

清华 外语教育论丛

(第一辑)

侯一麟 吕中舌 主编



清华大学出版社

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内 容 简 介

《清华外语教育论丛》是关于外国语言理论研究、外语教学、教材、教学改革等方面的学术性书刊,面向全国,不定期分辑出版。本辑的主要讨论专题是:1. 英语教材研究;2. 大学英语教学管理;3. 计算机在外语教学中的应用。

本书适合外语教育工作者、研究者、管理者参考和阅读。

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清华外语教育论丛

立足清华,服务全国,发表外语教育研究诸方面的文章,不定期出版,旨在推动、深化我国的外语教育研究,是教育管理机关的参谋,外语教育管理者的参考;是外语教育工作者、研究者、管理者的必备书。

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本辑主要内容

- 英语教材研究
- 大学英语教学管理
- 计算机在外语教学中的应用

前 言

《清华外语教育论丛》是关于外国语言理论研究、外语教学、教材、教学改革等方面的学术性书刊,由清华大学外语系主持编写。该丛书旨在探讨和研究外国语言理论与外语教学等方面的问题,提高外语教师的素质,改进外语教学方法以推动全国整体外语教育水平的提高,促进我国政治、经济诸方面的改革与开放。

《清华外语教育论丛》立足于清华,但不只局限于清华,内容涉及外国语言理论及外语教学的各个方面,不定期分辑出版,每辑集中讨论 2~3 个专题,欢迎全国各高等院校、研究所以及从事外语教育及外语理论研究的有识之士踊跃投稿。与一般学术性书刊有所不同的是,我们不限长度,但求质量,只要文章有新意,表达一定的学术观点,我们将予以发表。

承蒙清华大学出版社对我们《外语教育论丛》的鼎力赞助,清华大学外语系领导的大力支持以及各兄弟院校的热情鼓励,在此我们谨向有关单位和个人表示最衷心的感谢和诚挚的敬意。

《清华外语教育论丛》编写委员会

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THE TEACHING OF COLLEGE ENGLISH IN CHINA: A TURN-OF-THE-CENTURY PERSPECTIVE

Li Yinhua



EFL teaching in Chinese higher learning institutions has made considerable progress in the past two decades; on the other hand, it is also faced with some pressing problems. First, we have not given as much attention to the development of students' productive skills as to that of their receptive skills. Second, while emphasizing fluency, we somewhat neglect accuracy. Third, we tend to indiscriminately put on the shelf all our traditional approaches when introducing current overseas pedagogic trends to our classrooms. And lastly, in spite of the contributions the College English Test has made to College English teaching in China we regret to say it has, meanwhile, produce some harmful side effects. To settle these problems is not easy. I venture to offer three suggestions. The most important thing I think is to work out a new syllabus to replace the two existing syllabuses. Another urgent matter is that we should have more in-service teaching programs to help the faculty develop their EFL teaching techniques and English proficiency. Finally I briefly deal with evaluation, with a focus on the assessment of students' scholastic performance.

The last two decades have seen the economy grow at an unprecedentedly quickened pace in China, and hence its tremendous impact on and profound changes in almost every sphere of social life. Foreign language education is no exception. The teaching of English as the first foreign language here has been, in particular, deeply affected. The most obvious and direct result is that there is now an ever increasing demand for personnel with various degrees of English proficiency, ranging from the threshold level to a good command of English, both written and spoken, in addition to their expertise in

their respective specialized fields either as a space scientist or an environmental engineer or as a salesclerk in a department store. It is no accident that an increasing number of students in our universities and colleges now devote much more time and effort to English courses than in the past. For they are well aware that the mastery of English is more often than not a prerequisite for them to get a good position in the labor market after graduation. Needs might cause you to work harder but they cannot guarantee you a success. Thus it is quite common that students are puzzled by the age-old question; how to learn, whereas teachers who are duty-bound to help them are obsessed by the annoying question; how to teach. (Although applied linguists seem to have shifted their interest in the former rather than the latter [see V. J. Cook 1982, Ellis 1985, Corder 1986, Richards 1976, and Widdowson 1983], this does not mean that the teacher should have a lesser role to play; just the opposite. Now, in fact, there is a much higher goal for the teacher to reach; he should "prepare his students to become autonomous, ultimately to make himself unnecessary." [Michael Hall 1992]) Therefore, in this connection, I would like to mainly address myself to some pressing problems facing College English (for non-English majors) teaching in China that I think have stood already in our way for some time and might become more acute as the new century is drawing near, and then I will venture to offer a few suggestions. Before going into that, I will briefly look back on what we have achieved in recent years.

Just as our economy has been moving ahead very rapidly, the teaching of English has been making remarkable progress in our universities and colleges. A revised national College English syllabus for Chinese students of science and engineering came into being in 1985, followed by a similar one for liberal arts students not long after. Several sets of English textbooks based on the said syllabuses were published. A nationwide unified standardized test, i. e. , the CET (College English Test) was introduced. The average English level of students has been raised considerably. And the English faculty as a whole has gained insights into current teaching theories and accumulated rich experiences in their own practices.

However, there is still much to be desired. I would here like to emphasize four points. First, when we give priority to the development of students' receptive skills, especially reading skills in our teaching, we, to a certain extent, neglect the teaching of productive skills. The Syllabus for students of arts and sciences stipulates "College English aims to develop in students a relatively high level of competence in reading, an intermediate level of competence in listening and a basic competence in writing and speaking." As a result, compared with reading and listening skills (no speaking component in the CET), the average score in writing remains the lowest in the CET. A large percent-

age of examinees simply lack basic writing techniques, and their knowledge of spelling, grammar and usage is far from adequate. As for speaking proficiency, despite no available nationwide statistics, there is no reason to believe that students would perform better than they currently perform on the writing section.

Second, when we attach importance to fluency, we, in our teaching, fail to give enough attention to accuracy. This, in my opinion, partly resulted from negligence, on the part of the teacher, in helping the student develop his linguistic competence while stressing the importance of communicative competence. Take reading proficiency for example. Since it is our first goal, "the relatively high level of competence in reading" should have been attained when a student has completed the College English course. However, this is not always the case. Not long ago, 109 seniors of Qinghua University who, except a very few, have succeeded in passing the CET (either Band 4 or Band 6) took an English proficiency test designed to mainly evaluate reading comprehension ability and they were asked to read several unseen passages and then put some underlined sentences into Chinese. It turned out the failure percentage should run as high as 62.5% and the average score was 51.9 points out of a total of 100. of all the weaknesses that were revealed in the exam, inaccurate comprehension stood out (Hou & Cheng 1995). All this bears out that a goodly part of students has not yet achieved the proficiency as expected of them and their knowledge of English is still shaky, though they have done better than ever before.

Third, when we energetically introduce current trends in language pedagogy from abroad into our classrooms, we cast away what has been long proved to be efficient in our traditional foreign language education. This I will address later.

Finally, I would like to bring up a problem of another kind, namely, the side effects of the CET on the EFL teaching here. There is no denying that the CET has contributed a lot to the improvement of College English teaching in our country by serving as a yardstick for the evaluation of the student's scholastic performance in his English studies and as an effective means with which the teacher could see where his students' weaknesses lie and thus be able to design proper remedies for them. Besides, it is also a powerful stimulus to make almost every president of Chinese higher learning institutions have to show more concern for English education—usually this means more funds and better teaching facilities. For the CET is the only nationwide unified college test officially administered in the name of the State Education Commission of the People's Republic of China, and how his school performs in the Test, in the eyes of the president, would have a direct bearing on his university. Unfortunately, however, it is just because of

this that some negative effects of the Test have arisen and still exist today. In many cases what the school authority is most interested in is the ranking of his university according to the test score, and hence, there arises an intense competition among higher learning institutions, especially those within the same province. As a consequence, much pressure is finally put on teachers who, in turn, have to take pains to teach to the tests by mainly asking students to do plenty of simulated test papers and teaching them how to get better grades instead of teaching them how to really improve their language proficiency. And students are learning to pass rather than how to use the language. Inevitably this will distort school curriculum. For instance, the period of preparing students for the Test sometimes lasts a whole semester or even longer. which means that the normal teaching plan for that semester has to be given up, and thus costs students dearly indeed. Obviously this runs counter to the test designers' intention.

Closely linked with this is the questionable role of the multiple-choice items in the Test. It is true that the use of multiple-choice questions in a standardized test administered on a large scale has its merits, especially the objectivity and speed with which correct answers can be detected and counted by scoring machines. But, on the other hand, the multiplechoice question has its own inherent weaknesses. For one thing, it is not well identical with the purposes of education. "Picking one answer among four is very far from thinking a question through to an answer of one's own, and far less useful in life." (E. P. Taylor et al. 1977) For another, to write multiple-choice questions is a pretty tough job even for professionals whose native tongue is English. "Questions are often badly worded, confusing, or downright wrong. For many questions, the thoughtful or imaginative student can see several acceptable answers among those given." (ibid.) And to make matters worse, "after many decades of testing, the proportion of defective questions seems about the same... (it) is unlikely to go down in the future." (ibid.) Unfortunately, a considerable portion of the mock test papers our students are asked to do consists mainly of multiplechoice questions of the same sort. I, for one, believe this would do students more harm than good.

To solve the above-mentioned problems, of course, is by no means an easy job. It calls for courage to do away with biases so that we could see things in their proper perspective. It also calls for our concerted and sustained efforts so that we could do all the better and more effectively. Indeed, there are a lot of things that need to be done. Of them, the following areas I think deserve our particular attention;

- **We should design a new syllabus to meet the greatly changed situation.**
- **More efforts should be devoted to the in-service training of teachers.**
- **There needs to be improvement on the assessment of College English education.**

In the following I would like to comment on each.

A NEW SYLLABUS

What prompted me to ponder over a new syllabus is just the simple fact that drastic changes have taken place in our country since the two syllabuses came out, and accordingly the needs for English are very different from those ten years ago. It would be interesting to have a look at the results of two polls (Li Mengtao & Gong Li 1994). The first one was done by Shanghai Jiaotong University in the early 80s and the other by University of Science & Technology of China, etc., in the early 90s. Both of them were meant to investigate what the social needs for different English skills—reading, writing, listening and speaking. Those surveyed were chiefly scientists. Although both of the surveys show the demand for reading proficiency always registers high, the difference between them is large when it comes to other skills, especially writing and speaking. In the early 80s investigation, only about 29% of the people inquired thought it necessary to develop speaking and listening skills in English and about 25% considered writing skill indispensable. Yet, in the early 90s survey, there were as many as approximately 80% of those investigated who had the need for English speaking, listening and writing skills. And this was reconfirmed by a more recent poll conducted by Zhejiang University in 1993, which shows percentages of those who felt it necessary to be able to speak or listen or write in English are 71.11%, 67.29% and 61.48% respectively. Among other things, what impressed me most is the answers to the question in the early 90s poll “What do you think will be the most useful English skills for scientists in the next decade?” In the opinion of 697 young scientists inquired, what they will need most in their future work is “the skills of writing scientific papers, reports and abstracts; the skills of carrying out negotiations over matters like international cooperation; the skills of making daily exchanges such as greeting, inquiry and discussion.” In short, all this speaks volumes for the fact that the need for productive skills has increased remarkably and will remain so in the years to come. Therefore, it is time now for us to reform our English curriculum, and to work out a new syllabus for that matter.

To design a new syllabus, the following three aspects I think ought to be taken into full account.

First, a new syllabus should be built on sufficient investigation and research.

A new syllabus should, of course, meet the present and future needs of our society. To do this, it is imperative to unfold several surveys on a fairly large scale. To begin with, we should investigate what the larger society, in terms of English proficiency,

expects of university graduates at present and in the foreseeable future; we should evaluate the linguistic and communicative competences students have achieved at the time of graduating from universities as well as their English level when entering college. Besides, it is necessary for us to make a study of TEFL in other nations, especially in our neighboring Asian countries so as to draw on their experiences. Only based on adequate investigation and research could we know for sure what the general goal for our College English teaching should be and what should be the specific requirements for a particular course or skill. Take vocabulary for example. Both of our syllabuses set 4,000 words as the basic requirement and 5,300 as the higher requirement at the foundation stage. Suppose the student could enlarge it with 1,000 additional technical or semi-technical terms in his specialized field in the "specialized reading stage." His vocabulary would add up to 6,300 at most. It is obvious that with so limited a vocabulary he could hardly reach the target specified in the syllabus; "After completion of the course, the student should be able to use the English they have learned as a means to obtain whatever information they need in their fields of specialization". For it is widely accepted that a minimum vocabulary of 10,000 words is necessary for reading and other communicative purposes (see K. C. Diller 1978). Should we therefore require students to have a larger vocabulary in a new syllabus? And how many lexical items should be learned by them in the future? These and other questions could not be properly answered without investigation and research.

Second, a new syllabus should be built on the strengths of the two existing syllabuses, keeping what has been proved good while improving what seems inadequate.

Here, I would like to say a few words about the possibility of using a single syllabus to replace the two syllabuses in the future. If you compare the two syllabuses in use it can be easily seen that they share much common ground either in principles or in course objectives, requirements and structure. The most salient difference, if any, consists in that the syllabus for science and technology students has translation skill as one of its basic requirements whereas the other syllabus does not. True the glossary of the former differs from that of the latter in that it includes some sub-technical words not so common in a general English lexicon. But this disagreement has been ironed out as a universal wordlist came out not long ago.

Another reason for the possible merger of the two syllabuses is also related with the rapid changes of the larger society. As is known to all, human history has entered into an entirely new era of communications and high technologies marked by the recent introduction of information super-highway. Thus many frontier disciplines and more and more interdisciplinary courses have appeared, and consequently the demarcation line between natural science and social science is growing obscure. Moreover, for undergradu-

ates higher education, in essence, is still a general education. They should not limit their knowledge to a narrow scope at too early a stage, say, in the first or second year at the university. As far as the learning of English is concerned, this is true, too. In other words, given the increasingly higher demands on the learners' English productive skills as well as their receptive ones, and meanwhile, their relatively not so good foundations, we have every reason to believe that to build up a more broad and solid basis of common core English is still a common goal for every Chinese college student to achieve in the foreseeable future, no matter whether the major is nuclear physics or civil engineering or music. So, there seems little to be said for two syllabuses in the future.

Third, a new syllabus should be built on eclecticism.

Its designers should be open-minded toward different teaching theories and methodologies. Nevertheless, when absorbing what is in fashion overseas it seems to me we'd better bear in mind two things. To begin with, we should see if it is fit for our situations and conducive to the teaching and learning here. Besides, every effort should be exerted to integrate what we learn from abroad with what is good in our tradition.

Speaking of our traditions in foreign language education, I regret to say that we seem to have neglected them for a fairly long time. All the approaches, methods and techniques practiced in Chinese classrooms indiscriminately were put into just one parcel which was, and still is, labeled as grammar-translation method—a nuisance in the eyes of some linguists and their followers, and should have been kicked out once for all. However, interestingly enough, many things that have been cold-shouldered here have been picked up one after another by our overseas colleagues in the past few decades. When grammar was considered a foe instead of a friend in our teaching, Western linguists and language teachers began to attach new meanings to the role of grammar in language acquisition and learning. For instance, Balcom (1985) holds that formal grammar teaching can contribute a lot to acquisition, especially it can make input more comprehensible. As literature was regarded as a serious hindrance in our way it began to be reintroduced into language class and its strengths are being reexamined (see Collie et al. 1987 and Lazar 1994). As Rönqvist and Sell (1994) have put it, "the reading of literature texts in the target language gives genuine and easily available experience in the pragmatics of relating formal linguistic expression to situational and socio-cultural contexts. Reading literature not only gives learners a chance to contextualize on the basis of cultural knowledge they already have, but can encourage them to use their brains in an effort to acquire the new knowledge they need in order to understand passages which puzzle them." Even the most "notorious" rote learning seems to begin to receive better treatment (see G. Cook 1994). There are many more, here I just mentioned a few. I was also pleased to see an increasing number of my Chinese colleagues begin to reconsid-

er them from a new perspective. For example, there used to be a time people thought English should be used exclusively as the medium of instruction so that students could have the maximum exposure to the target language. Therefore, it often happened that to explain an abstract noun like cynic or a concrete noun yet denoting a rather complicated matter, say, word like embryo, sometimes took several minutes. Nonetheless, even so, some students still remained confused when the class was over. People began to question the soundness of this practice. Since students are learning English in a Chinese-speaking environment and the mother tongue is unavoidable in the process of learning—at least in the learner's thinking if not in his utterance. The point is not whether to use it or not, but when and how to use it and to what extent. The recent development in the theory of second language acquisition has also proved this. Another example is translation. To improve students' accuracy, more and more teachers, I have observed, resort to the traditional teaching method again: asking them to do translation. This is nothing strange, for linguists also maintain that "at an advanced level of foreign language study, translation may be an efficient way of making the learner aware of systematic contrasts between his mother tongue and the foreign language." (Dirven 1990)

TEACHER DEVELOPMENT

Apart from the need for a new syllabus, another urgent issue we are confronted with is to work out a national teacher development program. A severe shortage of teachers and lack of professionalism in EFL teaching have become two closely related factors that are seriously hampering our progress. It is estimated there are nearly 3,000,000 Chinese students who are learning English at tertiary level every year. But the English faculty is only a little more than 20,000. The shortage of English teachers can be felt almost in every university. As a result, each faculty member has to shoulder a teaching load often twice or triple as much as he or she should do, which, in turn, leaves them little time for further improvement on their English proficiency as well as teaching techniques. To build up a sufficiently large teaching staff calls for the governmental efforts in our country. Hopefully this problem could gradually be solved in the not too far distant future. Here I would like to touch upon the issue of in-service training only.

In-service training is always necessary for EFL teachers whose native tongue is not English; this is all the more true for us Chinese teachers of English. This is because a large majority of the English faculty here consists of college graduates majoring in English, with little or even no pre-service training at all in language teaching as well as teaching theories. One more thing, owing to the heavy teaching load or just because of lack of the means, it seems that not many colleagues develop the habit of keeping them-

selves exposed to the target language every day through reading or listening (to, say, VOA or BBC or English movies) and make this practice part of their daily life. Their English, therefore, often easily gets rusted. Moreover, with the increasing emphasis on the teaching of communicative competence, there is arguably more pressure on teachers than ever before to be fluent in English so that they can use it naturally and spontaneously in the classroom.

However, what has been done so far in this regard is far from satisfactory. As far as I know, although many teachers have received in-service training in this or that form, there are many more who haven't had any opportunity yet. It is still rare for a teacher to be able to have access to regular training at intervals. Under such circumstances, the only alternative I think is to start more teacher training programs of different kinds—from graduate-level courses, year-long training classes to intensive summer schools—so that they could meet the diversified needs of teachers.

While setting up more training programs, we should also pay more attention to its curriculum. It seems to me it should include at least three parts: EFL teaching methodology (to develop the trainees' classroom skills); linguistics and the English grammatical and phonological systems (to help the trainees build up a theoretical basis and meanwhile, increase their language awareness); language improvement courses (to improve the general English proficiency of the trainees). If possible, a literature or culture component could be added.

EVALUATION

Finally I would like to say a few words about evaluation. Evaluation in the education process is not restricted to the testing of students' language abilities, but also covers the process of assessing different components of the curriculum such as methodology, teaching materials, and so on. There is an increasing awareness of its importance in the improvement of teaching and learning. (see Rea-Dickins et al. 1992 and Weir et al. 1994) And the State Education Commission of the People's Republic of China promulgated *A System of Evaluating College English Education* in 1995.

Nevertheless, in my opinion, the crucial element in an EFL program evaluation is still the assessment of the learners' academic performance. In this respect, we have had the CET, which is, in essence, a criterion-referenced proficiency test. The "criterion" is the requirements for different levels of English proficiency students are expected to attain at different "bands" as laid down in the national syllabuses. In other words, it is syllabusbased rather than textbook-related, or rather, it is not closely linked with the teaching materials students use. Thus it would be possible for students to take the

CET, say, Band 4, without completing the required courses—in fact some only finished Band 3; others even less. This, I think, accounts partly for the fact that some students, having passed the Test, are still rather weak in English proficiency. To solve this problem, some universities like Beida and Qinghua have begun to take measures. They have designed a sort of achievement test for Band 4, in which nearly half of the testing items are textbook-based, coupled with an oral production component in the Qinghua test paper, stipulating that anyone failing in the test will not be allowed to graduate. In this connection, the State Education Commission has recently started a project to set up a test bank based on the 4 sets of text books that are most widely used in China. The purpose of it is to compel both students and teachers to concentrate their attention and efforts on the required courses so as to develop students' linguistic and communicative competences, and thus raise the EFL learning and teaching in China to a higher level. I believe, if used properly the said bank would strengthen the position of the CET, for they are closely interrelated and consequently will make up for each other.

CONCLUSION

Although we have made notable achievements in TEFL in Chinese tertiary education in recent years, there are still some urgent issues pending solution. They are 1) while stressing the importance of receptive skills we somewhat fail to pay enough attention to the development of learners' productive skills; 2) as we emphasize fluency accuracy is to some extent neglected; 3) some aspects of our tradition that have long been proved effective in FL teaching is underestimated and ignored; 4) the side effects of the CET, to a certain degree, affect our progress. In brief, the average level of our students' English proficiency is still comparatively low and our teaching needs to be improved. To solve these problems I suggest we should first of all consider designing a new syllabus to replace the two in current use, which should be based on 1) intensive investigation and research; 2) the strengths of the existing syllabuses; 3) eclecticism in language pedagogy. The second suggestion I made is that we should initiate more in-service training programs to help our faculty improve their practical EFL teaching skills and their proficiency in the language itself. Finally I touched upon the issue of evaluation with emphasis on the assessment of students' scholastic performance, mentioning the project of building a test bank, which is already under way, that might be helpful in stimulating both learners and teachers to direct their attention to the goals set in the syllabuses.

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