

Exam-Oriented Education and Quality-Oriented Education in China: A Comparative Analysis

— Taking English Education as an Example

Yiqi Huang^{1,a,*}

¹*School of Education and Social Work, University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand*

a. 2021312040116@cau.edu.cn

**corresponding author*

Abstract: China has a substantial student population with a global reputation for teaching to the test over an extended period. The recent uncovering of issues surrounding exam-oriented learning has led to the public's renewed focus on quality education. Nonetheless, the actual implementation of quality-oriented education in real-life teaching and its integration with the existing exam-based system remains an imperative challenge. This paper examines two education models, analyzes the impact of exam-oriented and quality-oriented education on students and society, and takes English language education as a case study to investigate their negative and positive effects on Chinese students' EFL learning. As well as considering the current situation of rapid advancements in science and technology, this paper offers practical recommendations for implementing quality-oriented education in China.

Keywords: exam-oriented education, quality-oriented education, Chinese education system, English as Foreign Language

1. Introduction

In China, it is common to refer to the primary, middle and high school levels as the "exam-oriented education level". For many years, China's education system in the exam-oriented education stage has operated under an exam-oriented teaching system, which can be traced back to the imperial examination system of the Sui and Tang dynasties. Generations of Chinese people have been impacted by this education system because of its emphasis on efficient and more equitable dissemination of fundamental knowledge. However, there are restrictions on how this education approach is provided such as a propensity to create students who lack innovation skills. The Chinese Ministry of Education has released the 2022 National Education Development Statistics Bulletin, which indicates that there will be 27,138,700 students enrolled in ordinary high schools and 159 million children engaged in compulsory education in China in 2022 [1]. Today, such a large population is still undergoing the so-called "the more points you got in the exam, the better you are" education dilemma. Even this "involved" competitive mentality is carried over to higher education, affecting students psychologically and mentally. Especially in English education, the absence of listening and speaking and the rigidity of expression in composition are becoming more and more apparent. Looking for the origins of Chinese pedagogy, Confucius once stated, "A man is not like a

vessel," signifying that a person should be versatile and excel in anything he or she does, rather than being utilised for just one function like a vessel [2]. In recent years, China's quality education policy has continuously evolved and "quality education" has been re-emphasised, with the concept of "all-round development and people-centredness" returning to public awareness. Although exam-oriented education still dominates China's education system, China has begun to consciously implement quality education in everyday teaching. Taking English teaching as an example, teachers have become more sensitive to the humanistic spirit throughout the classroom and actively explore cutting-edge pedagogical concepts rather than simply cramming teaching. At the same time, as contemporary technology advances, educators are incorporating multimedia and social media platforms into their hands-on instruction. This is proving to be highly advantageous for the execution of high-quality education in China.

2. Differences between Exam-Oriented Education and Quality-Oriented Education

2.1. Historical Background and Sociocultural Development Behind Educational Approaches

China's exam-oriented education system has a long history, dating back to the imperial examination system of the Sui and Tang dynasties. Over thousands of years of evolution, it has developed into a rigorous examination system. Following the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the Chinese government reformed and perfected this education system, emphasizing its exam-oriented nature.

The exam-oriented learning system places emphasis on exam results and admission rates while neglecting students' initiative, creativity, and personal development. Consequently, it fails to cultivate their personality and abilities beyond knowledge acquisition, making their integration into society more challenging [3]. However, one significant reason for the enduring popularity of this exam-oriented learning system in China is its perceived fairness that provides opportunities for students from disadvantaged backgrounds to jump out of the agricultural background [3]. Given China's status as a nation with a rural population of 491 million (source: National Bureau of Statistics of China), urban-rural conflicts and social inequality remain prominent issues. Therefore, this relatively matured education system will continue to innovate rather than be replaced in the foreseeable future due to it is the selection mode that can be accepted by most people in this country [3].

However, as China's economy continues to develop, the drawbacks of its exam-oriented learning system are becoming increasingly apparent. For instance, it hampers students' holistic development, stifles their critical thinking abilities, and negatively impacts their psychomotor competencies [4], thereby posing certain challenges to the cultivation of Chinese talents. Hence, it is not without justification that China strongly advocated for a quality-oriented learning system in recent decades. The purpose of quality-oriented learning system lies in cultivating the all-round development of students [2]; greater emphasis is placed on nurturing students' abilities and qualities while placing them at the forefront of teaching practices that consider both commonalities and individuality in overall development.

Despite the stark contrast between exam-oriented learning renowned for rote memorization and quality-oriented learning centred around the holistic development of mind and body, the essence of exam-oriented learning before its deviation lies in achieving improved academic performance goals. As such, it is not the opposite of quality-oriented education [5]. Therefore, within China's current educational landscape where exam-oriented learning still holds sway as a dominant force, quality-oriented learning also assumes an important role and begins to regain public attention.

2.2. The Impacts of Exam-Oriented Education and Quality-Oriented Education

2.2.1. Exam-Oriented Education

There is no doubt that the exam-oriented education system plays a crucial role in talent selection for this great nation. Particularly during the 1990s, China's valuing on sciences and neglecting the humanities with an exam-oriented education system successfully identified and nurtured numerous science and engineering professionals within its borders. However, the persistent neglect of humanities even to this day poses certain obstacles to the advancement of quality education. For example, it caused an unbalance of students' knowledge structure and a lack of humanistic quality [2]. Moreover, due to the influence of exam-oriented education's internalisation, students unknowingly carry forward a "theatre effect" into higher education where learning becomes mechanical [6]. In recent years, Chinese students seem to exhibit diminishing resistance towards exams after leaving school and instead display a growing "sense of familiarity", leading to an upsurge in national civil servant exams and steady jobs [7]. Consequently, while exam-oriented education undeniably plays a significant role in talent selection from a societal perspective, its singular training approach profoundly impacts students.

The previous argument posited that an examination-oriented education system can "equitably" grant low-income families access to higher education [5]. However, during the training process, it also exposes an "unfair" issue for individuals. Considering enrollment rates, teachers tend to prioritize the improvement of abilities and professional training of a select few top students, neglecting majority development and resulting in a "Matthew Effect" (the better the good students, the worse the poor students) in student progress. Simultaneously, many students are compelled to focus on exam-oriented contents at the expense of their personal growth [5]. Furthermore, the emphasis on achieving high scores has inflicted significant psychological harm upon students. Research indicates that students in exam-oriented education systems experience high levels of stress and anxiety [4], leading to potential mental illnesses, school-weariness, and fear of failure. Additionally, such an approach undermines critical thinking skills and hampers future practical applications. Consequently, it can be concluded that in terms of personal development, an exam-oriented learning system does more harm than good in the long run.

2.2.2. Quality-Oriented Education

There is a broad consensus in education that the fundamental purpose of education is to develop students into complete persons [6]. Quality-oriented education means paying more attention to training people's overall competencies. The difference between examination-oriented education and quality-oriented education lies in the fact that examination-oriented education focuses on learning and mastering basic theoretical frameworks of certain disciplines, while quality-oriented education emphasises on cultivating their comprehensive development [3]. Thus, quality-oriented education can flexibly employ the knowledge gained through systematic learning to support students' overall growth by integrating it with examination-oriented teaching approaches [3]. Moreover, quality-oriented education focuses more on individual differences and can help students better develop their identity and increase their motivation in learning [8]. However, at present, China's quality-oriented education still has many practical problems, such as the teaching objectives are not clear, the connection of the curriculum system is not high, and the lack of a necessary language teaching environment [9]. In addition to the rigidity of the examination-oriented learning thinking mode over the years, people still take the examination results as the core index to evaluate educational outcomes. The quality-oriented education policies in the school setting have both positive and negative aspects, and many problems remain unsolved. Thus, the issue of students experiencing a heavy workload has not been alleviated

and is exacerbating. However, regardless of the quality of education, Chinese parents view it as substandard if their children are unable to get into a reputable university [10]. Numerous educational institutions have also discovered that, given the circumstances, receiving a quality education can become more and more exhausting for everyone involved.

3. English Education in Different Stages

3.1. Exam-Oriented English Teaching

The term "exam-oriented education stage" refers to the educational phase that takes place in China between primary and high school. This stage's pedagogy emphasizes theory over practice, particularly when it comes to teaching English [11]. Students in exam-centric English education demonstrate strong reading and writing skills, yet have difficulty with daily oral communication [12]. The absence of oral communication scenarios means that students focus exclusively on pronunciation training, resulting in "Chinese English" speech patterns. Due to inadequate oral training in exam-focused education, students struggle to engage in even basic everyday communication. Simple everyday communication. In high schools, writing training for exams often prioritises word collocation, grammar and structure while overlooking creativity and content characteristics. Such a phenomenon also results in dull content and repetitive structure in English writing. In actual teaching practice, writing has become a patterned and fixed task due to the need to prepare for exams [13]. In contemporary education, writing is often reduced to a rote exercise designed to prepare students for exams. This is achieved through the use of templates, models, and strict writing requirements that encourage imitation rather than an application of creativity [11].

However, this exam-oriented education approach persists beyond this education stage and into higher education. College English tests are becoming more focused on imparting practical language knowledge and useful examination skills to enable students to pass the test. However, this emphasis neglects the development of well-rounded individuals and strays from the original purpose of education, as well as deviating from the syllabus requirements outlined by the Chinese College English Test Committee. This emphasis on training is at the expense of humanistic values, which are correspondingly diminished. Greatly influenced by social pragmatism and utilitarianism, college English tests demonstrate a clear bias towards instrumental training, prioritising skills development but posing questions about the validity of such an approach.

Overall, students in an exam-focused educational system will inevitably fall short of improving their English competence and instead become disinterested in the subject [14].

3.2. Quality-Oriented English Teaching

The essence of quality education is to develop students into all-round talents, so the combination of formal education and informal education in English teaching can well solve the problems of rote learning and lack of oral education in students' English learning under the examination-oriented system.

At present, the main factors hindering the development of quality English teaching are the lack of solid and comprehensive language skills in the classroom and the lack of cultural and humanistic introduction [3]. As a form of spreading the spirit of humanism, the English subject plays an important role in shaping the classroom through the concept of moral education and humanistic cultivation and plays the leading role in forming students' correct literacy. From the perspective of formal education, the correct application of quality-oriented English teaching can foster students with the spirit of transcendence and quality.

According to Krashen's Input Hypothesis and Long's Interaction Hypothesis, the acquisition of a second foreign language involves interference, the creation of new linguistic systems, and the learning

of the discourse and communicative functions of English. The lack of interaction or use of the language will negatively affect language learners in their communication [15]. Therefore, language learners should be encouraged to participate in the acute interaction that takes place in the classroom so that they can become fluent and proficient in the spoken language [16]. Thus, analysed from the perspective of informal learning, teachers can use today's new multimedia technology or social media platforms in class to create diverse English learning opportunities for students.

4. Discussion on Future Teaching Methods

In modern-day China, the shift towards incorporating quality-focused education into exam-focused education is becoming increasingly evident, and its significance is being acknowledged by all facets of the education sector. Whilst test-oriented education remains a necessary component of education, applying a quality-oriented educational approach will be the next emphasis of China's educational system. Project-based learning is a fruitful pedagogical method that has proven effective both domestically and across borders, which can boost the development of quality-oriented education. This approach aims to foster children's creativity and independence by transforming them from passive learners to active explorers of new knowledge. Its main activities include brainstorming, role-playing, didactic games, case studies, and others. Project-based learning yields a moderate to substantial positive effect on students' educational achievements in comparison to conventional teaching methods. Therefore, it could serve as a comprehensive and captivating substitute for other teaching approaches, alleviating concerns regarding its effects on students' achievement in the context of exam-focused education [17]. Drawing on English education as an example, we may acquaint learners with the course's cultural context, educational games, and case studies prior to its commencement. Before a course begins, cultural and background information may be introduced, along with relevant data, to stimulate students' interest. Engaging in brainstorming activities will assist with motivating students to actively participate in the classroom. Relevant humanistic content, encouraging personal growth and introspection, can be effectively incorporated during the course. Interactive activities such as games, role-play scenarios or multimedia presentations can serve as a useful vehicle for inspiration and reflection. Following the completion of the course, teachers can organise further discussions or debates on each unit's central issues to reinforce students' understanding of the theme, elevate their ideological level, and elevate their quality of humanities. The implementation of project-based learning in English language education in China is certain to facilitate the attainment of comprehensive education among Chinese students.

5. Conclusion

This paper examines the features of exam-oriented education in the context of China's current educational climate. It evaluates the advantages and disadvantages of both approaches from both individual and societal perspectives. Additionally, it presents the attributes and advantages of quality-oriented education, which aims to facilitate well-rounded student development. Taking English language teaching as an example, this paper introduced Krashen's Input Hypothesis and Long's Interaction Hypothesis from the perspectives of test-oriented education and quality education. Teaching suggestions are offered for formal and informal education. The findings indicate that China's integration of quality education with exam-oriented education will positively benefit Chinese students. The findings indicate that China's integration of quality education with exam-oriented education will positively benefit Chinese students. The paper provides an unbiased analysis of the current state of test-driven education in China. It highlights pertinent issues and presents suitable solutions through the lens of quality-oriented education. This work will assist teachers in integrating these solutions into their daily classroom instruction, thereby truly adhering to the principle of

student-centred education. Teachers should place a higher priority on quality instruction, especially when it comes to English teaching, and fully embrace the language's ability to connect people worldwide, rather than using it just as a tool for exam preparation. Nevertheless, as the saying goes, "Rome was not built in a day". Significant obstacles are presented by China's large student population and traditional test-oriented teaching techniques. Therefore, to tackle the root which was engendered by exam-oriented education, a paradigm shifts in the mindsets of students and parents, sustained government support and significant pedagogical research and investigation of teaching methodologies and practices are all necessitated.

References

- [1] Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China. (2023, July 5). 2022 National Education Development Statistics Bulletin. http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_sjzl/sjzl_fztjgb/202307/t20230705_1067278.html
- [2] Zhang, Y. (2015). Analysis on the path of the innovation of the cultural quality-oriented education in university. *Creative Education*, 6(03), 415.
- [3] Chen, R., and Zou, M. (2018). Discussion on the relationship between exam-oriented education and quality-oriented education. In 2018 2nd International Conference on Education Innovation and Social Science (ICEISS 2018), 350-353).
- [4] Yasmin, F., Farooq, M. U., and Shah, S. K. (2023). Impact of Exam-Oriented Education System on Undergraduate Students' Cognitive, Affective and Psychomotor Competencies. *International Journal of Linguistics and Culture*, 4(1), 109-125.
- [5] Dong, Y. (2023). Understanding Social Justice and Equity in Chinese Exam-oriented Education-Comparing Bourdieu's Theory of Cultural Reproduction and Nussbaum's Theory of the Competence Approach. *Journal of Education, Humanities and Social Sciences*, 9, 69-76.
- [6] Kim, Gyuren & Yao, Zonghu. (2023). The Implications of High Quality in Compulsory Education and the Way Forward. *Education Review* (06), 32-41.
- [7] Chen, Bing. (2023). Behind the fever of public examination and editorializing. *Xinmin Weekly*, 26, 6-7.
- [8] Dörnyei, Z. (2005). *The Psychology of Language Learner: Individual Differences in Second Language Acquisition*.
- [9] Feng, J. (2023). Professionalization and Quality-oriented English Major Education in Undergraduate Colleges. *Adult and Higher Education*, 5(10), 94-98.
- [10] Li, Hua. (2023). Why quality education is not well received. *Guangdong Education (Comprehensive Edition)*, 7, 81.
- [11] Tian Lu. (2023). Talking about high school English writing teaching under the perspective of core literacy. *New Wisdom*, 24, 112-114.
- [12] Zhao, H. (2023). The Influence of Test-oriented Teaching on Chinese Students' Long-term use of English. *International Journal of Education and Humanities*, 6(2), 123-128.
- [13] Jian, S. (2013). The Integration of Quality-Oriented Education and Instrument-Driven Training in Chinese College English Teaching. *English Language Teaching*, 6(5), 38-43.
- [14] Liu, F. W. (2021). Practical exploration of English teaching in the context of gaokao reform. *Campus English*, 52, 144-145.
- [15] Liu, D. (2015). A critical review of Krashen's input hypothesis: Three major arguments. *Journal of Education and Human Development*, 4(4), 139-146.
- [16] Namaziandost, E., and Nasri, M. (2019). A meticulous look at Long's (1981) interaction hypothesis: does it have any effect on speaking skill. *Journal of Applied Linguistics and Language Research*, 6(2), 218-230.
- [17] Maros, M., Korenkova, M., Fila, M., Levicky, M., and Schoberova, M. (2023). Project-based learning and its effectiveness: evidence from Slovakia. *Interactive Learning Environments*, 31(7), 4147-4155.