

# The Trend of College English Teaching Reform Based on Content-based Instruction: In the Direction of General Education or Specific Purpose Education?

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## ABSTRACT

At present, the focus of Chinese college English courses is shifting from language skills to content, and the academic community has agreed that content-based instruction is the best way to teach college English. However, for college English courses with different contents, there have been two reform directions: English for general education and English for specific purpose education. This paper analyses and reviews these two viewpoints, as well as discusses and offers suggestions on the two reform contents, based on a quick overview of content-based instruction. I think that whether the next step of college English teaching is based on general education courses or academic English courses, it will undoubtedly be a new challenge for the majority of English teachers. In the process of facing these challenges, teachers' knowledge structure and quality will be improved. They will fundamentally transform from language skills teachers to general education practitioners or academic English practitioners. Because students at different Chinese universities have varying levels of English proficiency, I believe that it is appropriate to rationally plan and allocate English teaching resources based on the characteristics of different universities, and to develop personalized and targeted English teaching syllabuses.

**Keywords:** *College English Teaching Reform, Content-based Instruction, General Education.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

With the release of the *Outline of China's Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development Plan (2010–2020)*, Chinese higher education entered a new stage of development. The reform of college English courses completed the transformation of the teaching model from exam-oriented education to all-round education. However, it is debatable whether the current educational system can satisfy students' developmental needs [1].

Domestic scholars and practitioners generally believe that the next step of reform should focus on the substantive content of the curriculum [1]. The teaching of college English courses needs to shift from focusing on language skills, such as grammar, to focusing on subject knowledge content and language communication [2]. It is widely accepted that content-based instruction (CBI) has become the mainstay of the next stage of college English teaching [2]. Such instruction transcends the language

syllabus, centralizing the content or information to be learned by students [3].

Based on varying contents, there are two different views on teaching reform: general education and specific purpose education [2]. Wang and Li [4], Wu and Han [5] and others supported a general education reform of college English from different perspectives. In contrast, Cai and Liao [6] pointed out that the direction of college English teaching reform is English for specific purposes (ESP), not general education. The reasons for the differences are as follows: 1. The general education system is underdeveloped in China. 2. The reform policies of college English courses in China are not complete. 3. Teachers face many constraints [6].

This raises an important question: In which direction should the next college English course reform go? This essay explores two directions of the Chinese college English course teaching reform: general education or specific purpose education. It begins by presenting the

background and rationale for the essay. Definitions of certain terms are then provided. Next, the essay outlines CBI in college English courses and the theoretical framework. A discussion of the two reform directions of college English teaching in Chinese universities follows. Finally, the conclusions are presented.

## **2. CONTENT-BASED INSTRUCTION**

### **2.1. Definition**

CBI is in line with the belief that “the purpose of learning language is communication” [7]. Content-based second language teaching and learning, as a language teaching method that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, has increasingly been a focus of research. Bowker summarized the research, categorizing studies as focusing on reading comprehension, students’ interest in learning content, improving students’ language acquisition level, academic reading in specific subjects, or the application of this teaching method. The method foregrounds language content (such as topics) rather than grammar, overcoming the shortcomings of past teaching methods that paid too much attention to language forms and ignored language content [7]. Additionally, Li Boling stated that one of the characteristics of this teaching method is that it transcends the boundaries that certain subjects impose on language [8].

### **2.2. Features**

CBI is a concept, and many techniques of other teaching methods can be combined with CBI, so the latter is very tolerant [9]. CBI can be applied to subject knowledge courses [10], teaching materials that are conducive to students’ thinking and that challenge students’ cognition, teaching materials that go beyond the target language or target language culture, or topics in the knowledge system [11].

The three main principles of CBI are subject knowledge as the core, authentic language materials, and meeting the needs of students [3]. Subject knowledge can challenge students’ cognitive abilities and arouse students’ interest [3]. Real and systematic language teaching materials can provide a meaningful context for effective language learning or acquisition [3]. CBI pays attention to students’ cognitive, language, and emotional needs, as well as their academic development and career needs [11].

Many models of CBI, such as thematic, auxiliary, and protective models, are commonly used in teaching practice. Met proposed a CBI model continuum that includes both a language teaching model and a content teaching model [11]. It incorporates immersive teaching and multi-disciplinary content teaching aimed at improving students’ language skills.

### **2.3. Content-based Instruction in College English Courses**

Because of the advantages of CBI in teaching practice and its great potential in developing students’ language ability, knowledge, and comprehensive quality, foreign countries have tried to apply CBI to second language and foreign language teaching in universities since the mid-1980s. The Chinese academic community introduced the concept of CBI in the mid-1990s. Wang Zhe first alluded to the direction of CBI in professional English reading teaching [4]. Other Chinese scholars then also began to explore CBI [5][12][13][14][15]. At this stage, Chinese research on CBI was mainly based on theoretical discussions. From 2005, empirical studies on CBI in China began to appear [16]. These studies used quantitative or qualitative methods (or a combination of the two) to evaluate CBI. CBI is used in teaching Chinese as a foreign language, translation teaching of college English courses, academic English writing teaching of college English courses, and basic stage teaching of English majors. Research has proven that learners welcome CBI in English teaching, and that the method is more conducive to cultivating learners’ English ability than traditional English teaching. For example, Chang Junyue tried to reform the teaching of college English courses by applying CBI [17]. He constructed a curriculum that integrated content-based courses and skill-based courses at the basic stage of non-English majors, and achieved a better teaching effect.

## **3. DEFINING ENGLISH FOR GENERAL EDUCATION**

General education originated from liberal arts education in the ancient Greek–Roman period. After the publication of *General Education in a Free Society* at Harvard University in 1945, general education flourished and gradually became a major feature of Western higher education. The report (1945) highlighted the disadvantages of over-specialization and utilitarianism in American higher education at the time. It defined its concept by clarifying the nature of general education:

Broadly speaking, education can be divided into two parts: general education and special education. The former aims to train students to become responsible people and citizens, and the latter aims to cultivate students’ ability to engage in certain occupations in the future. The two sides cannot be separated or opposed [18].

Dewey stated that the purpose of a liberal arts education is to develop intelligence and to teach people how to use intelligence to learn [19]. Becker defined a modern liberal arts education as a higher education system aimed at developing students’ desire to learn, critical thinking skills, effective communication, and civic responsibilities [20]. Wilbur argued that the value of a liberal arts education stems from the fact that its goal is

to foster the development of actual human activities, which are the true traits of humanity [21]. Similarly, Stewart proposed that education should assist students in becoming self-sufficient adults [22]. Thus, a liberal approach to education tries to assist students in finding their own path by encouraging them to take action confidently and with comprehension, rather than just passively accepting the world. A crucial component of a liberal education is therefore assisting youngsters in making decisions; in other words, increasing their autonomy [23].

College English education is a part of general education at the university level [7]. College English general education courses are a powerful supplement to college general education courses and can expand the scope of general education in schools [8]. English for general education aims to improve students' cross-cultural and international communication skills to cultivate their humanistic literacy and enable them to spread Chinese culture while accepting the cultures of Western English-speaking countries [7].

#### **4. DEFINING ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES EDUCATION**

The concept of ESP education mainly includes academic English and professional English. Some colleges and universities call such courses professional English, e-commerce English, foreign trade English, international financial English, news English, medical English, legal English, tourism English, marketing English, academic English, technical English, English literature reading, or English essay writing courses [24]. Regarding ESP education, Stewart claimed that it should include four essential characteristics and two variable characteristics. The four fundamental characteristics are:

1. The curriculum must meet the special needs of learners.
2. The content (themes and topics) must be related to certain disciplines, occupations, and activities.
3. The focus of the course should be on trying to adapt the morphology, vocabulary, and text structure to those specific activities, mainly through the use of language training.
4. There must be a sharp contrast to English for general education.

The two variable characteristics are:

1. It can be limited to the cultivation of a certain language skill (for example, reading skills or speech recognition skills).
2. It can be taught using any kind of teaching method [22]. Based on this, experts believe that the bilingual courses (professional English and academic English) offered by major universities (such as Tongji University

and Sun Yat-sen University) should also be included in ESP teaching. However, teachers of professional English may emphasize professional knowledge teaching and believe that not emphasizing language learning does not affect students' use of language as a tool to learn knowledge.

#### **5. DISCUSSION OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE TWO KINDS OF CONTENT-BASED INSTRUCTION REFORM OF THE COLLEGE ENGLISH CURRICULUM IN CHINA**

Chinese college English courses have experienced three major teaching reforms, from 1982–1994, 1994–2001, and 2002–present [25]. As the main result of the first reform, *The College English Syllabus* in 1986 stipulated that the purpose of college English teaching is to cultivate strong reading ability, certain listening ability, and preliminary writing and speaking ability. *The College English Teaching Syllabus* in 1999 formed in the second reform pointed out that the purpose of college English teaching is to train students to have strong reading skills and certain listening, speaking, writing and translation skills. The *College English Course Teaching Requirements* in 2007 from the third reform stated that the goal of college English teaching is to cultivate students' comprehensive English application ability, especially listening and speaking ability. From the perspective of the target orientation of the three syllabuses, Chinese college English teaching has long been based on language ontology, language foundation, and language skills. The main difference between them lies in the adjustment of the sequence of language skills cultivated [25]. The strength and impact of the third college English teaching reform that started in 2002 surpassed that of the previous two. In particular, colleges and universities have conducted many discussions on the reform of English teaching models based on using computers in classrooms [25]. After nearly ten years of development, the task of transforming the teaching mode has essentially been completed. The next breakthrough and development direction of college English teaching reform has become a problem that must be seriously considered by the academic community. In light of the good theoretical foundation and practical effects of CBI, the language foundation and skill ontology has been supplanted in college English teaching. Although the academic community has reached consensus on the use of CBI in this context, there remain two different viewpoints on the content: general education or specific purpose education.

##### **5.1. Reform of English for General Education**

One of the two views on CBI in college English teaching is that it should rely on general education. The generalization of college English education and college

English teaching based on general courses were clearly proposed at the “English for General Education and Curriculum Setting Forum” held in Guangzhou in May 2010. At this forum, Wang Zhe and Li Junjun argued that most of the college English teaching reforms in the past eight years have made changes to teaching structures, frameworks, and hardware [4]. According to these authors, a curriculum content design reform is required, rather than a purely structural framework reform, and the cultural connotations of English courses need to be increased, which would deepen the teaching reform. They concluded that the deepening of the college English teaching reform we are talking about is to use English as the language of instruction to promote general education. More precisely, the English language should be transformed into a carrier of content, and general education is the main content of English teaching [4]. After the idea of college English teaching based on general courses was put forward, it received positive responses from some domestic experts and scholars [5]. They wrote articles describing how to reform college English teaching based on general courses, and introduced the specific practices of some domestic colleges and universities. They hypothesized that “in the near future, college English courses based on language teaching will be gradually replaced by general courses based on English” [5].

### ***5.2.Reform of English for Specific Purposes Education***

Another point of view on CBI in college English teaching is that it should rely on students’ majors. In other words, the goal of college English teaching should be to increase students’ academic or professional English abilities. Several experts hold this view [4] [24][25][26], among which Cai Jigang’s view is the most representative. In recent years, he has written articles calling for China’s college English to be positioned as academic English. In the opinion of these experts, the main reasons for relying on students’ majors are: 1. Improvement of the overall English level of college freshmen: With the promotion and implementation of the “High School English Curriculum Standards,” college students are expected to have completed required learning tasks in high schools. 2.Students’ English learning needs: Academic English can prepare students for language, content, and learning skills for professional learning in English, and help them transition smoothly to bilingual courses. 3.Society needs ESP education: The Chinese market needs college graduates to have general listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills, as well as professional English skills [25].

Cai Jigang rejected the general English education orientation of the development of college English teaching [25]. He believed that English general education courses should be English humanities elective courses.

Although such courses are a way to learn English in combination with content and can meet the requirements of students with different interests, they can only be basic English follow-up elective courses. They should not be elevated to the mainstream status of college English teaching or be the development direction of college English. Experts who believe that the teaching goals of college English should be imparting academic or professional English skills are also aware of the incomplete knowledge structure of teachers. The academic backgrounds of Chinese college English teachers are mostly literature, translation, linguistics, and so on. Few of these teachers have backgrounds in academic or professional English. In this regard, Cai said that “as the focus of China’s basic English shifts, more and more basic English teachers will be transferred to primary and secondary schools in the future, which is an inevitable trend” [25]. He also supported that

University English teachers are fully qualified for academic English courses, and after appropriate training, they are also fully qualified for English course for specific purpose. Therefore, one of the key tasks of college English teaching is to train a large number of qualified ESP English teachers [25].

## **6. CONCLUSION**

### ***6.1.Major Findings***

The debate on the two kinds of CBI is based on the controversy over whether the attributes of college English education are humanistic or instrumental. There has been a long-standing dispute between the instrumental and humanistic nature of English teaching. For example, Cai Jigang noted that “in China, English teaching at all stages seems to focus more on the function of general education, and its instrumental role is often dismissed” [25]. Regarding the problem of insufficient emphasis on college English instrumentality, he asked, “What is the purpose of our college English teaching? Is it just to improve students’ humanistic quality and cultural accomplishment?” He also quoted that the target of college English teaching is non-English majors, because they have their own relatively certain professional learning direction, and for them, English is a secondary course and a tool [25]. At the same time, in the opinion of those experts who believe that the content of college English should be general education, once language is used for communication, it inevitably carries information, thoughts, or emotions. These contents reflect the characteristics of humanity, and general education is the best embodiment of this kind of humanity. In my opinion, college English should not be required to choose between humanity and instrumentality; this does not seem to conform to the laws of science. College English teaching is a combination of language instrumentality and humanity, like two sides of the same

coin. This point is clearly reflected in the *College English Course Teaching Requirements* in 2017. The document mentioned that a college English course is not only a basic language course, but also a general education course for broadening knowledge and understanding world culture, which is both instrumental and humanistic.

## **6.2. Significance and Suggestions of This Study**

The in-depth thinking about the positioning of college English education triggered by the dispute on the two kinds of CBI will play a key role in the future development and reform of college English teaching. In the process of further reforms, the majority of teachers will devote more energy, hard work, and effort to the sustainable development of college English teaching. They will get a broader space for development, which is conducive to their own professional development. A focus on the content of college English teaching reform will uncover new growth points for teacher development. Judging from the history of college English teaching reform, future reform will play a huge role in the quality improvement and professional development of college English teachers. Take the third college English teaching reform as an example. This reform emphasizes the integration of modern information technology in English courses. In a sense, it is not just a reform of a certain teaching model. Instead, it promotes the full integration of modern information technology, computers, and networks as the core of the English curriculum. This is a renewal of teaching philosophy for the majority of English teachers; accordingly, it entails new and higher requirements for quality. Chen Jianlin asserted that the internal quality of teachers is the key to the success of college English teaching reform [26]. Teacher quality includes two aspects that interact with each other: knowledge and character. Knowledge is one of the contents of teaching, but personal character can influence the method and effect of teaching. In addition to these qualities, an English teacher in the 21st century should also possess important qualities related to the integration of computer networks in English courses, that is, "information-teaching" quality. I think that whether the next step of college English teaching is based on general education courses or academic English courses, it will undoubtedly be a new challenge for the majority of English teachers. In the process of facing these challenges, teachers' knowledge structure and quality will be improved. They will fundamentally transform from language skills teachers to general education practitioners or academic English practitioners. Because students at different Chinese universities have varying levels of English proficiency, I believe that it is appropriate to rationally plan and allocate English teaching resources based on the characteristics of different universities, and to develop personalized and targeted English teaching syllabuses.

The decision on whether to offer English courses for general education or English courses for specific purpose education should take into account influencing factors such as the type of university, students' level of English proficiency, and students' needs. College English courses in China's normal or comprehensive universities, for example, could focus on general education, while colleges and universities of science, technology, finance, and economics could focus on specific purpose education. Universities with higher rankings and students with greater English proficiency could provide specific purpose English education, while universities with lower rankings and students with lower English proficiency could focus on general English education. Different institutions within the same university should also evaluate which types of English courses are offered to meet the demands of different students. For example, English courses for specific purpose education could be offered when international majors are involved.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

I would like to convey my gratitude to the following individuals.

A special thanks goes out to Dr. Liang Haoshen, my tutor, for all of his assistance and guidance throughout this process. I would also like to thank my enlightened parents for their invaluable assistance during my writing process. I would also like to express my gratitude to my friends for their assistance with the writing. I hope that in the future, I will be able to improve with these people and that we will be able to help each other.

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