

English Education in Present-day China

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New Standard in English Teaching

With the opening up of China, English teaching has been getting more and more attention, especially since Beijing won the bid to hold the 2008 Olympic Games. Apart from English teaching in schools, other forms of English training courses have appeared across China (for example, the Beijing New Oriental School is the best and most famous privately-run English school for TOEFL and GRE tests). People are enthusiastic about learning English, and publications about English learning and English reading books have become more and more popular.

Recently, a 9-year voluntary education programme was put forward in China. A standard English course is being used to replace the former teaching outline. The new standard adopts the international system according to which English language education is divided into 9 levels. This has changed the old style of teaching, which attached importance to grammar and vocabulary. Adopting the new standard helps to develop the students' ability to use English in their daily life, by focusing on arousing their interest, and encouraging their participation, with the help of their own experience.

The new method will place less stress on "reading" and "writing", in favour of "listening" and "speaking". The pupils start learning English from grade 3 in primary schools. The basic phase is divided into 9 levels. After grade 6, they should reach level 2, and after grade 9, level 5. Students graduating from high school should have reached level 8, while those from foreign language high schools or schools with foreign language specialties should have reached level 9.

It is said that all English textbooks for primary and middle schools must be compiled according to the new standard. Since the autumn of 2001, many new textbooks have been tried out in 38 trial areas across China. Students of other areas will start using the new textbooks from this autumn, and within 5 years, primary and middle school students throughout China will be using them.

Public college English (not including English major) teaching has improved a lot during the past two decades. The reading speed of college students has reached 70 to 100 words per minute and their vocabulary has surpassed 4,200 words. College students not majoring in English can read ordinary English newspapers and magazines and communicate in English. Some students even get gold prizes in international English lecture competitions, and the pass rate of CET (Chinese English Test) Band 4 and CET Band 6 has been increasing. More and more students took these tests of college students' English ability.

Most important of all, after 20 years' effort, China has built a solid foundation for the further development of public college English teaching. Great progress has been made in terms of personnel training, textbooks, courses, field work, teaching method and teachers.

Some Points to Improve Present System

From primary school to college, a complete system of English teaching has been established. Meanwhile, some problems exist:

1. The system of public college English teaching is not cohesive with that of primary and middle school. The Educa-

tion Ministry has put forward a new demand: from now on, students from cities and developed areas of China will start to learn English from grade 3 of primary schools; students in remote areas from grade 1 of middle schools. Recently, there have been some gaps and overlaps between middle school and public college English teaching. These gaps and overlaps occur in content, courses, textbooks, teaching methods, etc, resulting in a waste of time and energy as well as discontent among students. Some students who did well in English during high school complained that they gained little from college English teaching.

2. Public college English teaching aims at developing students' reading ability. To a certain degree, communication skills in English such as listening and speaking are not given enough attention. The aim was suitable when people in China depended on English material to learn about foreign countries. Nowadays, it is more important for students to improve their oral and listening ability. It's high time we remedied the phenomenon of "deaf English" and "dumb English" (when students can read, but cannot speak English fluently, or understand what people say). Some students said their vocabulary was probably larger than that of some native speakers, but they could not express themselves in English. After ten years' English learning, they were still "deaf and dumb."

Because reading is emphasized, grammar is mainly taught in Chinese. Classes are relatively large (more than 20 students) so students seldom have a chance to speak. Through lack of funds, many universities lack language lab or multi-media facilities, thus, students' listening and oral English training is impaired. In order to expand their vocabulary, students spend much time reciting words, but they don't know how to use them correctly in practice.

3. Public college English teaching cannot meet the needs of all kinds of personnel in specialized subjects such as science because all teachers follow the same teaching syllabus. Students must pass CET (College English Test) Band 4 or Band 6 in order to get their degrees. The Education Ministry demands over 10% of teachers in important universities teach basic and specialized courses in English within three years. The aim is to improve students' comprehensive ability in English use. Nowadays with the development of market economy, the ties between universities and industries are being strengthened. Different types of universities should have different demands as to students' English level. For instance, in well-known universities around the world, the students' English level and ability enable them to communicate. Apart from reading and writing, they can speak and listen quite well, especially in their majors and the field of science and technology.

4. More money and attention should be put into English teaching. Funding for teaching is always a weak point, especially English teaching: (1) Lack of language labs and multi-media classrooms, means students have not enough time to practice English; (2) The quality and quantity of English teachers need to be improved. At present, public college English teachers are mostly young postgraduates who need to improve their teaching methods and quality. Universities should pay more attention to teachers' training, and their subsidies.
5. More studies should be done on the reform of public college English teaching. For example, studies on teaching and hearing methods, facilities on the Internet, test systems, new textbooks and excellent textbooks from abroad, English teaching systems and reforming of courses.
6. Evaluation and test systems need to be improved. Recently, all kinds of evaluation and test systems have appeared, among which TOEFL and GRE from America, CET Band 4 and CET Band 6 from China are very popular. Passing TOEFL and GRE is the key for Chinese students to go abroad to continue their studies. With the opening of some special training schools, grades may not reflect the students' true English level. These tests do not influence students' graduation and job selection, so they are not severely criticized. As for CET Band 4 and CET Band 6, two opinions exist. People who approve of them believe that they function as a bridge which links students' English level and their future. Meanwhile, these tests encourage teachers to improve their methods so as to achieve higher grades. In short, these tests help improve teachers' teaching methods and students' English levels, thus benefitting both. In the long run, they will benefit society.

People who oppose these tests argue that teachers and students pay so much attention to preparing for CET Band 4 and CET Band 6 that they neglect to cultivate the students' communication skills. They complained that some students passed CET Band 4 and even 6, but they couldn't speak and write well in English. Although they knew how to pass these tests, they did not digest what they had learned.

CET Band 4 and Band 6 are set according to the College English Teaching Syllabus which has nothing to do with students' progress, graduation and obtaining employment, so universities shouldn't emphasize these tests too much. They ought to attach importance to improving students' English level instead.

English Education through the Introduction of its Culture

What we need behind English education is to open the students' eyes through the introduction of western culture. English as a language is derived from its root culture. First of all we should learn the history of English. Then, we can understand how English developed into what it is today. History also helps us understand the elements of English itself, such as synonyms. "Culture" is such a big concept, as it covers literature, art, religion, philosophy, science, social science, etc.

Through introducing culture, we can see a picture with a background. As for teachers, they should introduce the cultural background first, and then teach some knowledge of English. This will help students understand what they learned deeply and arouse their interest in exploring knowledge behind the language, so students may develop the habit of learning through the background.

In conclusion, English teaching is entering new phase, because more and more people show great enthusiasm in learning it. As a result, English teaching and reform are coming to a turning point which predicts a bright future in English education in China.

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English Course of Beijing Language and Culture University



Beijing New Oriental School, the largest and a dynamic language training school in China, cooperating with Algonquin College of Applied Arts and Technology, the Canadian famous vocational education institute, in the training work of international programmer in China