

The Impact of Examination System Reform on English Education

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Abstract: With the acceleration of globalization, English education in China has become increasingly important. In recent years, China's education system, especially the examination system, has undergone a series of reforms. However, as these reforms take place, new issues have emerged one after another. This paper believes that as the transition of China's examination system to the "New Gaokao" system, the focus of the examination has shifted from rote learning to quality education. However, after the reform, the main problems in English education today include an excessive emphasis on exam-oriented teaching, wastage of educational resources and low resource utilization efficiency, as well as a weakening advantage for top English students. To address these problems, it is crucial and essential to transform the approach to English education development, enhance the categorization of digital resources, and improve policies related to examinations. This article believes that only by fully understanding and addressing these issues can the new examination system truly promote the healthy and sustainable development of English education.

Keywords: examination system reform, English education, exam-oriented education

1. Introduction

The educational landscape is an ever-evolving realm, influenced by societal changes, technological advancements, and the continuous pursuit of improved learning outcomes. Within this context, the examination system has already become the cornerstone of academic evaluation and has long been a defining element in education systems around the world. For centuries, examinations have played a pivotal role in determining students' academic prowess, influencing curricular choices, and shaping the trajectories of learners' lives. In the context of globalization, English education is not only deeply influenced by these examination structures, but the status of English as a globally common language is also becoming increasingly prominent. However, as China is the largest English-learning country in the world, its English education has always been the focus of attention from all sides. Especially in recent years, with the deepening of educational reforms, the transformation of the examination system has become a major topic in the field of education. The traditional English education approach, which is exam-oriented, is being challenged, and educators and policymakers are seeking more scientific and practical teaching and evaluation methods. In this regard, the reform of the examination system has not only influenced the way students learn but has also had a profound impact on the overall quality and direction of English education. For example, during the deepening reform of the college entrance examination (Gaokao) from 1999 to 2009, the Ministry of Education issued the

“Action Plan for Revitalizing Education Towards the 21st Century” and “Opinions on Further Deepening the Reform of the Enrollment Examination System for Regular Institutions of Higher Learning” [1,2]. These two documents announced the national Gaokao reform plan and marked the beginning of the Gaokao reforms during this period. During this time, the timing of the Gaokao changed, and the subject examination scheme was also modified to a “3+X” format, indicating that English became one of the mandatory subjects in the Gaokao. This paper aims to delve into the specific impacts of the current examination system reform on English education. Through an analysis of the current situation, the goal is to identify the primary issues and propose corresponding strategies and suggestions. This paper aspires to offer readers a fresh and comprehensive perspective on how the new examination system shapes the landscape of modern English education and how to better promote the healthy development of English education, providing theoretical references for the strategic responses in English education.

2. Current Situation of the Examination System

2.1. Historical Background and Current Examination System

Since the 1960s of the 20th century, China’s examination system has gone through a long and rich process of transformation. During the Cultural Revolution, academic evaluations were replaced by political criteria, and countless youths and students were dispatched to rural areas or mines, losing the opportunity to study. Fortunately, in 1977, with the end of the Cultural Revolution, the college entrance examination system was restored [3]. In the 1980s, the college entrance examination system gradually stabilized and also witnessed the diversification of educational approaches, such as the adult college entrance examination and self-study exams, providing more people with educational opportunities. From the 1990s to the 2000s, with societal progress and the pace of globalization, the content and structure of the college entrance examination began to adjust accordingly, placing more emphasis on modern subjects such as English and computer science.

In the 2000s, some regions began to reform the college entrance examination system based on local realities, such as introducing the “3+X” model. In September 2014, following the release of the “State Council’s Implementation Opinions on Deepening the Reform of the Examination and Enrollment System”, a deepened reform of the college entrance examination, known as the “New Gaokao” system, began on a nationwide scale [4].

The “New Gaokao” system is the latest and most influential system in China’s examination system. The essence of this system is not just an adjustment in examination content and format. More profoundly, it reflects China’s shift in education from a traditional model to one that fosters students with innovative spirits and practical abilities. Firstly, the most notable change in the “New Gaokao” is the adjustment in subject categorization. The past strict division between arts and sciences has been disrupted, providing students with more extensive choices. The introduction of a comprehensive quality evaluation emphasizes holistic student development and signifies a shift in educational focus from exam-oriented teaching to students’ comprehensive quality and practical abilities. The five-dimensional evaluation system breaks away from a sole emphasis on subject knowledge and places greater emphasis on a holistic evaluation of students [5]. The implementation of this evaluation method means that every student’s high school academic and extracurricular experiences will be meticulously recorded, serving as a crucial reference for their future choices in higher education. At the same time, the integration of technology has modernized examinations. Computerized exams, online courses, and online assessments bring unprecedented convenience and accuracy to exams. Staged examinations are also another highlight of the “New Gaokao”. The separation of academic level tests and the Gaokao means the former places greater emphasis on subject depth and practical skills assessment, while the latter stresses students’ integrated application abilities.

2.2. Status and Challenges of English in the Current Examination System

In China's current examination system, the English subject undoubtedly holds a pivotal position. From the stage of basic education, English is endowed with special importance. This importance continues in the college entrance examination, or Gaokao. Although the "New Gaokao" system offers students more freedom in subject selection, English remains one of the key thresholds for university entrance in most regions. This not only reflects the academic value of the English subject itself but also showcases its practical significance in today's globalized context. In fact, the status of English in the examination system goes beyond this. For majors in English or areas closely related to foreign languages, English proficiency becomes a basic entry requirement. Examinations such as the Foreign Language Teacher Qualification Exam and Business English Tests have clear requirements for candidates' English proficiency levels. In terms of international exchanges and cooperation, English's position is irreplaceable. As China's interactions with the world grow closer, English has become the primary bridge for international communication. Whether individuals aim to study abroad, work, or participate in international cooperation, English exams like TOEFL and IELTS often become their essential passports to the world.

However, at the same time, the subject of English is facing certain challenges. Although English still retains its importance in the "New Gaokao" examination system, compared to the previous Gaokao system, its role and significance in the overall structure have been adjusted. In the "Regulations for Enrollment Work in Regular Higher Education Institutions for 2020" issued by the Ministry of Education, it is explicitly stipulated that starting from 2020, provinces implementing the "New Gaokao" system will adopt a "twice a year" examination system for English [6]. Candidates can choose the better of the two scores to be included in the Gaokao total score, and in some provinces, the listening and written tests will be conducted together. Furthermore, in the university examination system, the English subject is also facing challenges. Previously, for many universities, the Certificate of College English Band Four and Six was an unshakable prerequisite for university graduation. However, nowadays, an increasing number of universities are relaxing this standard.

3. Problems in English Education under the Current Examination System

3.1. Excessive Emphasis on Exam-Oriented Teaching

Although the current examination system reform aims to alleviate students' examination pressure, the English subject still faces the issue of being overly exam-oriented. In practical teaching, many students and teachers still place excessive emphasis on examination techniques and practicing specific question types, rather than focusing on cultivating actual language application skills [7].

Under the backdrop of learning "for the sake of exams", a perspective that regards "exam scores as the sole measure" has emerged and developed, with its influence growing increasingly widespread. From elementary school final exams to the crucial college entrance examination that shapes students' futures, almost all assessments under the sway of exam-oriented education focus solely on students' scores. This undoubtedly hinders students' comprehensive development. Of course, exam-oriented education is not without merits. The perspective of using "exam scores as the sole measure" serves as an evaluative method that reflects students' strengths and weaknesses within a certain academic phase, allowing students to understand where they fall short based on their scores and where they should strengthen their studies. However, it is undeniable that exam-oriented education indeed neglects process-oriented evaluation and doesn't adequately address individual differences among students.

Another flaw of exam-oriented education lies in its constriction of students' personality development, yielding graduates who lack creativity and practical adaptability. This often results in

students paying the price in language skills—they lack the natural rise and fall of intonation like native speakers of English, and can't express themselves with proper tone and pitch, making it hard for native English speakers to comprehend their meaning. Society demands creative, applied-type talents, not merely test-oriented individuals with high scores but limited abilities. Over time, due to the unreasonable school evaluation system, many teachers have become driven by scores. Some teachers, driven by the pursuit of scores, increase students' academic burdens, leading to student aversion, avoidance, or even disregard for academic subjects. This approach neglects the need for students' emotional development, disregards their holistic education, and distorts the values encompassed by scores. In the context of exam-oriented education, learning English or any language, if everything is geared toward exams, learners forget that language is a tool for communication and not theoretical knowledge for testing.

3.2. The Waste of Educational Resources and Low Resource Utilization Rate

With the advancement of information technology, traditional examination methods are being challenged. Examination methods have started to integrate with technology, leading to the emergence of online exams and computerized tests. To adapt to these reforms and to help students quickly embrace these changes, English education has seen a rise in online teaching models, thereby enriching online English educational resources. However, current online English educational resources face issues of educational resource wastage and low resource utilization rates.

An important feature of English education development in the Internet age is the emphasis on providing students with abundant educational resources for independent learning, thereby developing their self-directed learning abilities. Among these educational resources, online educational resources are the primary focus, such as high-quality online English courses.

However, in the early stages of China's educational informatization, due to the imperfect network infrastructure, the focus of educational informatization was mainly on the construction of educational platforms and databases, while the construction of online educational resources was relatively lacking. Later, with the strong promotion of online educational resource development, the resources within educational platforms have been greatly enriched. However, the utilization rate of these resources is very low, with many resources being wasted.

According to the research findings by Hu Junjie, Yang Gaixue, Wei Jiangming, Yang Yongliang in 2014, many high-quality course websites are completely inaccessible. As a result, the video resources and course interactions they offer cannot be obtained. Among these resources, the average accessibility rate for undergraduate high-quality courses is only 57.9%, the average percentage of video resources in a course that can be viewed normally is 41.4%, and the average proportion of course interaction modules that can be used is 25.2% [8]. These online education resources were planned and constructed with a large framework, thus spending a lot of time and effort in many places. However, due to insufficient capacity, time, and energy, these resources ultimately cannot be improved.

What's more regrettable is that many projects were driven by administrative orders, lacking mechanisms for sustainable development. Not only that but many topics were prematurely concluded before the course content was genuinely completed. Even if some topics have perfected course content when it is completed, the lack of regular updates and maintenance will lead to a situation where the information within becomes outdated. These reasons have led to a tremendous waste of educational resources in the development of educational methods, resulting in a low resource utilization rate.

3.3. Weakening Advantage for Top English Students

As mentioned earlier, under the “New Gaokao” system, English exams will be held twice a year, and in some provinces, the listening and written tests will be conducted simultaneously. Students can choose the better of the two scores to be included in their Gaokao total score. While this is undoubtedly beneficial for most candidates, it poses a challenge for top-performing English students. Their advantage in “boosting scores” in the English subject will no longer be prominent with the new approach. Such a change will impact those students who excel exceptionally in foreign languages. Given that English exam scores are included in the Gaokao total, these top-performing language students could previously leverage their high scores both to compensate for deficiencies in other subjects and to elevate their overall scores, widening the gap with other students. However, if the English test is held multiple times a year and candidates can choose any one of the scores for college admission consideration, the advantage for these top-performing students becomes significantly reduced. This may feel “unfair” to them. The introduction of this societal examination reform in foreign language subjects under the “New Gaokao” system is likely an exploration towards a comprehensive reform of the Gaokao examination and admission methods. If in the future all subjects adopt a societal exam format with multiple opportunities to test each year, then it would be entirely fair for all candidates.

4. Suggestions for Current Problems

4.1. Transform the Approach to English Education Development

In the 45 years since China’s reform and opening up, as the country’s pace of internationalization has accelerated, English, being the world’s most dominant international language, has been increasingly emphasized. The energy and time invested in English education have surpassed any other subject. However, the resources invested have not yielded proportionate results. The development of English education should rely on teaching, learning, and testing for stimulation and support. In reality, English education heavily depends on teaching and testing, with external pressures driving intrinsic motivation. English learning has become solely for academic advancement, job-seeking, or just for scores. This mindset has led to an increasing focus on exams and an over-reliance on teaching. As a result, schools no longer prioritize students’ communication skills and innovative abilities. Teachers increasingly impart test-taking techniques, and even parents prioritize exam results over other essential qualities, like capability or emotional well-being. This imbalance between students’ internal and external worlds and the disparity between what’s tested and actual knowledge has, over time, resulted in an unhealthy English education system.

To address this, English education needs to be based on self-learning and needs. By enriching oneself internally, primarily through extensive reading and communication, students’ external abilities will gradually improve. Extensive reading includes reading images and English texts, while extensive communication involves English conversations and interactions, including both human-computer and human-human dialogues. During these activities, learners should immerse themselves in the language and culture to holistically enhance basic listening and speaking skills. Another key to solving the problem is the linguistic environment, which is also essential for transitioning English teaching from a closed to an open setting. This environment requires learners to be immersed in the English world, engaging in the acquisition of knowledge and skills. Being in such an environment allows students to find autonomy in English learning, allowing them to study without excessive constraints. Additionally, the roles of parents and society cannot be ignored. Collaboration between schools and businesses not only offers students practical platforms to use English but also provides valuable feedback for school teaching. The importance of parental education is evident. Only by

making parents understand the real purpose of learning English can students receive more support and opportunities to use the language.

4.2. Enhance the Categorization of Digital Resources

A critical factor for the successful development of English education methods in the Internet age is whether there are abundant and available educational resources, and among which online English educational resources are primary. Therefore, classifying digital online resources and finding appropriate paths for educational resource development are crucial for promoting the evolution of English education in the Internet era. The scientific and reasonable classification of digital English educational resources is not only of great significance to the construction of online educational resources but also helps to improve the utilization of educational resources. The classification of English educational resources should be carried out in strict accordance with the relevant standards of the nation, the Ministry of Education and the education industry. The “Technical Specification for Educational Resource Construction” issued by the China E-Learning Technology Standardization Committee (CELTC) presents classification standards for educational resources [9]. It suggests classifying educational resources based on three main attributes: content types, target audience, and subject.

Additionally, resources can also be classified by usage purpose, media format, or even based on emotional and educational attributes depending on user needs. Furthermore, the “Education Modernization in China 2035” emphasizes the construction of online learning courses, digital libraries, and other resources [10]. Regarding these digitized high-quality educational resources, three main approaches for their development are proposed: self-construction, collaborative construction, and introduction. Small-scale resources with limited application scope are suitable for self-construction; large-scale resources with broad application scope are appropriate for collaborative construction; high-quality resources with challenging development requirements are fitting for introduction. Schools at all levels should choose suitable construction methods based on their circumstances. Similarly, education information centers at various levels and types should select appropriate resource construction methods according to local conditions to avoid wastage of educational resources.

4.3. Improve Policies Related to Examinations

With the implementation of the “two exams a year” system in China’s “New Gaokao” system, it seems that top-performing English students are facing the issue of their relative advantages being diminished. To ensure these students are rightly acknowledged and their talents fully showcased, a series of strategies and recommendations urgently need to be put forward.

First, there must be a diversified reform of the English evaluation system. This should not only encompass the traditional written assessment but also include interviews, project assignments, and English reports, among other forms, to comprehensively evaluate students’ actual English application capabilities, especially for top-performing English students [11]. These methods can provide them with a broader stage to showcase their English talents.

Second, English competitions and certifications are also an indispensable direction. Participating in various English contests can not only help students train and elevate themselves but can also bring them valuable certificates and honors. High-value certifications should also be given additional points in the college entrance examination. At the same time, offering opportunities for international English proficiency tests also grants them international recognition. For top-performing English students, participating in international English proficiency tests like IELTS or TOEFL and achieving good results often means they can enter prestigious universities by studying abroad rather than taking the

Gaokao. Special recommendation systems and collaborations with higher education institutions also provide these English acers with more direct opportunities for further education. This can not only meet their needs for in-depth learning but also serve as an additional consideration criterion for university admissions, showcasing the student's depth and breadth in the subject.

In summary, although the "two exams a year" system brings some new challenges to top-performing English students, through the aforementioned strategies, their advantages in English will continue to shine brightly in the field, laying a solid foundation for their future.

5. Conclusion

With the deep reform of China's examination system in recent years, the field of English education has also experienced unprecedented challenges and opportunities. Current observations indicate that the reform has brought about some positive changes. Students now have more opportunities to showcase their comprehensive English abilities, no longer limited to traditional written assessments. Educators and students have started to value practical language application rather than just exam scores. Additionally, the system of multiple exams provides students with more opportunities, reducing the risks associated with a single exam. However, the reform has also introduced a series of issues. The problem of being "overly exam-oriented" still persists, which not only causes difficulties for students' learning but also presents new challenges for teachers and educators. Meanwhile, although the "two exams a year" system benefits most students, it might weaken some advantages of top-performing English students. With the enrichment of online English education resources, there are also issues of resource wastage and low resource utilization rates. To fully harness the advantages of the new examination system and address its challenges, this article proposes the following strategies: First, diversified assessments should be further strengthened, including evaluations of spoken language, writing, and English reports. Second, educators should intensify the cultivation of students' practical application abilities and encourage them to engage in hands-on activities. Lastly, for top English students, special evaluation and recommendation mechanisms should be established to ensure their efforts and talents receive proper acknowledgment. However, this article has the following limitations: Firstly, the analysis and recommendations provided in this article are based on the current state of the examination system reforms in China and may not be applicable to other countries or contexts. Additionally, this article primarily focuses on the impact of examination system reforms on English education and does not delve deeply into other subjects. Further research can be carried out in the above areas in the future. Looking ahead, it is clear that the English subject possesses endless opportunities and potential challenges. Through continuous efforts and innovations, English education will certainly cultivate more high-quality talents for China's future development.

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