

Changes in English Education Policies in Chinese Higher Education Institutions 1979-1999

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Abstract: The policy of “reform and opening up” in 1978 expanded exchanges between China and foreign countries, and the importance of English became increasingly prominent. The Ministry of Education decided to change the English education policy to develop English talents that meet the needs of society. This paper reviews the changes in China's education policy from 1979 to 1999. The main arguments of this paper are:1) the communicative approach to English has been implemented;2) the proportion of content reflecting communicative purposes in textbooks has increased; 3)a few universities have begun to propose a model for training complex English talents. Therefore, the contribution of this paper is to provide a reference for future education policy reform.

Keywords: English education policy, changes in China’s policy, Higher education institutions

1. Introduction

The reform and opening up that began in 1978 had largely expanded the extent of foreign exchanges and produced great changes in English education [1]. During the reform and opening-up period, Deng Xiaoping encouraged foreign investors to invest in China and learn advanced science and technology from developed countries in order to develop the economy. This increased communication between China and the West, which enabled English to be considered an important communication tool. The government also reacted simultaneously formulating a series of policies to meet the demands of English speakers. From 1979 to 1999, a series of changes occurred in the field of English education in China.

This paper takes 1979 as the starting point of the study and examines the following 20 years. Since the long time period theory proposed by Braudel argues that any historical phenomenon of human development is difficult to grasp the essence from a short time period analysis and should be analyzed from a longer time period [2]. Since she is beautiful, she has lots of friends.

The teaching policies established by the Ministry of Education include the curriculum, teaching materials, and proficiency tests. The policies for English majors are rather different from those of

other majors. Therefore, this paper studies the educational policies of English majors and non-English majors in colleges and universities separately and discusses them in the three aspects mentioned above.

2. English Education Policies for English Majors

Since the reform and opening up, English had become more widely used, and English majors in colleges and universities were popular majors.

After 1978, China's import and export trade increased substantially. The massive growth of international trade requires communicative foreign language talents. In order to cultivate English talents a series of changes had occurred in the whole field of English education in China, the communicative approach to English has been implemented; the proportion of communicative content in textbooks has increased; and a few universities began to propose a model for training complex English talents. In the process of reform and opening up, English education has developed in a leap forward and tends to develop in a utilitarian way.

2.1. The English Syllabus of Higher Education Institutions in 1979

From July to September 1977, Deng Xiaoping, vice chairman of the Communist Party of China Central Committee, and the leaders of the State Council formulated a series of important instructions for national education work.

2.1.1. The Content of the 1979 English Syllabus for Higher Education Institutions

The Ministry of Education has developed syllabuses for three distinct types of English majors, namely the four-year teaching plan for English majors in foreign language colleges, the four-year teaching plan for English majors in foreign language departments of comprehensive universities and the four-year teaching plan for English majors in higher teacher training colleges [3]. The syllabus was sent to all schools in 1979. However, the teaching mode of these three syllabuses are relatively homogeneous; they are all four-year undergraduate programs with a focus on literature and linguistics that are intended to prepare students to work as translators, English teachers, and other English-speaking professionals.

2.1.2. Adjustment of Teaching Objectives

The curriculum of the English major in the Department of Foreign Languages in 1979, was similar to the previous syllabus and did not change with the needs of society. By the 1980s, the economic exchanges with foreign countries were increasing under the background of reform and opening up. These changes have led to a variety of demands for foreign language proficiency. To meet market demands, it need not just individuals with strong English language and cultural backgrounds but also those with aptitude for foreign trade. With the deepening of reform, many coastal cities that were open to the outside world needed a lot of foreign language talents in economy, trade, management and tourism. In addition to training political, diplomatic and cultural exchange talents for government departments, the Department of English began to explore a breakthrough from the original single mode of training talents to train a group of foreign language talents with proficiency in foreign languages and relevant application knowledge (i.e, knowledge of economy, trade and management) to meet the requirements of trade and economic development.

In November 1980, the Ministry of Education held a meeting of the editorial and review committee of professional foreign language teaching materials in higher education in Qingdao province of China. Many of them thought that English education should get rid of the situation of monolingual teaching

as soon as possible and change the single subject into multiple subjects, enabling students to learn foreign languages and combined with a certain specialization, and become talents who are fluent in foreign languages and have expertise in a certain area [4]. In order to broaden the specifications of talent training and meet the needs of society, some colleges and universities started a dual-degree training model. They not only offered students a bachelor's degree in literature, but also a minor degree in economics, management, law, and so on. Along with keeping the fundamental majors in literature and languages, the institution gradually expanded and broadened its majors and created a number of complicated majors, like business English.

Gradually, single-subject foreign language colleges and universities had been transformed into multidisciplinary foreign language universities. For example, in 1983, Shanghai Foreign Language Institute was the pioneer in adjusting the structure and curriculum of its majors; on the basis of the traditional language majors, it added six new cross-disciplinary majors: to equip foreign language majors with other professional knowledge and skills to meet the requirements of foreign language talents for reform and opening up. Since then, the mode of training composite talents has gradually gained attention nationwide.

2.1.3. Changes in Teaching Materials

The content of English education and teaching has gradually shifted from the study of English and American literature to practical subjects. Thus, textbooks were prepared by domestic experts according to national development plans, considering the actual needs of China. During this period many teachers were exploring new teaching methods. Professor Li cooperated with two Canadian teachers, Allen and Spada, and tried for the first time to implement the communicative approach to teaching foreign languages, which emphasizes the aim of language learning is to improve learners' ability to communicate in the target language. Language teaching topics should include the grammatical structure of the language and various ideas and common expressions [5]. Such a change in teaching materials brought life to English education in China. Finally, the nationally unified, obsolete syllabus, teaching plans, and textbooks developed by a few authorities were gradually eliminated.

2.2. The English Syllabus of Higher Education Institutions in 1999

Foreign language education policy is an issue of political, economic, diplomatic, national defense, educational, cultural, and international importance to China, involving language scheduling and language policy [6]. English teaching originated in the early 1980s. In 1990, the English Language Proficiency Test for second-year English majors was introduced, with approximately 12,000 candidates taking the test that year. In 1991, the Level 8 test was introduced for fourth-year English majors, with about 3,000 candidates taking the test. After the reform and opening up, the education of English majors has continued to experiment with training methods and testing methods, among which the adjustment of talent training objectives is a very important initiative [7].

3. English Education Policies for Non-English Majors

3.1. Public English Teaching in 1980

As communication with foreign countries has increased since the Reform and Opening Up, English has gradually played an increasingly important role. Besides, college English education has been crucial in China's education system. Foreign language education policies must meet the needs of the national interest and change as national policies are adjusted [8]. In 1979, Tsinghua University and Peking University in China were entrusted by the Ministry of Education to compile the College

English Education Syllabus. In August 1980, the Ministry of Education issued a draft syllabus for the teaching of English, which was designed for the teaching of English to four-year undergraduates in science and technology who were not majoring in English, following research into the need of talent training. At a time when there was no standardized English teaching program and system in the early years of reform and opening up, the introduction of the English Teaching Syllabus has greatly facilitated the provision of institutional guarantees for planned, organized, and feasible English teaching activities.

In 1980, the Syllabus for Teaching Science and Technology in Higher Education stipulated that its teaching targets were: "Students who have studied English in secondary schools should master 700 to 800 words and the basic knowledge of grammar when they enter school and be able to read aloud the texts they have studied relatively smoothly." This syllabus develops students' ability to read books and journals related to professional English through the English language teaching stage. The number of hours of teaching varies according to the type of specialism, ranging from 240 hours in engineering to 300 hours in science, and is arranged from the first to the fourth semester. The hours are 140, 60, and 40 to 100 [9]. In the 1980s, college English education focused on the importance of reading. It stipulates that by the end of the Basic stage, students should be able to read Popular science articles, or General scientific articles with the same level of difficulty as the next texts and with the contents that can be understood by students. Writing a Chinese Abstract is also a must for the students. Their reading speed should be around 2500~3000 printed symbols per hour (no more than 15 words that they have not learned before); by the end of the specialist reading stage, the speed of reading relevant specialist books and journals should be 4000-5000 printed symbols per hour. From the late foundation stage onwards, emphasis should be placed on the development of fast reading skills [10]. This Syllabus reflects the requirements of the times. It highlights the training objectives according to the nation's needs. Reading ability is given higher priority. At the early stage of the reform and opening up, with the need for communication between countries, English was highly valued. It was also the outcome of China's specific domestic and international factors to take "Understanding English" as the most urgent problem to be solved.

3.2. College English Syllabus for Bachelors of Arts and Science in 1986

It was in 1984 that the College English Teaching syllabus Revision Forces was founded. After they summarizing from past English teaching experiences, statistical survey and filtering, two years later, the College English syllabus for Bachelors of Arts and Science was published in April, 1986.

3.2.1. Teaching Aim

The syllabus stipulated that the purpose of English teaching in college is to train students to read better and can listen, speak and write in English properly, in order to help students to get the needed information for their majors using English as a tool and to set the tone for their further English improvement.

3.2.2. Teaching Requirement

The College English teaching period can be divided into two parts, the foundational stage, and the professional reading stage. For the foundational stage, the teaching can have six stages, from College English Bands(CEB) 1 to 6, known as CEB 1-6, the difficulty of which increases from CEB 1 to CEB 6. And if students can pass CEB-4, they meet the basic requirements. What's more, if they can pass CEB-6, they meet the higher requirements and may have a higher level of using English as a tool to help in their professional field.

To be more specific, the basic requirements are: First, the speech sound and tone of English reading out loud should be correct. Second, they should attain a perceptive vocabulary of more than 4000, and including 2300 productive vocabulary. On the other hand, to meet the higher requirements, 5300 perceptive vocabulary and 2800 productive vocabulary. Third, they should acquire primary grammar and can apply them into discourses. Fourth, they could read and understand general textbooks and articles with mediate difficulty, at the rate of passing 50 words per minute, higher requirements, 70 words per minute. When reading a seemingly easier essay, at the rate of passing 90 words per minute, in addition with 70% accuracy, that is for the basics. If they want to meet the higher requirements, they should try to figure out more that 97 % of a more difficult reading materials and with the accuracy of 70%. Fifth, for listening, they can follow courses taught in English only. When listening to a relatively familiar material at a rate of 120 words per hour, higher requirements require a rate of 140 words per hour. For both, they should get the whole picture with the accuracy of no at least 70 percent. Sixth, they could write a subject related essay of 100 to 120 words in half an hour, following the directions. Last, for speaking, students should be able to repeat the textbook materials and take daily conversations. On the other hand, students are also required to meet the higher requirements [11].

3.2.3. Teaching Implication

English teachers should help students to lay a solid foundation and to apply English into daily conversations. The aim of nurturing students is that learning English is not for the certifications. It is for building our country and lead our country into the World stage. If we don't actually use English, English teaching will be pointless [12]. Also, to cultivate students' better reading, listening, writing and speaking and their relationships, much less their fluency. Furthermore, teachers should be aware of their teaching methods, teaching students in accordance with their aptitude and situation [13]. Also, creating a immersion program as well as using modern teaching facilities would also help students to acquire English better. In addition, Professor Li first introduces communicative teaching method into China, which has already been popular abroad [14].

3.2.4. Tests for Examining English Proficiency Level

According to the teaching implication recommendations, colleges have corresponding tests. Optional courses also counts. And to evaluate the actual English ability of college students objectively and accurately and to support further college English teaching, in 1986, National Education Examination Authority were planning College English Band 4 and 6 Test, which is the initial CET-4 and CET-6. Tests should be scientific, object, unified and standard. The CET test-takers are undergraduates, majoring in any discipline except English. Students, usually second-year students, who have finished the College English Courses Band 1 to 4, take the CET-4. Those who have completed the College English Courses Band 5 to 6 and have passed the CET-4, take the CET-6, usually third-year students [15].

3.3. College English Syllabus Revised Edition for Undergraduates of Advanced Education in 1999

It is found that with the development of the national economy and the further deepening of reform and opening up, the society has put forward higher requirements on the English proficiency of college students, and the college students are eager to improve their English application ability as soon as possible [16]. The College English syllabus Revised Edition in 1999 for Undergraduates of Advanced Education is published, and this version is for all the non-English major undergraduates of higher education.

3.3.1. Teaching Aim and Requirement

Compared to the 1986 version, the teaching aim is still the same, students should keep up with social development and economic construction. What's new is as follows: First, basics require that they should attain perceptive vocabulary for more than 4200, and including 2500 productive vocabulary, which is 200 words more than the 1986 version, same as the higher requirements. And as for reading, the reading speed requirement raised to at the rate of passing 70 words per minute, that is for the basic requirements, 20 words more than 1986, so is the higher requirement. Third, when students listen to relatively familiar material, they should retain a rate of 130~150 words per hour. Fourth, they could write a subject-related essay of 120~150 words in half an hour and should express their own opinions clearly and grammatically correct. Besides, this version also has some requirements for students Chinese-English translation ability. Students should translate English into Chinese at the rate of 300 English words per hour, and the rate of 250 Chinese words into English, with elegance [17].

3.3.2. Teaching Implication

English teaching should be more detailed and based on students' levels. Teachers should be practical and realistic. If students already are at a higher level, colleges should offer more advanced English courses. Based on this syllabus, colleges should stipulate the teaching requirements for different levels of courses from the preparatory stage, which refers to CEB 1-6 to the advanced English level. Moreover, colleges should still run courses for senior students' professional English to further improve their professional English knowledge. Even if they are about to graduate, it is not suggested to loosen restrictions on their professional English ability.

3.3.3. Tests for Colleges

As for the relevant tests, colleges should arrange tests at the end of both the fundamental stage and the professional reading stage and should be fair. Language tests should focus on foundation and linguistic use. It is recommended to hold a professional English examination in the senior year. From this, we could tell that there is a higher standard for college students and it is important to help students apply their professional English knowledge to actual situations. From the 1986 version to the 1999 version, the standards for undergraduates of Advanced Education have been upgraded and also, and teaching methods are more students-oriented.

4. Conclusion

Reviewing the past, summarizing the experience, and looking forward to the future, only then can we forge ahead. This article mainly concludes the changes in College English syllabus in Chinese Higher Education Institutions from the year 1979 to 1999, and hopes to help further improvements of English Education Policies in Chinese Higher Education. And then Chinese College students could perform better in English communication and could contribute to the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation and the community of shared future for mankind.

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