**College English teaching in China:**

**Responses to the new teaching goal**


by Hui Du

*Abstract*

*Educational policy-makers in China initiated a reform process in 2002 which has been designed to shift the teaching of the College English (CE) course from a focus on reading to a focus on listening and speaking. In order to canvass university-level responses to the new teaching goal, language faculty deans in three national universities were asked to evaluate the implementation and effectiveness of the reform. Analysis of the interview data indicates that while the pedagogical improvements were expected to rely primarily on the use of information and communications technology (ICT) in classrooms, a large proportion of CE teachers were insufficiently prepared to implement the necessary changes.*

**Introduction**

As a global trade, TESOL is 'ubiquitous in the world' (Pennycook, 1994: 5). In the People's Republic of China, College English (CE) is an English-language course offered to non-English majors in 1,983 universities. As of 2004, there were about 50,000 Chinese English teachers teaching CE to an estimated 19,000,000 students (Wu, 2004).

Despite its ubiquity, CE instruction in Chinese universities has sometimes been labelled as 'deaf and dumb English'. The assessment of Y.X. Zhang, Director of the Department of Higher Education in the Chinese Ministry of Education (MOE), is indicative: 'Chinese university students can neither speak English nor understand it when they hear the language spoken' (Zhang, 2002: 4). In response to criticisms of this type, in 2002 Chinese policy-makers launched a reform process which was intended to rectify 'the situation of students' inability to use English for oral communication' (Zhang, 2008: 2).

The reform began with a shift in emphasis in the official documents. While the guiding College English Syllabus (CES) had focused on reading as the primary goal, the new national curriculum (the

College English Curriculum Requirements, CECR) prioritised listening and speaking (as shown in Figure 1 below).

| CES (1999) | CECR (2007) |
|---|---|
| CE aims to develop in students a relatively high level of competence in reading, and an intermediate level of competence in listening, speaking, writing and translating, so that they can exchange information in English. (College English Syllabus Revision Team, 1999: 1) | The objective of CE is to develop students' ability to use English in a well-rounded way, especially in listening and speaking, so that in their future studies and careers as well as social interactions they will be able to communicate effectively. (Department of Higher Education of Ministry of Education of P.R. China, 2007: 18) |

**Figure 1 – Policy shift in the primary goal of College English teaching**

To effect the change, the MOE released a series of reform documents during an eighteen-month period from December 2003 to June 2005. For example, between 15 December 2003 and 18 February 2004, three documents were distributed among Chinese universities indicating the policy-makers' desire to reform CE teaching completely. Facing this type of intensive, top-down reform process, all universities had to respond quickly.

This study considers the success of the reform by investigating how three universities have so far responded to the new teaching goal. It focuses on two aspects: how CE teaching is organised, and how students and teachers have been affected.

**The context of College English teaching in China**

The context in which language teaching takes place has increasingly attracted researchers' attention. They contend that it is necessary to consider not only language itself, but also the classroom learning environment and the ethnography of communication, because '[l]anguage usage … is governed by culture, subculture and context specific norms' (Gumperz, 1986: 53), and that the classroom is 'an inherently complex and unpredictable context … where social, cultural, psychological and institutional forces interact' (Wright, 2006: 73). These notions derive largely from the work of Basil Bernstein, particularly in his explanation of how instructional discourse (ID) 'transmitting specialized competences and their relation to each other' is determined by regulative discourse (RD) 'creating specialized order, relation, and identity' (Bernstein 1990: 183).

To understand CE teaching in China, we first need to understand its context. CE teaching has always been shaped by official policy documents produced by the MOE: firstly relating to implementation of the CES from the 1980s to 2004, and then to the CECR from 2004 to the present (College English Syllabus Revision Team, 1991, 1999; Department of Higher Education of Ministry of Education of P.R. China, 2004, 2007). Within these documents, three levels of requirements are prescribed for students in listening, speaking, reading, writing and translating. National CE Tests – perhaps the

driving factor behind CE teaching – are used to check whether students have met those requirements. While CE Test Band 4 (CET4) is used to check basic requirements, CET6 is used to check the second level (intermediate requirements). For most undergraduate students, CET4 is compulsory while CET6 is optional. The annual dates for the CET4 and CET6 examinations to assess whether students meet the levels stipulated in the CECR are the first Saturday in January and the third Saturday in June, with CET4 in the morning and CET6 in the afternoon. Across Chinese universities, teachers and students pay most attention to the tests at these two levels.

Not all Chinese students learn English because they like it. Motivation 'varies among individual learners' (Gu, 2009: 310). Some students elect to learn English out of intrinsic motivation. For these students, learning 'is inherently interesting or enjoyable'. For others, the motivation is extrinsic. They know that learning English 'leads to a separable outcome' (Ryan & Deci, 2000: 55). For example, some want to learn English in order 'to study abroad' (Jin & Cortazzi, 2006: 7), some regard English as 'a linguistic capital that could be beneficial to employment and career development' and some have to learn English because it is a compulsory course. For these students, English language learning is 'deeply' motivated by the desire to pass the examinations (Pan & Block, 2011: 401).

In order to teach the CE course, textbooks were compiled using the CES (1999) before 2004 and now the CECR (2004, 2007) is used. Both national documents and their related textbooks reflect a stereotypically Chinese approach to knowledge which views 'language learning as … mastery of a body of knowledge', and where the learning process is perceived as 'rather like climbing a ladder' (Brick, 2004: 154, 150). Under the CES, with its emphasis on reading, classroom teaching of CE was textbook-based and teacher-centred. By focusing on listening and speaking, the new teaching goal under the CECR entails moving away from this type of pedagogy to a more communicative approach through the use of information and communications technology (ICT).

**Methods**

The data for the current study were generated during November 2007 and March 2008, against a backdrop of continuing reform. The three universities were selected as research sites for a number of reasons:

- They are among the 72 national universities operating under the MOE.
- As national universities, each specialises in one area.
- Students who enter these universities have all scored the same level in university entrance examinations.
- CE teachers in these three universities have similar qualifications.

- I was able to include the language faculty deans from these universities as additional participants in the study.

The situation in the three universities can be viewed as representative of other national universities in China (Patton, 2002: 236). The deans were chosen as participants because as program managers they were familiar with the institutional contexts for CE teaching and also they were responsible for decisions made in response the new teaching goal.

My research questions were as follows:

1    How is the teaching organised in response to the new teaching goal?

2    How are students affected?

3    How are teachers affected?

To address Questions 2 and 3, the three deans were asked the sub-questions listed in Figure 2.

| How are students affected? |
| --- |
| • What are the effects on students? |
| • What types of CE classes do students have? |
| • How many CE classes do they have per week? |
| • What is the range of class sizes? |
| **How are teachers affected?** |
| • What is the workload of CE teachers? |
| • What is the teacher-student ratio? |
| • What are teachers' academic ranks? |
| • What are teachers' academic qualifications? |
| • What are teachers' ages? |

**Figure 2 – Sub-questions on students and teachers**

In this paper, I focus on the responses of the three language faculty deans. These responses were largely generated by face-to-face-interviews. Sometimes, however, the deans provided additional data by email, for example, if they had to check details about the information requested.

**Findings**

As shown in the Appendix, when it came to pedagogical changes in response to the new teaching goal, each of the three deans addressed the same aspect: the use of ICT in the classroom. In brief, ICT was integrated into the students' learning environment and, while it made the teaching more convenient, it also put teachers under more pressure. For example, it took the teachers much more time to prepare their lessons using PowerPoint presentations. Except for this change, the deans indicated that all other teaching practices remained much the same. Students continued to have four CE classes each week, consisting of three periods for intensive reading class (IRC) and one for listening class (LC), and class sizes remained large.

Statistics about teachers' situations have been compiled into five categories: workload, teacher-student ratios, academic ranks, academic qualifications and age (Tables 1-5 below).

Table 1 provides an overview of CE teachers' workloads at the three universities.

| Universities | Teachers | Assigned periods/week | Actual periods/week | TETs* | TETs periods/week |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| U1 | 24 | 11 | 12-16 | 2 | 12 |
| U2 | 37 | 11 | 10-18 | 0 | N/A |
| U3 | 33 | 9 | 9-12 | 9 | 8 |
| Totals | 94 | 31 | 31-46 | 11 | 8-12 |

(*TETs = temporarily-employed teachers)

**Table 1 – CE teachers' workloads**

While teachers were assigned to teach 9-11 class periods per week, they also taught other English courses simultaneously, such as courses for English majors, and so they all had additional teaching loads. Moreover, of the three universities, two had to employ teachers temporarily to help cover the teaching of CE classes.

The overload on teachers was also evident in the teacher-student ratios (Table 2).

| Universities | Students | Teachers | Teacher-student ratios |
|---|---|---|---|
| U1 | 4,491 | 24 | **1:187** |
| U2 | 6,450 | 37 | **1:174** |
| U3 | 5,536 | 33 | **1:167** |
| Totals | 16,477 | 94 | **1:175** |

**Table 2 – Teacher-student ratios**

In general, the teacher-student ratios resulted in large class sizes. This was confirmed in the interview data, with the deans reporting class sizes ranging between 40 and 90 students (see Appendix).

As summarised in Table 3 below, the CE teachers in the three universities were mainly lecturers and assistants.

| Universities | Professors | Associate professors | Lecturers | Assistants | Totals |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| U1 | 1 | 4 | 12 | 7 | 24 |
| U2 | 1 | 8 | 26 | 2 | 37 |
| U3 | 0 | 4 | 16 | 13 | 33 |
| Totals | 2 | 16 | 54 | 22 | 94 |

**Table 3 – CE teachers' academic ranks**

Commensurate with these academic rankings, CE teachers at the three universities generally held lower-level qualifications (Table 4). Teachers with bachelors' degrees accounted for 44.6% of the total work force, with none of the teachers possessing a doctorate.

| Universities | Bachelor | Master | Doctorate | Teachers |
|:---:|:---:|:---:|:---:|:---:|
| **U1** | 8 | 16 | 0 | 24 |
| **U2** | 18 | 19 | 0 | 37 |
| **U3** | 16 | 17 | 0 | 33 |
| **Totals** | **42** | **52** | **0** | **94** |

**Table 4 – CE teachers' academic qualifications**

CE teachers in the three universities were generally young and it may be assumed as a result that many had limited previous teaching experience. Teachers aged 30-39 and under 30 years old accounted for 50% and 21.2% of the CE teaching population respectively (Table 5).

| Universities | 50 & over | 40-49 | 30-39 | Under 30 | Teachers |
|:---:|:---:|:---:|:---:|:---:|:---:|
| **U1** | 4 | 3 | 8 | 9 | 24 |
| **U2** | 1 | 12 | 18 | 6 | 37 |
| **U3** | 2 | 5 | 21 | 5 | 33 |
| **Totals** | **7** | **20** | **47** | **20** | **94** |

**Table 5 – CE teachers by age**

Overall, the data indicate that CE teachers in the three Chinese national universities

- were young and possibly inexperienced teachers
- held lower-level academic qualifications
- held low academic ranks, with lecturers and assistants accounting for 80% of all teachers
- were overworked.

In addition, most of the teachers were forced to contend with large class sizes.

**Discussion**

It is true that 'China has the world's largest educational system with the largest number of learners of English' (Jin & Cortazzi, 2006: 5). However, the problems facing English language teachers are also considerable, as summarised by the Vice-Minister of the MOE Q.D. Wu in her speech given on 18 February 2004:

> Class sizes are large … [A]ccording to an investigation in 340 universities, class sizes ranged from over 40 students in two thirds of them to even over 80 in 20 of them … Another problem we are facing is teachers' situations. CE teachers' workload is heavy in over 90% of the universities in China … [I]n most universities they teach over 16-20 class periods per week. Their academic qualifications are low: 72% of them only hold a bachelor's degree … CE teachers seldom have opportunities for further studies or in-service training … [M]any teachers need improving in pronunciation, grammar, culture and methodology. (Wu, 2004)

The data from the current study support these observations. Nearly half (44.6%) of the CE teachers surveyed held only a bachelor's degree from an English Major Program (EMP), corroborating concerns expressed about the levels of English language proficiency of the teachers themselves. The Syllabus for the English Major Program (SEMP) provides additional insight into these concerns.

According to the latest version of the SEMP (2000), the total number of periods for an English Major Program should not be more than 2,000 sessions. These sessions are structured in three types of courses – skill, knowledge and related knowledge. The *skill course* consists of classes focusing on intensive reading, phonetics, listening, speaking, extensive reading, writing, grammar and oral and written translation; the *knowledge course* comprises subjects like introduction to general linguistics, English literature in the UK and USA, academic writing and a general introduction to English-speaking countries; and the *related knowledge course* includes such focuses as introduction to diplomacy, international law ABC, theories in language learning, English testing, introduction to Chinese culture, international trade and business, introduction to economics and finance, communication and so on. A model of the distribution of these three types of course in the SEMP is shown in Table 6 below.

| School Year | One | | Two | | Three | | Four | | Total | % |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Semester | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | | |
| Skill | 14 | 12 | 14 | 12 | 6 | 8 | 4 | 4 | 74 | 67% |
| Knowledge | | | 2 | 2 | 4 | 2 | 4 | 2 | 16 | 15% |
| Related knowledge | | | | | 4 | 4 | 6 | 6 | 20 | 18% |
| Total periods/week | 14 | 12 | 16 | 14 | 14 | 14 | 14 | 12 | 110 | 100% |

Table 6 – **Distribution of three types of course in the English Major Program** (Source: SEMP, 2000: 5)

If there are 18 teaching weeks each semester, the structure of the program tallies as 1,332 sessions of the skill course over eight semesters, 288 of the knowledge course in six semesters, and 360 of the related knowledge course in four semesters, amounting to 1,980 periods within the limit of 2,000 as stipulated by the SEMP (shown in Table 7 below).

| Course | Total periods/week (in semesters) | Teaching weeks | Totals |
|---|---|---|---|
| Skill | 74 (8) | 18 | 1,332 |
| Knowledge | 16 (6) | 18 | 288 |
| Related knowledge | 20 (4) | 18 | 360 |
| Totals | 110 | 18 | 1,980 |

Table 7 – **Structure of the English Major Program**

Generally speaking, there are 45 minutes in each class session. Thus, 2,000 sessions is the equivalent of 1,500 hours. If a person learns English for four hours every day, s/he spends 1,460 hours in one year learning the language, which is almost the total amount of time an undergraduate English major

spends in his/her English Major Program. More specifically, the student will spend approximately 250 days on the *skill course*, 54 days on the *knowledge course*, and 67 days on the *related knowledge course*.

The minimum vocabulary requirement for graduates of an English Major Program is 5,500-6,500 receptive words, of which 3,000-4,000 should also be productive (English Group in Council of Foreign Languages Teaching in Higher Education, 2000: 7). This is comparable to the vocabulary requirement for the non-English majors these graduates will be teaching in the College English course. For example, students being tested in CET6 are required to know 5,500 receptive and 3,000 productive words (College English Syllabus Revision Team, 1999: 3).

On the basis of these data, concerns about graduates' English language proficiency when they complete their first degree in an English Major Program seem well founded. One of MOE Director Zhang's complaints was that CE programs are 'seriously lacking in qualified teachers' (Zhang, 2002: 4). His concern was echoed by the deans at my research sites. More specifically, they viewed the new teaching goal as challenging for those teachers who were weak in oral English, and particularly for those holding only a bachelor's degree. In addition to this, because most CE teachers are not able to conduct and publish research, they are not promoted to higher ranks. Low academic ranks and qualifications are further interrelated. Teachers' low levels of confidence in their English language proficiency may prevent them from reading extensively in the field. This increases the difficulty for them to research and publish, let alone in English.

The three language faculty deans expressed dismay that no teachers held degrees from English-speaking countries and had limited familiarity with English language usage in those countries. Their concern reflects the belief that 'language teaching is culture teaching' (Byram, 1989: 42). The deans recommended that CE teachers should undertake courses on native English cultures or culture immersion programs in order to increase their understanding of the 'cultural onion' (Shaules, 2010: 15) of English-speaking countries.

Compounding these limitations in teachers' own educational backgrounds and English language proficiency levels are the expectations encountered in teaching the CE program itself. One of the implications of the CE teachers' excessive workloads is that they have less time to prepare lessons. Effective lesson planning provides teachers with both confidence and security (Clark & Yinger, 1979; Jensen & Kiley, 2005; Leibling & Prior, 2005; Senior, 2006). Additionally, heavy workloads exhaust teachers. When a teacher is not energetic in class, they cannot be expected to create an active and productive classroom environment or maintain a level of high quality teaching. In addition, the large

class sizes also result in more teacher time spent marking student work, further limiting the time available for lesson preparation.

Small class sizes are beneficial for language classrooms where 'language is taught through language' (Cook, 2001: 144). Different learners can achieve the same level of success if the language instruction matches their own preferred approach to learning (Ellis, 1994: 524). Therefore, effective language teaching is teaching which is responsive to the needs and interests of the individual learner (Mitchell 1994: 38). However, it is impossible to pay attention to individual learners' needs in large classes. Furthermore, 'teaching is a social activity, realised in discourse built jointly by learners and teachers' (Roberts, 1998: 106). This suggests the significant need for learning experience of this kind in teacher training and professional development programs; however, as Vice-Minister Wu points out in her speech, CE teachers do not usually have 'in-service training' (Wu, 2004). Since the official directives (e.g., Zhang, 2002: 4) also suggest that the optimum CE class size is fewer than 20 students, there is a long way to go for the existing CE class sizes of between 40-90 students to be reduced to meet this standard.

Chinese students' weakness in listening and speaking skills is unsurprising when CE teaching is considered in its context as the endpoint of a continuum of English language learning through primary and junior and senior high schools:

> Rather striking to outsiders who look for more communicative or learner-centred approaches is a dominant use of teacher-centred and book-based interaction which mediates learner activities … In the middle school, memorisation of vocabulary lists, knowledge of grammatical rules and the ability to recite texts become increasingly important and by the end of senior middle school English learning becomes dominated by exam-preparation activities. (Jin & Cortazzi, 2006: 10)

The dominance of teacher talk and examination-oriented classrooms suggests that students do not have enough opportunities to speak, which results in their weak oral English skills. Although the need for listening skills in English

> should have been solved at high school …, it remains … because of factors inside and outside school (e.g., lack of teachers, focus on the University Entrance Examination). The problem is consequently left for College English teaching to solve. (Zhang, 2008: 18)

It is for these reasons that College English can be seen as the product of 'deaf and dumb English' rather than its cause. Weakness in oral English is a phenomenon that begins in primary school and continues right through high school. Unfortunately, the educational policy-makers have not viewed

Chinese university students' deficiencies in listening and speaking against this continuum. Moreover, they did not pay enough attention to the circumstances of CE teachers. Instead, they expected 'to solve students' problems in listening and speaking by using ICT' (Zhang, 2008: 3). Clearly, as a technology, ICT alone cannot improve students' oral English. How a technology functions depends on how people use it. If we believe that teachers are 'a key factor in the successful implementation of curriculum changes' (Richards, 2001: 99), their situation has to be improved.

**Conclusion**

When students learn a language that is not used for communication outside the classroom, teaching is the chief or only source of their target language: '[w]hatever they know, whatever they can say or understand, is an effect of teaching' (Cook, 2001: 141). This is the case for English language learning in China. Data from my three research sites shows that most CE teachers held low academic ranks and lower-level qualifications, and that they were teaching large classes. Furthermore, they were overworked, and most would have little prior teaching experience. These circumstances provide a shaky foundation for realising the new teaching goal of prioritising oral English.

Although the changes are intended to remedy students' weaknesses in listening and speaking, it is unfair to criticise CE as 'deaf and dumb English' when it is considered alongside the continuum of students' English language learning from primary school through high school prior to embarking on university study. Although implementation of the policy reform is expected to be achieved through reliance on ICT, a technology cannot solve problems in teaching unless teachers are given the means to learn to use it efficiently and productively. As always, it is teachers themselves who are the decisive factor in the effectiveness of teaching and learning.

The implication of this study is that as long as we see language teaching as happening between a teacher and students, any teaching reform aiming to improve learners' language proficiency but ignoring the situation of teachers is to put the cart before the horse and is consequently unlikely to succeed. Furthermore, it is doubtful that College English teachers who have low levels of language proficiency themselves will be able to equip their students with a high level of English language proficiency. This negative ongoing effect on subsequent generations will continue unless effective measures are put in place to improve teachers' working conditions and, more specifically, the quality of pre- and in-service teacher education and, as part of that training, teachers' own language proficiency levels.

**Acknowledgements**

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### Appendix – Interview transcript excerpts

Dean 1

Everything remains the same … except we have multimedia in every classroom. Every teacher is encouraged to use PowerPoints in classroom teaching. But making PowerPoints takes a lot of time … Perhaps the use of ICT will be beneficial for students ...

The students are affected by ICT. I wish technology would work. There's no other change. Every week they have intensive reading classes (IRC) for three periods, and listening classes (LC) for only one period. For the LC they have access to English movies and dramas. …

Classes are big, 46 on average in IRC, and about 80 in the biggest class in LC.

Dean 2

The only change is the instalment of multimedia in classrooms. By using PowerPoints, teachers feel that classroom teaching is easier than before. This change might work for students. But teachers have to spend much time making PowerPoints. More challenging than this is that the new goal requires teachers' English proficiency in oral communication. It's difficult for those who graduated with only a Bachelor of Arts …

The change for students is that teaching is aided by ICT now. As usual, students still have two types of class: IRC and LC. On average, there are three periods for IRC and one period for LC each week. Class size varies from over 40 to 90 …

Dean 3

The new teaching goal challenges teachers' oral English … We now have multimedia in classrooms. Teachers use PowerPoints to teach. It's demanding. But there's nothing else happening. We still have intensive reading classes and listening classes …

Perhaps students could take advantage of ICT to improve their learning. Except for that, nothing has changed. They have three periods for IRC and one for LC every week. They are still in large classes, ranging from 47 to over 80. Much more input is available for students, including English movies. This may be helpful to students' listening and speaking …

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