The Implementation of College English Curriculum Reform in Chinese Tertiary Institutions: A Preliminary Exploration

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Abstract. Institutional-level practice of the implementation of curriculum principles specified in the revised national curriculum documents is overwhelmingly under-researched in the existing literature. This paper fills the gap by examining the practical changes at three tertiary institutions in implementing national policy documents of curricula reform. The review has revealed the encouraging progress and trend of curriculum design towards more individualized and flexible from being unified.

Keywords: Curriculum reform; College English; stratified teaching.

1. Introduction

As English continues to be an important mediational tool for accelerating globalization, the past decades have witnessed an ever-increasing competition among nations aiming to ensure that their resource pools of talent have adequate command of English. Against this backdrop, Chinese Ministry of Education initiated a comprehensive reform of English language teaching (ELT) so as to improve the quality and efficiency of English education which was criticized for being unable to meet the demand made by China's increasing integration into the globalization of world economy. These reforms, often led by revision of relevant curricula, concern ELT at various levels ranging from the primary to the tertiary level. While curriculum development at the elementary and secondary levels was increasingly documented in literature (see Hu, 2005; Hu & McKay, 2012; Li & Baldauf, 2011;), curriculum change at the tertiary level is overwhelmingly under-researched. Even if there are discussions on curriculum development of ELT at the tertiary level, focus was on the changing trends of the national curriculum (e.g., Xu & Fan, 2017) or change in training models and the revision of the national curriculum (e.g., Chang, 2006) based on the macro-scopic analysis of policy documents. A gap left by the existing studies is that, as far as we know, there is little consideration given to the on-going institutional-level practice of the implementation of curriculum principles specified in the revised national curriculum documents.

This paper, therefore, intends to report on the practical changes at tertiary institutions in implementing national policy documents of curricula reform. Specifically, it describes what we see as a radical curriculum innovation taking place at three representative universities, together with discussion of the evolution of the College English curriculum for non-English majors in Chinese higher institutions from the mid-1980s to the present time. In particular, this paper justifies the individualized and stratified curriculum design based on Confucian education theory and Carl Ransom Rogers' humanistic psychology.

2. CET Curricula Reform in China

The CET is an acronym for College English Teaching referring to English-language education for non-English majors, which account for a vast majority of Chinese university students (more than 90%; Jin & Cortazzi, 2006; J. Wang, 2007). The practice of CET has been regulated through the national unified curriculum syllabus – the College English Teaching Syllabus (1985/1986, 1999), latterly, the College English Curriculum Requirements (CECR) (2004, 2007) and most recently, Guidelines on College English Teaching (2015, 2017). The evolution of these College English Curricula documents has taken place alongside a number of encouraging progress and trends since the mid-1980s when China started its modernization and internationalization drive. The most prominent development might be the shift from monolithic and centralized direction of teaching arrangements to a more

flexible and individualized approach, reflecting a process of gradual devolution of decision-making to higher institutions and their increasing participation (Xu & Fan, 2017). For instance, realizing the differences between higher institutions in terms of teaching resources and students' level of English upon entering college and social demands they face, CECR (2007) states that colleges and universities should formulate a scientific, systematic and individualized College English syllabus to guide their own CET, in accordance with the Requirements and in the light of their specific circumstances.

The latest Guidelines on CET (2015/2017) represent a breakthrough in terms of decentralization and openness in comparison with its previous counterparts (Xu & Fan, 2017). The teaching objectives are divided into three levels: basic, high and advanced and each level is provided with the corresponding requirement in terms of general competence and separate language skills so that each higher education institution can determine its own starting stage, phase and ultimate goal (ibid). In terms of curriculum design, the Guidelines sets a framework for course structure and contents represented by three categories of courses: English for General Purposes (EGP), English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and English for Intercultural Communication (EIC). Following the delineation of each course, it also highlights the point of encouraging differentiated syllabuses in the light of their specific circumstances by stating:

Curriculum design in College English should take into consideration students' different level of English upon entering college, implementing the philosophy of individualization. The curriculum design should display concerns for students with low English proficiency as well as providing opportunities for development for students with higher language proficiency … in order to satisfy the specific needs of professional and personal development.

The 2015/2017 Guidelines directs that the specific course system should be constructed according to the specific situation of each higher institution, ultimately resulting in a course system reflecting the characteristics of the particular college and university.

However, it is one thing to stipulate principles guiding curriculum reform in policy document, and quite another to organize execution and implementation accordingly, as many a university has done no more than pay lip service to policy rhetoric. A recent study (Peng & Feng, 2014), for instance, found that about one-third of the colleges investigated did not design their own syllabuses despite the fact that the alleged curriculum reform had been carried out for some ten years. Taking stratified-teaching as a focused case, this paper reviews the practice of College English curriculum reform in China with a view to examining the idea of setting various English teaching goals and teaching English according to different social and individual needs of English for students majoring in different subjects.

3. The Necessity of Needs-Analysis-based Stratification in CET

3.1 Theoretical Basis

As early as 2000 years ago, Confucius was aware of individual differences among his students so that he guided them according to their differences (因材施教). For instance, Confucius talked about more profound philosophy with students with above average aptitude, while he did not do that with below average students (中人以上, 可以语上也; 中人以下, 不可以语上也). This perhaps represents one of the earliest notions of stratified teaching.

American psychologist Carl Ransom Rogers proposed learner-centered model as a result of his personality theory which states that everyone exists in a constantly changing world of experience in which he or she is the center. Therefore, the background and experiences of the learner are essential to how and what is learned. Since each student will process what he or she learns differently depending on what he or she brings to the classroom, relevance to student is vital for learning. Stratified teaching conforms to such people-oriented ideology of instruction requiring mobilizing students' initiative, enthusiasm and creativity.

3.2 Practical Requirements

In practice, different disciplines or professions have dissimilar requirements for English skills or proficiency. Some professionals will have to employ English as a tool in their specific field of study or work while others are very unlikely to use it either in work or in daily life. The former group can be further differentiated from each other in terms of the degree of English use. For instance, researchers may need to be highly proficient in reading and writing while other in application-oriented professions such as business management, foreign trade and engineering are required to have adequate communicative competence. Only on the basis of scientific analysis of students' needs can CET requirements for different majors be formulated, avoiding the blindness of teaching and unnecessary misuse of educational resources. Only when the English teaching objectives of different majors are defined should we implement the principle of 'teaching students in accordance with their aptitude'. That is to say, we enact the same teaching goal in the same major, but implement stratified teaching taking consideration of students' individual needs and English foundations. For instance, teaching contents and methods can be adapted or teaching hours can be prolonged to cater for students with relatively low English proficiency. Meanwhile, students having good command of English are allowed to earn credit for CE by demonstrating English mastery instead of only being allowed to earn credit through seat time.

4. The Status-Quo of Stratified Teaching in CET

In this part, I review three case studies on stratified teaching of CE in three higher institutions representing science and engineering universities, specialized universities and comprehensive universities respectively.

4.1 Stratified-teaching in Xi'an University of Posts & Telecommunications (XUPT)

Cheng (2013) reported the implementation of an innovative curriculum in XUPT. This revised curriculum features the structure of 'EGP (English for General Purposes) + individualized follow-up courses + comprehensive linguistic skills and/or ESP (English for Specific Purpose). The details of course design is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Follow-up courses-based course design in XUPT

class type	course type		teaching weeks	credits	academic hour	ratio to overall academic hours
Advanced class	Foundation English (L2-4)		32(2 terms)	4	64	25%
	follow-up courses	Language skills	16(1 term)	2	32	12.5%
		Language application	16(1 term)	2	32	12.5%
		Language culture	32(2 terms)	4	64	25%
		Individualized ESP course	128(2 terms)	4	64	25%
Middle class	Foundation English (L1-4)		48(3 terms)	6	96	37.5%
		Language skills	16(1 term)	2	32	12.5%
		Language application	16(1 term)	2	32	12.5%
		Language culture	16(1 term)	2	32	12.5%
		Individualized ESP course	128(2 terms)	4	64	25%
Average class	Foundation English (L1-4)		64(4 terms)	8	128	50%
	follow-up courses	Language skills	16(1 term)	2	32	12.5%
		Language application	16(1 term)	2	32	12.5%
		Individualized ESP course	128(2 terms)	4	64	25%

This curriculum design has three distinctive features compared to traditional CET curriculum: (1) deduct the academic hours for foundation English courses; (2) increase the academic hours for follow-up courses; and (3) highlight individualized language education. The individualization of follow-up courses is reflected in complying with students' learning desires and personal development needs by setting up language skill courses or selective ESP courses that reflect students' individual strengths and differences in their English proficiency. These courses include ESP courses such as courses for examination purposes (CET-4, CET-6, IELTS, etc.) or different professional courses (e.g., Communications English, Business English, etc.).

Although teachers are generally satisfied with the new course design, there are reports of discontent or challenges in the following aspects: (1) Teachers' working loads on preparing a brand-new course has been greatly increased; (2) Teachers are facing a lot more pressures in giving lectures because students normally hold higher expectations for the new course than traditional one; (3) Nearly 70% of the students surveyed are feeling stressed out. These challenges are seen as inevitable for any curriculum reform.

4.2 Dynamic Stratified-Teaching in Harbin University of Commerce

The dynamic stratified-teaching refers to a teaching model in which students are divided into several levels according to their existing knowledge and abilities in accordance with the requirements of the syllabus. Instructions are carried out consistent with students' actual linguistic competence. Based on examination results and academic achievements, students are advanced to a higher or eliminated to a lower level, making the whole group get the best outcome as a result of the appropriate dynamic hierarchical adjustment strategy. The dynamic stratified-teaching model is in conformity with quality education, displaying more advantages comparing to traditional teaching. The specific design layout of such CET model is exemplified in Figure 1.
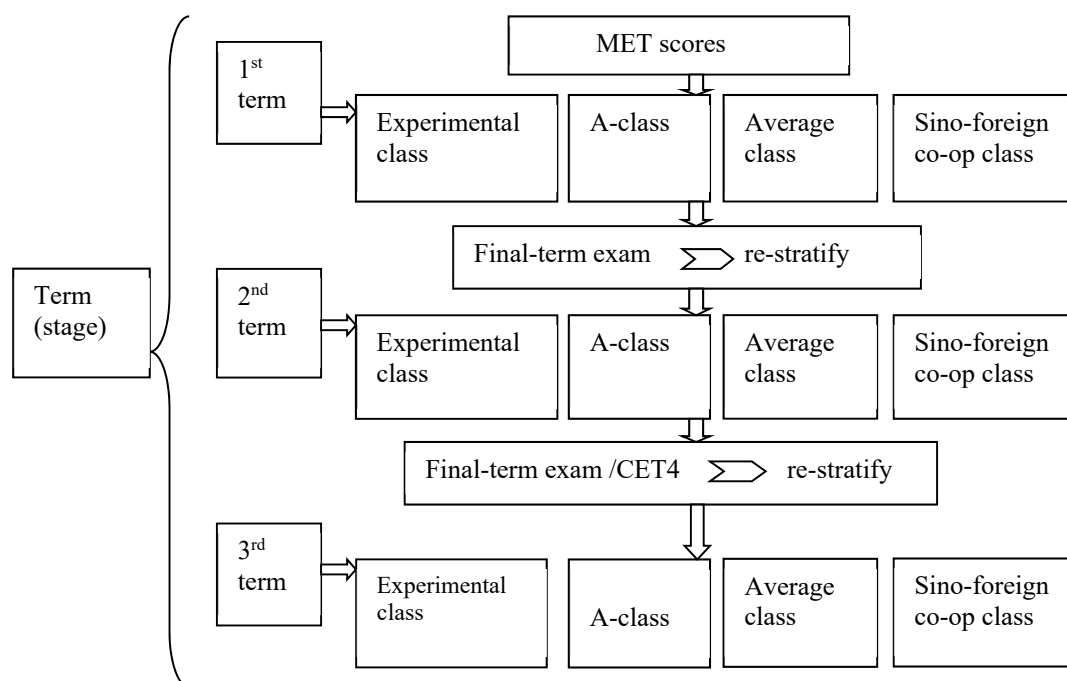

Figure 1. Dynamic stratified-teaching model in Harbin University of Commerce (source: Guo, 2013)

4.3 Differentiating Instruction in Southwest University

The specific Starting from the autumn of 2014, Southwest University located in Chongqing municipality implemented differentiating instruction to freshman students. The details of course design and allocation of credits are listed in Table 2.

Table 2. CE stratified-teaching and credit arrangements in Southwest University

level	1st term	2nd term	3rd term	4th term	Total credits
Level 1	3 credits Foundation English 1	3 credits Foundation English 2	3 credits Foundation English 3	3 credits Foundation English 4	12
Level 2	3 credits Foundation English 2-3	3 credits Foundation English 3-4	2 credits selective course	2 credits selective course	10
Level 3	2 credits selective course	2 credits selective course	2 credits selective course	2 credits selective course	8
Level 4	2 credits selective course	2 credits selective course	2 credits selective course		6
Level 5	2 credits selective course	2 credits selective course			4

Clearly, this curriculum features differentiating instruction based on students' 5 levels of English upon entering college. The most prominent feature of this curriculum is the diversity of courses, which is reflected in its 6 categories of courses, namely, basic English, English language, language skills, language and culture, language use and language enhancement. This diversity enables the progress of students with higher English proficiency, and meanwhile, it also provides students with lower English proficiency with appropriate instruction. Another feature of this curriculum is the offering of a number of ESP-oriented courses including Legal English, English for management, English for education, English for academic reading, English for academic writing , etc.

5. Conclusion

The evolution of the curricula has increasingly shifted towards a focus on individualization and flexibility in order to give different higher tertiary institutions more room for innovation and experimentation (Xu & Fan, 2017). Realizing the importance of individualized or personalized instruction, the 2015/2017 Guidelines extends decentralization and openness even further by empowering tertiary institutions to make more decisions on their own. The stratified teaching or differentiating instruction reviewed in this paper shows that the implementation of national curriculum documents has revealed some encouraging progress and trends towards 'greater flexibility and individualization, as opposed to a monolithic and centralized approach' (Xu & Fan, 2017, p.286). The findings of this library research, however, need to be treated cautiously considering the very limited number of reports on the practice of stratified teaching in CET. This is perhaps because any implementation of curriculum reform is inevitably fraught with difficulties and challenges, and consequently a number of colleges and universities have been operating under the guidance of the previous curriculum document enacted two decades ago.

Acknowledgements

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