

## Current situation and countermeasures of college public English in China

Yang FENG

School of Education, University of Nottingham, Nottingham, England

### Abstract

Through teaching practices and relevant studies, the present study finds College Public English encountered issues that teachers are hard to teach, students are unwilling to learn English and their progress in English is very slow and even regressed. The reasons include issues in the arrangement of college curriculum, teaching schedule, education mode, teacher-student ratio, system of motivation for teachers, guidance on students' study interest and motivation and so on. Furthermore, the present study proposed feasible countermeasures, such as the teaching plan to attach the same importance to academic English and CET-4&6.

**Keywords:** higher education institutions in China; College Public English; analyses of current situation; countermeasure propositions

### 1. Introduction

Since the 1980s, Public College English have become a compulsory course for all undergraduate except English majors in China. *The Syllabus of College English* (Working Group of *Syllabus of College English*, 1999) [7], issued by the Ministry of Education in China, requires all universities and colleges must arrange College English in the freshman and sophomore year, four semesters with no less than 280 study hours, the ratio of study hours inside and outside a class is no less than 1:2, four to five study hours per week, and 16-20 credits, which accounts for around 10% of undergraduate credits.

College Public English is a key course in China's college teaching reformation in the past 30 years. Its curriculum developed from an English class to comprehensive cultivation of listening, speaking, reading and writing. However, the English of many college students in China are not improved and even regressed in college and worse than their level in high school (Miu, 2013) [6].

Based on my teaching practice and relevant studies, the present study analyzed issues in the instruction of College Public English and proposed some plans according to foreign language teaching theories.

### 2. Current situation and causes analyses of Public College English in China

#### 2.1 Many college students do not like learning English

Nearly 90% of higher education institutions in China are the second- and third-tier colleges. These colleges and universities do not have high-level teachers and teaching quality and their lowest qualifying score is only 300-400, which is only half of the full score (750 points), and the English score is also merely 30-50% of full score (150 points), which is around 60 points (Dong, 2013) [3].

Therefore, it can be concluded that more than half of college students do not like English in high school and have good English basis; they also do not plan to study abroad, get into graduate school, and work in a foreign-owned company. So they think they need not English in the future, are unwilling to study English in colleges, and lack the motivation to study

English, which is the biggest obstruction for College Public English (Wang, 2014) [10-11].

#### 2.2 Goal of instruction cannot meet the demand of students

The syllabus of College Public English in China is determined by the Ministry of Education (MOE) and its teaching goal is to cultivate reading competence and skills of listening, speaking, writing and translating, without focus on the competence of taking exams (Cai, 2011) [1].

All colleges and universities in China follow this syllabus and cannot make significant revision. They usually offer courses, such as Comprehensive English, Intensive and Extensive Reading, Listening and Speaking, Spoken English, English Writing, and Translating and Interpreting, to develop students' skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. However, finishing all the above courses in around 280 study hours (some colleges only have 240-260 hours) may cause each course cannot be taught well. In addition, many courses in College Public English repeat the English courses in high school; many students do not value it, which causes the regression of students' English competence (Su, 2010) [8].

Though College English Test Band 4 and Band 6 has disconnected with the bachelor degree, they are very important in job seeking. So most college students will take them, except students in English major. English is a compulsory subject in the entrance exam for graduate school in China and studying abroad needs the score of TOEFL and IELTS.

But most Public English courses in current China do not include the relevant contents, so many students believe these courses cannot meet their demand and cannot improve their English competence effectively, which makes them to spend much time and money attending the high-cost training classes outside campus (Liu, 2013) [5].

Independent study are encouraged in colleges, but most Chinese students are not cultivated the habit of study independently in high school. So many of them are attracted by online games, online chatting, part-time job, and student activities and lost the motivation to study after they get into colleges and do not have the supervision of parents and teachers in high school anymore. The unwillingness to study

English is the reason causes the level of English of many college students even worse than their level in high school.

After surveyed and interviewed 196 students in ten colleges in Guangzhou City about English courses and study in college, the reporters in *Nanfang Metropolis Daily* concluded that around 70% of college students believe their level of English is worse than that in high school and over 90% of respondents stated that “if we are allowed to take CET4 in the freshman of college, we may get a higher score, and we feel our English is worse than our level in high school.” (Tang, 2014) <sup>[9]</sup>.

### 2.3 Instructional approach cannot motivate students

Though the main determinant of the regression of English level lies on students, the instructional approach of current College Public English also contributes to the regression.

The instruction of English course in high school only has a single goal and it completely follows the syllabus of English in Gaokao, which requires at least a period of English course each day. Students are asked to read English half an hour every morning and to do the school work of English or revision for an hour every night, which means they need to spend at least two hours study English per day. In addition, students have to do more than 50 simulation test papers in the senior year of high school. Generally, each high school class in China has 40-50 students, teachers and students can meet every day and teachers can help students at any time. So even high school students generally perform not well in spoken English, they become competent in taking exam or they will fail in the entrance exam of college (Cao, 2014) <sup>[12]</sup>.

Public English courses in China's college do not focus on passing the CET and they generally are arranged two classes each week and each class lasts around two class hours. A class generally has 80-120 students and even 150 students, which causes the teacher-student interaction is impossible. The classes of Comprehensive English and Reading stress on words, grammar and syntax and teacher merely give lecture without interaction with students. The classes of listening and reading only present some English movies to students without effective practices. Students cannot meet teachers after class and get encouragement and teacher even cannot recognize all his/her students, so the effectiveness of English classes is worse than that in high school.

### 2.4 English has no connection with other subjects

All college courses in China are taught in Chinese except the foreign language subjects. The medium of instruction and living for Chinese college students are Chinese either, so students have nowhere to use English besides in exam, which is also the reason they do not interest in studying English. The class hours of English for specific major in junior and senior year in college is limited (usually lower than minimum of 100 hours required by the MOE) and the content of instruction is also the reading and translation of literature relevant to a major, rather than the listening, speaking and writing that relevant to a specific major, which reduce the time for students to be exposed to English in the final two years of college and enhance the forgetting of English (Li, 2013) <sup>[4]</sup>.

The freshman of Sino-foreign universities, such as University of Nottingham, Ningbo and Xian Jiaotong-Liverpool University, do not have significant gap in English with freshman of other ordinary Chinese universities when they get enrolled, but they have strong motivation to study English.

These universities adopt English textbooks, their medium of instruction is English, and they employ the major-oriented teaching mode. Students of two semesters in the first year at these colleges are mainly study the courses of listening, speaking, reading and writing in English and each class only includes 15-20 students, which is very helpful to improve students' English for academic purposes.

Students are allowed to take other courses only after passed these courses. So they will study actively and spend much time studying outside class. In addition, they study the knowledge of their major in English in the last three years and use English in class discussion, schoolwork, essay and exam, which enhance the all-round development of English.

The non-English major students at these Sino-foreign universities often spend 8-10 hours studying English and other courses through English each day, so their time of listening, speaking, reading and writing English exceeds 12,000-15,000 hours, which is 10-15 times of the time spent on English study by non-English major college students and 1.5-2 times of the time of English major students in ordinary colleges of China.

Therefore, their English level can surpass the English major students in ordinary Chinese colleges when they graduate, and their academic performance of their own major also surpasses their peers in the same major. More than half of graduates of these colleges will go to famous colleges in the U.S. and the U.K. for postgraduate study and another half will get a job in foreign-owned companies (Su, 2011; Zou, 2015) <sup>[8, 12]</sup>.

It can be concluded that the English-medium education can cause a huge gap in students' level of English and career development. English is the global lingua franca at present and the high-level universities, which recruit students internationally, also take English as medium of instruction. So the progressive Chinese universities will promote the English-medium education. Though many colleges in China unable to take English as medium of instruction in all subjects, the reasonable academic English instructional object, small class teaching, intensive and high-frequency English class in the freshman year, and the adoption of English textbooks and English as medium of instruction as much as possible can create an English environment for college students, motive them to study English, and improve their English competence effectively.

### 2.5 Reward system is hard to motivate teachers

College English is one of the college public courses and the teachers' payment is lower than that of other teachers of major courses. The low payment affects teachers' enthusiasm of teaching and cannot attract good teachers to participate.

In addition, teachers of College Public English have to give lectures 16-20 hours per week and correct students' work, so the workload is very heavy, which causes teachers do not have time improve their own competence and teaching skills, let alone the time to giving students instructions after class. This situation seriously affects the quality of college English (Zhou, 2015) <sup>[13]</sup>.

## 3. Reform countermeasures of College Public English in China

### 3.1 Adopt the teaching plan that attach same importance to academic English and CET-4&6

The goal of college English should be adjusted to improving students' application ability of academic English, avoiding the

content and teaching mode of English in high school, focusing on academic reading, listening, speaking and writing ability and developing students' English competence.

No college and students dare to refuse participate the CET-4&6, so the content of College Public English ought to include the instruction and training courses of CET-4&6. This content is the extension of English course in high school and basis of academic English and these two parts can develop mutually.

The specific arrangement of instruction: the instruction of College Public English in the freshman year focuses on the syllabus of CET-4&6 to raise the score and fulfill the students' demand of passing the exams; the instruction of College Public English in the sophomore year stresses on listening, speaking and writing of general academic English to improve students' competence of academic English; offer elective course for preparing English in postgraduate entrance exam, TOEFL and IELTS to fulfill students' demand; permit some freshman undergraduates studying academic English courses.

### 3.2 Employ the student-centered teaching mode

The MOE ought to require colleges and universities to follow the rule of foreign language teaching, increase the faculty of English, teach in small class and improve class interaction, such as promote the flipped classroom, which can increase the frequency of English communication and improve students' competence of listening and speaking. In addition, MOE should supervise colleges and universities to establish and use the online English study platform, create and improve the reading, watching, grammar, words and writing of online multimedia materials and short films and songs, encourage students to learn English and finish and submit schoolwork online, and advocate colleges and universities to promote the contest of English speech, comedy and writing to make students enjoy English.

### 3.3 Offer bilingual major courses

The English level of teachers in non-English major needs to be improved and teachers should encouraged to offer bilingual major courses (such as the payment of a bilingual course is 1.5 times of a Chinese course) and employ English textbooks and English as medium of instruction to create a bilingual environment for students.

Students should be motivated to take bilingual courses since sophomore year and the credits of bilingual courses can be raised (such as 1.5-2 times of Chinese courses) to make students to learn English in their four years of college study and develop their own English application ability.

### 3.4 Formulate a reasonable motivation system for teachers

Colleges and universities should raise the payment of College Public English, encourage teachers to guide students to carry out extracurricular activities, such as play English drama, hold a contest of English speech, arrange teachers to give online instruction and offer reasonable payment, attract good teachers to participate the teaching of College Public English through competitive salary, raise students' interest in English and college English and study on their own initiative, and let students can get instructions of teachers on time.

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