

# *Study on the Role Change of English Teacher in the Context of Reforms in English Teaching*

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**Abstract**—The aim of this paper is to investigate the possible effects of reforms in College Entrance Examination and college-level English education on teachers' position and development. We examine the history of English teaching reforms in recent 36 years in major cities and regions, its driving forces and traditional role of English teachers. The results we obtain prove that a reform in English is closely related to the economic demand of the society and political concerns. While English is still regarded as a critical skill, its position as a key subject in the whole education system has been weakening. The result suggests that English teachers should regard specialty English teacher and communicator of advanced foreign culture and brilliant traditional culture as a better direction of career transformation. However, the necessity and reasonableness of such reforms is still to be further studied.

**Keywords**—college English; College Entrance Examination; teaching reform; change of teacher's role

## I. INTRODUCTION

Since the 1970s, English has always been an important part of fundamental and higher education, as well as a key means to evaluate career capability. In this circumstance, countless resources have been put into this subject. The result, however, cannot be satisfactory enough. "Our common foreign language teaching lasts from third grade in primary school till second year in college. Despite so many years of learning, college graduates fail to conduct effective communication with this language. So, it's high time to address this issue." Li Lanqing (1996) remarked, which indicates the urgency and importance of reforms in English teaching.

Different from the long-lasting "English fever" in China, the three core subjects for college admission around the world are native language, math and science, while English merely serves as a tool of communication. Nowadays, after learning in primary school and intensive training in middle schools, students' English skills generally reach a peak after the third year in high school and generally see a dramatic decline during college years. It seems that college-level English teaching has lost its appeal to the students and the necessity of its existence in colleges becomes more questionable than ever. This paper, first studies the history of fundamental English education in China. Second, it predicts the possible influence of present English teaching reform. Finally, it provides with

some practical measures for college English teachers' change of role.

## II. REFORM IN HIGH-SCHOOL-LEVEL ENGLISH TEACHING

### A. History of Reforms in College Entrance Examination

Since first tested in the first College Entrance Examination in 1977, English is subject to constant changes and reforms. To better relate the present to the past, a review of the 36 years of change in the College Entrance Examination may be necessary. According to general requirements on students, we divide this changing process into their periods.

TABLE I. ENGLISH IN THE COLLEGE ENTRANCE EXAMINATION

Time	Changes of policies
1978-1990	Resumption of college entrance examination; English test: multiple choice (1977) English exam required for entering senior middle schools (1983) First English exam required for entering colleges (1984) CET-4 and CET-6 came into being (1987-1989)
1991-2003	Spelling and correcting mistakes introduced to the exam (1991) Listening required (first in Guangdong in 1999; in the whole country (in 2003) 3+X mode, with English as one of the three main subjects (2002)
2004-2015	Reform planning, with English as the focus (2013) New policies: six times of English exams in three years in high school (2015)

As we can see from the table, changes of English education are closely related to the actual needs of the society. For example, from 1987 to 1989, the golden years of foreign trade<sup>1</sup>, the demand of foreign language talents increased rapidly. That's when CET-4 and CET-6 came into existence. Since then much resources have been put into this subject in the whole educational system. English has become so important that it is key to college graduation, pursuit of doctor's degree and master's degree, attaining registered residence in major cities, passing civil service examination, landing jobs with most companies and organizations and getting a promotion. Under such pressure, students in college

<sup>1</sup> [http://gaokao.eol.cn/kuai\\_xun\\_3075/20140103/t20140103\\_1060039\\_4.shtml](http://gaokao.eol.cn/kuai_xun_3075/20140103/t20140103_1060039_4.shtml)

even overlook their majors to learn English well, which is a great loss to both the society and students themselves.

#### B. Reforms in major cities and regions in China

After years of survey and discussion, in May, 2015, the reform in College Entrance Examination was launched, with English as the focus. The most eye-catching change is that in 2017, English exam will be held twice a year as a social standard exam, which means students will have six chances with English test during the three years in senior high school, the highest score of these recorded as the final.

To further understand the direction and aim of the English reform, we list main several policy changes in some economically advanced regions, for the reason that these areas, endowed with the best resources, always represent the ideal state and mode of education in this country.

TABLE II. ENGLISH REFORM IN COLLEGE ENTRANCE EXAMINATION IN SOME MAJOR REGIONS

Regions	Changes	Details of policies
Beijing	50 less in score; Twice a year	English subject weigh lower, which becomes a social standard exam held twice a year, adding up to a total of six tests in the 3 years in senior high school. The highest score of these 6 times will be recorded as the final. The full score will be 100 in 2016.
Shandong	Listening test excluded	In 2014, listening will be excluded from the summer exam. The full score of English remains 150. The highest listening score in the senior high school will be recorded for reference.
Jiangsu	Twice a year; Standard exam (in trial)	English is no longer the three main subjects. The exam will be held twice a year, with the score as reference during college admission.
Guangdong	Several tests	Since 2010, English has always been one of the three main subjects and a necessity of college admission. Till now, the policy remains unchanged.
Shanghai	Twice a year	Oral test will be required.

<sup>a</sup> Resource: Sina website

As shown in this table, the common two steps are making English a social standard exam and allowing multiple times of exams. In fact, since the beginning of the reform in College Entrance Examination, multiple times of English exams is the only definite and detailed step made by the government.

To sum up, these regions cope with the situation by means of differentiation. On one hand, they admit the over-exaggeration of English's role in the past exams and education, and begin to treat it as a common subject and push students to focus on native language learning and study of math. On the other hand, we may reasonably believe that, students may try hard to nail the problem in the first year in high school and stop paying many efforts into it. This will, positively speaking, leave ample room for college-level improvements.

#### C. The reason for reforms in English education

We believe there are two reasons for taking English the starting point of the whole reform in the College Entrance Examination.

First, it's the most challenged part within the educational system, as after years of test-oriented learning, student's ability to use this language hasn't seen much progress, and their interest in this subject has kept falling.

Second, English's position is weaken in order to promote the public's respecting and learning the Chinese language and traditional Chinese culture, which fit well the needs of revival of traditional Chinese culture of the government.

#### D. Possible effect of reforms in College Entrance Examination

Therefore, English teachers' concern that credits will be cut down seems fairly reasonable and possible, since the main motivation for Chinese student's learning and purpose of school training is high scores. Under huge pressure of competition, students and schools may cope with this situation by reducing English learning to one year and then focus on other subjects.

Hu Zhuanglin (2002) predicted the shrinking of college-level English teaching.<sup>2</sup> Eight years later, in a survey in 32 universities under the direct supervision of the Ministry of Education, including the Peking University, Hunan University, Tsinghua University, Sichuan University, Xiamen University, China University of Mining & Technology- Beijing, Central South University. She found that with the number of students unchanged, the workload had been through drastic reduction.

Another influence may be on the overall English proficiency of the younger generation. In 2013, Education First, a well-known English training organization conducted a survey, ranking non-English speaking countries based on their English proficiency. There are four levels: very high, high, middle-level and low. India, Japan, Korea and Indonesia ranked the third level while China ranked the last in the fourth level. Given that English still prevail as the common language in the world, sheering away the focus of English will in a long run hinder China's cooperation and competition with other countries in the world.

### III. ROLE CHANGE OF COLLEGE ENGLISH TEACHER

From above, we know that English is too important to be underestimated, both for the students and the whole nation. People need English training, both as part of the liberal education and professional development. Still, in the reform, the teaching system will be inevitably reformed, and teachers' role needs to be changed accordingly.

#### A. Traditional Role of College English Teacher

In the early 20th century, under the influence of behaviorism, the role of teachers was defined as an

<sup>2</sup> Hu Zhuanglin, "The Low Efficient English Teaching in China," Foreign Language Teaching Abroad, 2002(4).

“educator” responsible for student's learning new skills and knowledge and answering their questions. In the 1940s, Florian Witold Znaniecki(1940), a polish sociologist defined teachers as “knowledge people” with the following features: Possessing knowledge but don't develop it; being a scholar not responsible for creating new knowledge; constantly requiring new knowledge and pass it to the younger generation. Despite the introducing of this definition provides a new angle of studying the role of teachers, it still regarded teachers a spreader of knowledge.

Since the mid-20th century, humanism began to have an effect on the recognition of teacher's role. The representative researcher, Carl Rogers(1969) first developed the theory of “free learning” and “student-centered” teaching. He criticized the traditional relationship between teachers and students and emphasized on emotional connection between them which he regarded as a positive factor on student's academic performance. Another expert Abraham H. Maslow (1954) came up with the theory of “inner education” and “inner study” which focus on development of human beings. He believed that it is the teacher's job to motivate students to exploit their own potentials and enhance their inner awareness of learning. (Zhuxia and He Qizong, 2009:10).<sup>3</sup>

In the 1970s, some constructivism believers represented by Piaget (1970) devoted to studying of role of teachers and came to the conclusion that students are the main part of education while teachers, assignments and environment serve as medium and outside factors. Thus, teachers are helpers, promoters, organizers and assistant of discussions, researchers who help students with their problems. This belief is a breakthrough of the research on teachers' role.

In China, however, writing and reading skills have long been regarded as the focus of English training, while comprehensive abilities such as listening and speaking English being always neglected. Besides, oversize class is such a common phenomenon among colleges and universities that management becomes quite a big problem. Gradually, college English teaching turned more and more rigid under the pressure of test-oriented education in which teachers and students strive to improve vocabulary, grammar, reading and writing. Time seems, therefore, too precious to be spent on the practice of communication skills. The role of students is merely a receiving end, without any logic thinking or participation while teacher just serve as a dominant resource of knowledge.

Under the new situation, to achieve higher scores in middle schools, students will focus on other subjects like math and Chinese and the task of English teaching will probably be transferred to colleges. Thus, it is colleges that will be responsible for students' further English training. In this case, classification of the English teaching may be the direction of reform and a reasonable choice of teachers.

<sup>3</sup> Zhu Xia and He Qizong, “Standard of Teachers in Humanism,” Education Research Monthly, 2009 (10).

## B. Specialty English Teacher

College students learn a foreign language in the following situations: first, they learn it to become some professional personnel, such as interpreters or translators. Second, they learn it to pass some exams required by college and future employers, such as CET-4 for graduation from college. In addition, there are many students working on improving their English for studying abroad and learn foreign languages.

Since English is basically a course closely related to the development of society, while other subjects generally remain stable, English education in China is constantly changing. In fact, since 1978, English teaching has changed every seven or eight years.

For teachers nowadays, it is really hard to carry on a successful English lesson in colleges. There are probably several reasons for it. First, students may find the content and teaching method similar with that in the high school, in which vocabulary and grammar are the aim and core, and are no longer easily attracted by what college English class provides, teachers can only change their role from language teachers to activities coordinators. But after years of traditional lecturing method, the shift of role is hard for them. Second, due to the lower credit, university teachers are forced to teach optional classes. Some even change to other fields such as law, economy, in the expectation of teaching professional courses in English.

Faced with the changing situation, some experts suggested re-positioning of different level of English teaching: primary English teaching focuses on laying foundation, while undergraduate and graduate English teaching should be about ESP or academic English. Liu Runqing (2010), said: “Time has changed and now I expect that, within a few years, ESP will be the only way out.”<sup>4</sup> Zhang Shaojie (2011) noted that with the basic foreign language education improving, high school graduates; especially from the key universities no longer need this time-consuming and inefficient college foreign language education.<sup>5</sup> The skill-oriented English training should be replaced by profession-oriented training.

## IV. COMMUNICATOR OF ADVANCED FOREIGN CULTURE AND BRILLIANT TRADITIONAL CULTURE

Since December 2013, topics such as Chinese culture, history, politics, society and economy have been included in the CET-4 and CET-6 exams. On April 19, 2013, Director Liu Xianghong in the Department of Higher Education stressed the need to pay attention to cultural heritage in higher education. From then on, it is required that English teachers focus more on cultural heritage throughout all aspects of college English training, to reflect the outstanding achievements of the English-speaking countries at the same time and guide students to establish cultural awareness and self-confidence in the English class.

<sup>4</sup> Liu Runqing, “A Study on the Five Realms of An English Class,” Link and Think, 2010(2).

<sup>5</sup> Zhang Shaojie. “Opportunities and Challenges for Foreign Language Teaching in the opening-up of Education,” Chinese Foreign Language, 2011 (2).

Chinese culture has been more and more popular. Till now, there are 476 Confucius Institutes and 816 Confucius primary schools in 127 countries and regions, aiming at colleges, middle schools, communities and companies in order to promote Chinese culture.

Under the influence of the Confucius Institute, the global "Chinese fever" continues to heat up. In 2012, the United Kingdom, Sweden, Ireland, Serbia and other seven countries officially include the Chinese language into the national education system. So far, more than 40 countries have made Chinese teaching part of the national educational system.

Linguists Lado (1957, 50) says: "Language is part of culture, therefore, those who does not know the mode and principles are impossible to really learn the language."<sup>6</sup> Language is a tool of thinking and carrier of culture. Without good understanding of the cultural background of target language, one cannot accurately understand the article. It can't be separated from culture to exist, or from social heritage.

In college English teaching, it is advisable for teachers' associate theory with practice to create a good English context for students to learn the language, making the students fully aware of the social life, cultural traditions and customs of the English-speaking Western countries. The highest goal of culture teaching is to train students to communicate with the needed language. Instead of scores, teachers should mainly focus on students' cultural awareness or cultural sensitivity and cultivate the students' cultural communicative competence.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I would like to first thank my husband Cecil, for his love and support. I would also say thank you to all my students, whose encouragement, kindness and inspiration help me through all the years. I am inspired by and thankful to all my friends, especially He Jing and Lily Leng, for their love and appreciation means a lot to me.

This dissertation is also dedicated to my parents and all the other family members. Without them, I can never realize my childhood dream, that is, to become a teacher.

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