

Current Situation on Exam-Oriented Education in China and the Outlook for Quality-Oriented Education Taking Oral English Education as an Example

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ABSTRACT

This paper looks at the current situation of exam-oriented education in China, then discusses its different root aspects and the influences such an educational model has on Chinese society. Exam-oriented education has many flaws, which has been widely recognized by the public and educational professionals, however, many restraints from society ensured its continuation. This paper analyzes a number of scholarships on exam-oriented education as well as its quality-oriented counterpart, concludes its negative impacts on students and society, then emphasizes oral English education to provide an insight into quality-oriented education and its positive impact on the development of students' overall English abilities. After carefully comparing the benefits between exam-oriented education and quality-oriented education, the writers believe that quality-oriented education is ultimately the better educational model for enhancing Chinese students' second language capacity. Although reformation of the current exam-oriented educational model will require a huge amount of effort, the impact on the educational system and society will be tremendous. Promising perspectives on how China's exam-oriented education could be improved to suit the society's qualitative needs provide an insight of a hopeful future for the Chinese academia.

Keywords: *exam-oriented education, quality-oriented education, oral English education, communicative competence.*

1. INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, international communication is deepening and expanding. English, which is regarded as an international language, plays a more critical role, especially the oral English. Also, with the globalization of world economy and cultural integration, the Ministry of Education in China has put forward higher requirements for English language ability. However, under the exam-oriented education system in China, the importance of vocabulary and grammar is often greater than oral English ability. Pressured by the demand for high testing grades to get to higher education, English teaching tends to focus more on examination results instead of cultivating students' language output ability. Exam-oriented education runs against the original

intention of English education, causing students to spend a lot of time learning English to become dummy English learners with high marks but poor ability. According to the British Council's official IELTS data, in 2019's Academic Mean Performance by Nationality Survey, Chinese examinees averaged 6.2 in reading, 5.9 in listening, 5.5 in writing, and 5.4 in speaking [1]. With oral English scores ranking as the worst among the other three, China is the only country in this survey that has such a special phenomenon. By contrast, other countries score worst in writing. Moreover, Chinese examinees' speaking scores are far lower than those of other countries. In a sense, this result showcases the Chinese students' lack of basic English communicative competence, leading to a deepening concern for the vicious cycle of exam-oriented education. This paper

will look into existing scholarships to find out the roots of this phenomenon, then try to give constructive suggestions to help rectify the problems caused by these roots.

2. LITERARY REVIEW

As a product of the long-history talent selection system in China, exam-oriented education could not be completely abolished, especially in English education, but wrong teaching methods such as indoctrination and one-sidedness could be removed when teaching oral English to make a reform toward quality-oriented education step by step.

2.1. *Scholarships on Educational Models*

By comparing the advantages and disadvantages of exam-oriented education and quality-oriented education, it can be seen that quality-oriented education is more conducive to students' second language acquisition.

2.1.1. *Exam-oriented Education*

Exam-oriented education is a unique educational model derived from the influence of "diploma trumps everything", "scores equal abilities," Gaokao and other academic entrance exams. The most typical cases are Asian countries with large populations, such as China, Japan, and South Korea. The term "exam-oriented education" first emerged in 1992 [2], and many scholars have done researches on it and its aftermath. When it comes to the definition of exam-oriented education, Chinese scholars come up with many standpoints, which could be roughly categorised into "general malpractice theory, exam-oriented education theory, exam-oriented methods theory [3]." While its adverse effects on individuals and society are present, it is still widely adopted as the primary tool to measure a student's academic capacity.

Xu Xiaoyun deemed that "the so-called exam-oriented education is a mode of education that derailed from the practical needs of individual and societal development and a traditional educational mode that violates education rules and teaching to cope with the needs of higher education enrolment [4]." The exam-oriented education lays a one-sided emphasis on scores, which distorts students' learning purpose and motivation, makes too much of the tactics of doing exams, over-intensifies the training, and neglects the cultivation of students' comprehensive ability. Besides, teachers pay much attention to "scores" in teaching, and parents also praise highly of "students' scores first" and sign up for weekend cram classes for their children frantically. Xu classified exam-oriented education in the general malpractice theory category, treating it as an

educational model that causes unilateral malpractice and goes against society's developmental needs.

Li Tao defined exam-oriented education as "a utilitarian educational mode which sets exams as the goal of education, with the teaching method of infusion education, unilaterally developing student's capacity [5]." Under this education mode, the educational authorities evaluate schools and teachers by students' scores of college entrance examinations. In particular, the salary policy of performance pay forces teachers to adopt unscientific teaching methods to improve students' academic scores, leading to a tense, busy and competitive atmosphere in primary and secondary schools, which also increases students' burden. Overall, Li's definition coincides with the exam-oriented education theory, seeing it as a baton to organise and implement education.

Meng Yan argued that "exam-oriented education is an instrumental educational form that emphasises the infusion of rational knowledge and the students' passive acceptance towards such knowledge [6]." And this belongs to the exam-oriented methods theory category, which summarises the titular exam-oriented education and infusion education.

Exam-oriented education comes into being under the fierce competition of educational resources and the improper educational concept in China. In recent years, China has been deeply aware of this unsuitable teaching method and issued various policies to emphasise quality-oriented education more and more. In June 2006, the new Compulsory Education Law launched by the Chinese National People's Congress included quality-oriented education in the law for the first time, clearly stipulating that "quality-oriented education must be implemented" in compulsory education [7]. However, under the influence of the deep-rooted concept of exam-oriented education and teaching methods, the effects of implementing quality-oriented education policy are limited.

Under the Gaokao system, China cannot completely abandon the exam-oriented education model. However, the indoctrination and one-sidedness need to be rid of in pursuing quality-oriented education, rather than exam-oriented education, Cui Lili urged [8].

2.1.2. *Quality-oriented Education*

Quality-oriented education lays equal stress on results and processes, intellectual and non-intellectual factors, on teachers' guidance and students' learning, and cultivating students' general abilities and creative qualities. Besides, in teaching, quality-oriented education not only pays attention to the acquisition of academic knowledge but also emphasizes good moral character, independent study and research abilities, stressing the equality of theoretical learning and

practical learning, in-class learning and after-class learning.

Unlike exam-oriented education, quality-oriented education is an education model centred on developing people's quality and fostering students' ideological and moral character, cultural quality, aesthetic quality, physical and mental quality. What is more, implementing quality-oriented education is the objective requirement of China's social and economic development to education and the need to improve the quality of workers and cultivate talents of all levels and various types [9]. Challenged by the intensive international competition in this new era, population quality is the most promising factor and the most important resource of a nation. In addition, the continuous development of science and technology also brings new challenges to the workforce. It is not difficult to see that the concept of quality-oriented education is gradually permeating into every stage of China's education system, which undoubtedly contributes to improving people's overall quality and enhancing cultural soft power.

2.1.3. Exam-oriented Education V.S. Quality-oriented Education

As an essential subject of most Chinese examinations, such as Gaokao, English is a second language that almost every Chinese student has to learn. However, even if they learn English from a young age, most Chinese students' oral English still cannot support them to communicate in real-life conversations under China's long-term exam-oriented education. So, the writers reckon, Li Tao's definition of exam-oriented education, which is developing students' capacity according to the exams' needs best describes the problem the Chinese educational system is facing. Quality-oriented education, on the other hand, while proven to be more effective in improving students' overall capacity, does not satisfy the needs of the current rigid examination regime. To shift the focus from exam-oriented education to quality-orientated education, a qualitative approach needs to replace the current quantitative approach while retaining the original exams function to filtrate the "good students" and the "poor students", new emphasis on productive learning must be implemented.

2.2. Oral English Education – Second Language Education Method Overview

Linguistic competence and communicative competence are two essential concepts in second language acquisition. And second language education is derived from two main educational methods – grammatical translation and conversational method. The concept of "linguistic competence" was first introduced

by linguistic giant Noam Chomsky in 1968. He supposed that humans possess the grammatical ability to create endless sentences using the internal language principles, which is a mental mechanism [10]. Based on transformational linguistic and cognitive psychology, German linguist Ollendorff raised the grammatical translation method, using the learner's L1 to proceed with grammatical knowledge education [11]. It mainly focuses on reading and translation, which is also the earliest and most widely utilised second language education method China has adopted. However, this method over-emphasises grammatical education and ignores oral education, significantly reduces the content of second language education, and forces students to take in knowledge passively, which to some degree contains the infusion and unilateral characteristics of exam-oriented education.

Social linguist D. H. Hymes holds the opinion that an individual's linguistic competence is reflected in one's ability to communicate under appropriate contexts, and he proposes the concept of "communicative competence" – using language to communicate socially [12]. Zhu Zhiping quoted Hymes' ideas, proposing four dimensions of communicative competence, advocating that communicative competence should be – historically accurate, pragmatic, effective, and contextual [13]. Zhu assumes that, to assess language learners' communicative competence, is to assess their understandings of the L2 historical background and social practices, while being able to accurately express the meaning of a sentence and attract attention. According to Hymes' theory of communicative competence, a communicative teaching method was created in the 1970s and adopted by most western countries ever since – teachers should create realistic conversational environments in this communicative teaching method, helping L2 learners study and practice conversational materials, encouraging them to express themselves freely.

Chomsky's theory of universal grammar stated that all humankind possesses linguistic competence, and everyone can master any language. However, there is still a difference between a native speaker and non-native speaker – communicative competence. Native speakers could use their language correctly, swiftly and effortlessly in historical, practical, effective, and contextual dimensions.

The grammar-translation method, for example, is a traditional second language teaching method that treats cultivating students' language abilities as the endgame. However, the true endgame for second language acquisition is for students to communicate effectively in various contexts. "Linguistic competence does not equal communicative competence ... the accuracy alone in a language is insufficient, what is more important, the appropriation [14]." To help students achieve the

purpose of second language acquisition, and acquire communicative competence, communicative language teaching is undoubtedly the most appropriate and most efficient way [15].

2.3 Current Situation of Chinese Oral English Education (Secondary and Above)

Under the exam-oriented education system, education is utilitarian, and the contents of courses are bland. “Scores, marks, are the synonyms for personal ability. Therefore, it is the educatees’ target to achieve high scores in exams [16].” Due to the task format in Gaokao and various higher education exams, which mainly focus on exercises and completing tasks, so in order for students to achieve high scores, teachers often adopt the grammar-translation method in teaching. Students thereby only focus on improving their reading ability and would not actively improve other aspects of second language acquisition. Even when they are learning oral English, it is not for communicative purposes but rather to deal with exams. Communication, which is the true purpose of second language acquisition, Chinese students would hardly practice. Rubin Joan said, “If second language learning takes place in the classroom with little or no opportunity for practice, the type of strategies used may well be more limited and distinct from those used where the learner has an opportunity to and perhaps should use his language for real communication purposes. [17]”

To sum up, in China’s English education, most students only acquire exam-taking skills but not communicative skills. Long-term grammar-translation study will result in Chinese students’ inept oral ability and lack of communicative competence, leading to the phenomenon of “dummy English”. However, knowing these disadvantages, many Chinese teachers still adopt the grammar-translation method unconsciously.

3. DISCUSSION

In this section, the writers discuss the current educational problems that China is facing. And the writers look into the sources of these problems, combine them with actual social situations and then come up with some ideas for possible transformation into a quality-oriented educational model.

3.1. Current Problems of Exam-oriented Education

The problems of exam-oriented education are caused by various factors, such as China’s population, talent selection system, school policies, the quality of teachers, parents’ attitudes of urgently expecting their children to succeed, etc. The reform of exam-oriented education is a long process.

3.1.1. The Problems in the Educational System

Education should not be carried out to satisfy the unilateral pursuit of good scores and language education also should not go against its principle that aims to help students acquire language and communication skills. To acquire communicative competence, students need to experience real-life conversations and practice the negotiation of meanings [18]. It is of utmost importance that students learn about language, learn about the language use, and try to practice productively by using the language to deepen their understanding. Also, with practice under proper guidance, students could receive instant feedback on what they have learned and rectify their mistakes immediately, especially their communicative mistakes under a simulated conversational context. Current higher education in China does not abide by the principle of language learning and provide materials to meet students’ communicative needs. Instead, the State Education Development Commission (SEDC), which is in charge of everything from curriculum to teaching methods, chose to adopt the grammar-translation method and set exam scores as the standards of students’ ability. Under such a system, teachers are forced to cram as much grammatical teaching as possible, turning language study into exam study.

3.1.2. The Problems in Teaching Quality

The Western academia’s view on teachers’ role, is to encourage, guide, and inspire their students to have a positive attitude toward learning. It argues that, while textbooks are the physical holders of knowledge, teachers are the transmitters of knowledge. However, in China, this runs counter to the cultural influence rooted deeply in Chinese history. For instance, Confucian ideals argued that teachers are the physical holders of knowledge, instead of textbooks. Teachers should not be asking students questions, and they should not engage in debates or role-play with students, for if they do not display knowledge in lectures or stutter when questions are asked, they will be viewed as not doing their job [19]. The lingering Confucian ideal is one prime example of how outdated tradition could affect newer generations when ingrained in society, put students as passive receptors of knowledge, and undermine the development of their communicative needs. Although people argue that teachers need sufficient knowledge to teach properly, the Confucian ideal of teachers being the knowledge holders should not be at fault. Ultimately, this argument is somewhat correct. Teachers should hold enough knowledge to share enough knowledge with their students. Still, fundamentally, this ideal can no longer be adopted in the modern society since students who seek knowledge in the olden days were more seeking wisdom of the teacher and would typically

stick with the said teacher for years on end. However, this educational system simply cannot keep up in the modern world that requires constant communication across all fields. Therefore, if an educational transformation occurs, teachers shall rid of their outdated traditional mindset and review their roles as educators.

3.1.3. The Problems in Teacher Quality

To improve students' learning quality, teaching quality should be improved first. As an old Chinese saying goes, "An accomplished disciple owes his accomplishments to his great teacher." Teachers play the most critical role in education, and a qualified and professional teacher would undoubtedly play a huge role in students' lives. However, the lack of qualified English teachers is a common problem in Chinese English education. To qualify for a good English teacher, one should be capable of listening, reading, speaking, and writing; one could possess expertise in one area and be adaptive in all areas as a whole. Having such high standards is no doubt sounding unrealistic. Nevertheless, the idea of having teachers with well-rounded abilities does not mean teachers must be holistic, whereas knowledge is usually interconnected and interchangeable, especially in language. Hence, having sufficient knowledge of overall English language would significantly enhance each specific aspect's teaching delivery. With the deficiency of good quality teachers, the Chinese approach increases the class size in key schools to increase students' exposure to great teachers, but that also creates problems regarding learning efficiency. Some argue that reducing the class size would be the next best option to improve student's ability with the lack of capable teachers. In 1995, the United States Educational Department praised the effectiveness of the Class Size Reduction (CSR) plan, in which the students' performance was raised by 10 percent after downsizing the class to 15-20 pupils [20]. This is undoubtedly an easy improvement, but facing the mega population in China, such a plan might not be easy to impose.

3.2. Assumption Based on the Current Educational Situation in China

China's population is over 1.4 billion, with more than 200 million students in school. There is an urgent demand for high-quality education. Taking second language education as an example, teachers' linguistic competence is of great significance in teaching quality, while only a few have comprehensive language ability, far from meeting the needs of 200 million students. Following this specific condition, the development of the CSR plan cannot be supported by scarce educational resources.

Under the unique examination-oriented system in China, people all focus on utilitarian education aiming at high scores. Schools, teachers, parents, and students all regard high scores in examinations as the end goals of education and learning. To name a few, teachers use the grammar-translation approach to teach instead of the communicative approach, and students use unilateral input method instead of communicative method to get high marks. As for the social environment, the Chinese society has been used to and accepted the exam-oriented education system, which involves a lot of scope and influence, bringing a massive cost to transforming English education from score-oriented education to communication-oriented education.

In addition, teachers are reluctant to accept the teaching method of guiding students to think independently and pay attention to students' mental establishments. Under the exam-oriented education system, teachers' reputations and salaries are entirely determined by students' high scores and high enrolment rates. Their teaching methods, therefore, are affected by this more or less. With their reputation not being influenced by students' capability of communicating with others, teachers will only pay attention to improving students' examination ability instead of communicative competence. Moreover, using a variety of education methods will increase the career cost. Judging from this situation, the exam-oriented indoctrination teaching method is the best choice for teachers out of reason [21].

To carry out linguistic competence-oriented education focusing on fostering capability of communicating under China's existing structure with a great population as well as a specific educational system, the writers proposed the following ideas:

First of all, the writers reckon it is necessary to change the tendency of taking achievement as the only standard to evaluate students, giving full play to the role of comprehensive academic evaluation and diversified special tests in the enrolment of higher education and employment. Then the contents and forms of Gaokao, CET-4, CET-6, and other English exams need to be changed. China could learn from other countries' language testing methods under the true capability-oriented education system, such as IELTS, TOEFL, and use communicative competence as the dominant language testing method. China's education needs to overcome the disadvantages of one-sided reliance on examination, weaken the proportion of scores in the college entrance examination, adopt multiple entrance evaluation programs, and reduce the demand for exam-oriented education.

In addition, to promote the teaching and increase chances of second language communication for the students, increasing teachers' income and reducing the professional cost, would help to reinforce teachers'

consciousness of abiding by and implementing the new communicative competence teaching scheme. During the teaching process, attention should be paid to foster students' interest and change their English learning habits. Teachers should consider students' motivation to pass the exam and enhance students' interest in language and understanding of context, attaching importance to interaction and communication. The state also needs to build a well-rounded system for teachers' professional development and increase the number of teachers with comprehensive linguistic competence.

4. CONCLUSION

Filling the void caused by exam-oriented education and closing the gap between exam-oriented and quality-oriented education, drastic changes shall be made. Educational reforms are likely necessary to amend decades of industrialized exam-oriented education, redress teaching methodologies, and re-profile existing and new educational staff. To carry out reformation of such calibre would have an earth-shattering effect. Many areas in the educational system would be touched, and many positions in the educational hierarchy will be shaken. However, such changes might be unavoidable in light of the rapidly changing world arena, and the ever-increasing globalization. Exam-oriented education has fed up generations of Chinese nationals. These generations created the now economic wonder, but with current population reaching its saturation and economy closing in on stagnation, the influence of the old generation will start to fade. It is inevitably a better way for the new generation to stand out more on the world stage, carry forward traditional culture and impose new ideals.

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