Application of Five-year Undergraduate majors in Universities of Science and Technology) (1962) (1962 Syllabus)</i>
<i>1985/1986 Syllabus for College English Teaching (1985) (1985/1986 Syllabus)</i>
<i>College English Teaching Syllabus (1999) (1999 Syllabus)</i>
<i>College English Curriculum Requirements (2007) (Requirements)</i>
<i>Guidelines for College English Teaching (Draft Exposure) (2015) (Guidelines)</i>

Adopting historical and comparative perspectives, this paper conducts a document analysis to explore the evolution in terms of *actors*, *behaviors*, *people*, *ends*, *conditions*, *means*, *process* and *effect* under Cooper's accounting scheme. The documents collected help to provide text of curricula, important historical materials and critical analysis of College English curricula, and serve as a means of tracking change and development.

4. ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Analysis below demonstrates how each of the components of accounting scheme can be applied to different stages of the Chinese College English curriculum development.

4.1. Actors

The main planning *actors* of each stage of College English curriculum were the MOE and academic research institutions. The MOE invited the institutions to conduct research and formulate drafts of curricula.

Besides, *actors* also involved other agencies, specifically, university-level policy makers and front-line teachers. Since the *1999 Syllabus*, university-level decision makers have been granted the right to decide their own syllabuses with reference to their local resources and situations. Moreover, front-line teachers have been granted more opportunities to voice their opinions since they were the people who had first-hand information of the problems of curricula in practice.

4.2. Behaviors, people and means

When formulating a language policy, *actors* attempt to influence the behaviors of people through some means. The *behaviors* here refer to the language behaviors to be changed. *People* pertain to the target group of the curricula and *means* relate to the ways by which curricula were promulgated.

The curricula of the 20th century all involved changing students' weak foundation of English proficiency, because after the founding of new China, the public foreign language teaching in Chinese HEIs was mainly Russian, and students' English foundation was weak. When entering the new century, college students were generally equipped with basic English knowledge, but their application ability, especially listening and speaking abilities, needed to be improved since students' ability to gain or exchange information in English cannot meet the requirements of the development of the country. Therefore, it can be concluded that the curricula of the 21st century generally intended to improve English application ability, except some special requirements in each curriculum.

The target *people* of College English curricula expanded from students of science and engineering to all non-English majors. At first, the *1962 Syllabus* and the *1985 Syllabus* only opened to science and engineering universities and colleges, and the *1986 Syllabus* was for comprehensive universities and social sciences and humanities colleges. While in 1999, the two curricula merged into one. Since then, there has been only one curriculum of College English in China, which opened to all non-English majors. Regarding the *means*, the promotion approach of the curricula has always been the authority of the MOE, that is, the MOE reviewed and formally issued the curricula nationwide and HEIs carried out College English education under the guidance of the curricula.

4.3. Ends

Teaching objectives stipulated in the curricula were the final goals of the language education policy, thus they were regarded as the *ends* of the curricula.

The *ends* have experienced great changes over the past 70 years. More concretely, the *1962 Syllabus*, the *1985/1986 Syllabus* and the *1999 Syllabus* all emphasized reading ability. The *1962 Syllabus* underlined reading and translation abilities of scientific and technology texts. While the *1985/1986 Syllabus* incorporated listening, writing and speaking competences for the first time and reshuffled the five language skills into two levels with reading skills as a primary objective and the rest as secondary objectives. The *Requirements* shifted its emphasis from reading ability to listening and speaking abilities and highlighted the abilities to use English in a well-rounded way. The *Guidelines* discontinued to distinguish discrete language skills, but stressed on students' ability of using English. Therefore, the focus of

ends developed from improving discrete language skills to using various language abilities in a well-rounded way.

4.4 Conditions

Conditions, the context of the formulation processes of the curricula, can influence or determine policy [5]. This paper covers three *conditions*: situational, informational and environmental.

The situational *conditions* were generally realized as documents released by the government. For example, in 1961, the “Opinions on Foreign Language Curriculum in Colleges” stipulated that the first foreign language in HEIs be Russian or English, which laid a foundation for the formulation of the *1962 Syllabus*. At the second stage, the “Seven-Year Plan for Foreign Language Education” established English as the most important foreign language in school education. In addition, four modernizations (modernizations of agriculture, industry, national defense, and science and technology), National Symposium on Foreign Language Education and the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee of the Communist Party of China provided political, educational and economic basis for the formulation of the *1985/1986 Syllabus* respectively. When in the 1980s and 1990s, the “Decision on the Reform of the Educational System” made arrangements for College English to gear up to the possible challenges in the 21st century and the *1999 Syllabus* was formulated. In the new century, the “The Project of Teaching Quality and Teaching Reform in Colleges” proposed new requirements for College English. Hence, *Requirements* was on the agenda. In the 2010s, the MOE and the State Council issued several policies, which all called for improving teaching quality, formulating national curriculum standards and cultivating innovative talents. On this premise, the MOE initiated the formulation of *Guidelines*.

Informational *conditions* refer to the data required for good decisions [5]. Since the *1985/1986 Syllabus*, syllabus revision group/ project team/ task forces started to conduct extensive and in-depth empirical investigations nationwide, and the results generated were the basis of the formulation of new curricula.

Environmental *conditions* are events, structures, and attitudes which exist outside the system but which influence decisions within it [5]. In this case, environmental *conditions* were realized as China’s interactions with the outside world. In the 1960s, China was subject to a tense relationship with Soviet Union, thus the public foreign language teaching in Chinese HEIs switched from Russian to English. In the 1970s, China resumed its legal seat in the United Nation and began to establish diplomatic relations with western countries headed by the United States. The change of diplomatic pattern further promoted the status of English. When entering 21st century, the successful bid for the Olympic Games, the entry to the WTO in 2001, Shanghai 41st World Exposition, “a Community of Shared Future for Mankind” initiative and “Belt and Road” initiative all demonstrated

that China has been trying to play a more active role on the international stage. The *Requirements* can no longer meet the needs, and the *Guidelines* was required.

4.5 Process

The formulation *process* of College English curricula in each stage were examined on the basis of Cooper’s classification: formulation of problem or goal and formulation of means [5]. The development of College English curricula by and large conformed to the framework. The process can be divided into two stages. The first stage was the identification of problem, which involved several aspects in this case. To begin with, the MOE held conferences or issued documents to discuss the problems in the current curriculum and proposed to form a new one. Then it entrusted academic institutions such as the College Foreign Language Teaching Steering Committee to be responsible for the formulation of the new curriculum. Next, project groups/ syllabus revision groups/ task forces were established. They carried out large-scale investigations nationwide, held seminars and put forward drafts for discussion. Existing problems were identified through national investigations, which served as basis for experts to evaluate problems and formulate preliminary drafts.

The second stage pertained to the formulation of means, which also included several procedures. To be specific, seminars of various levels were held to solicit advice from front-line teachers and other experts. Based on the advice, preliminary drafts were revised and final drafts were put forward. Finally, the MOE approved the curricula and formally released them. In addition to the main formulation processes, these stages varied from one to another in details. For instance, the formulation processes have involved nationwide surveys since the *1985/1986 Syllabus* and engaged front-line instructors since the *1999 Syllabus*. In addition, the *Requirements* was formulated based on the practical results of the three-year trial version. Therefore, the formulation processes of College English curricula in China followed a main process of formulation of problems and means on the one hand, it gradually refined the details on the other.

4.6 Effect

This paper collected data from empirical studies to evaluate the outcomes of the College English education, including the results of College English Test (CET), Band 4 and Band 6 (CET-4 and CET-6), the satisfaction degree of students, etc. CET-4 and CET-6 are nationally recognized summative assessment tailored for College English education for non-English majors starting from 1987 and 1989 respectively.

Three conclusions can be made regarding the outcomes of College English education. To begin with, students’ English proficiency has been improved. In the 1960s,

teaching objectives were hardly achieved, only 30.89% of the students graduated with practical reading skills [9]. While since the implementation of the *1985/1986 Syllabus*, the passing rate of CET-4 grew from 25.6% to 62.4% [10-11]. Jin and Yang [12] further revealed that from 1987 to 2017, more than 37 million students met the requirements of CET-4, and more than 16 million of them met the requirements of CET-6.

Besides the increasing passing rate, the data further demonstrated that the curriculum in each period guided and improved the quality of College English education. For example, the first three curricula stressed reading ability and neglected listening and speaking abilities. Zhuo and Zhang [13] revealed that 65.71% of the students thought that their listening and speaking abilities were worst among the four abilities. Against this backdrop, *Requirements* prioritized listening and speaking abilities. Meanwhile, the idea of developing students' abilities to use English in a well-rounded way has been widely accepted. 89.5% of the key universities and 78.9% of the general universities have taken this notion instead of passing examinations as teaching objectives [14].

Despite the fruit of College English reform, there was still much to be desired. Empirical studies revealed students' dissatisfaction at College English teaching. In Wang and Liu's [15] study, 89% of students thought that after College English learning, they cannot use English as a tool to exchange information. Moreover, employers were not content with graduates' English competence. They claimed that only 5% of college graduates had strong or very strong oral ability and 11% of them had strong or very strong English writing ability, 37% of them had poor or very poor oral ability [16]. In addition, students still lacked cross-cultural awareness and communicative competence [17].

5. DISCUSSION

Based on Cooper's accounting scheme, this paper examined the evolution of College English curricula in China, especially the policy formulation processes and outcomes. In this section, this paper discusses features and trends of the development of curricula and attempts to explain reasons of it.

First, some features of the formulation process of College English curricula can be documented. Specifically, the *actors* of the curricula were the MOE and academic institutions; the *means* employed by the government has been authority; the *process* was led by the government. The reason for these features lies in the fact that China is a government-led society. Therefore, the formulation and release of curricula were all dominated by the government.

At the same time, some trends in the formulation of College English curricula can be observed. Specifically, *behaviors* changed from consolidating students' English foundation to improving students' English application ability; *people* expanded from science and engineering students to all non-English majors; *ends* developed from discrete language skills to comprehensive English language ability. The *process* was initially led by the government,

that is, a "top-down" decision-making method. However, "bottom-up" factors have been added to the formulation processes, such as front-line teachers becoming members of *actors*; national surveys and three-year trial in the formulation of the *Requirements*. With the development of society and democracy in China, the "top-down" and "bottom-up" methods have been combined in the formulation of language policies, that is, the government finds problems and starts the formulation process, taking into account the public's opinions at the same time.

The *conditions* can account for the change of *ends*, *people* and other factors. In the 1950s and 1960s, Sino-Soviet relations deteriorated, so it was urgent to develop its defense force. Strengthening national defense depended on the progress of science and technology, so science and engineering has been valued and only science and engineering students were required to learn English. After the reform and opening up in 1978, the focus of the country shifted to economic construction. Economic construction required students to have various English abilities. Therefore, the *1985 / 1986 Syllabus* and the *1999 Syllabus* contained the requirements for all language skills, and were opened to all non-English majors. In the 21st century, China has been increasingly integrated into the world and launched initiatives of "Belt and Road" and "a Community of Shared Future for Mankind". To play a greater role in the world, foreign language ability, especially English ability, is particularly important. Therefore, the country has put forward new requirements for college students' English ability.

6. CONCLUSION

Adopting Cooper's accounting scheme, this paper examined the formulation processes and implementation effects of College English curricula in China. It summarized features and trends in the evolution of the curricula, and attempted to analyze its reasons, so as to provide some inspiration for College English teaching reform. Chinese College English Teaching is an important part of language education in the field of higher education in the world. Against the background that LPP in higher education is still under researched, analysis of College English curricula can fill this gap.

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