

New Chances of Reforming Pedagogical Approach in Secondary English Class in China under the New English Curriculum and National College Entrance Examination Reform

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Abstract—Five years after the newest English curriculum, reform policy was enacted in China and hand-wringing spread among teachers who accused that this is another “wearing new shoes to walk the old road” policy. This paper provides a thoroughly philosophical policy analysis of serious efforts that had been made to support this reform and revealed the hindrances that bridled the reform to yield the desired effect. Blame could be easily put on teachers for their insufficient pedagogical content knowledge, conservative resistance, and the handicaps of large class sizes and limited teaching times and so on. However, the underlying causes for this implementation failure are the interrelated factors in the NCEE-centred education system, such as the reluctance from students, the lack of school and education bureau support and insufficient teacher training. A further discussion of the 2017 to 2020’s NCEE reform on English prompts new possibilities for the authentic pedagogical approach reform in secondary English classes. In all, the pedagogical approach reform at the secondary level is heading towards a brighter future with the initiation of new NCEE reform.

Keywords—English curriculum, failure, NCEE, new possibilities, pedagogical, policy analysis, reform.

I. INTRODUCTION

THE mismatch between Chinese curriculum reform and National College Entrance Examination (NCEE) reform has long been a vexing issue for English practitioners in China. Actually, the implementation gap is a common feature in educational reform process, which means that the intended changes in the education system level or classroom level do not necessarily guarantee the improvement of education quality in real education practice, as there always are many influential factors [6], [13], [38]. Unsystematic reform policies; insufficient education facilities; students’ unwillingness; and teacher’s lack of capabilities are among the most prevalent influential factors that hinder the effectiveness of educational reforms [15], [34], [11], [44].

The high-stakes examination functions as the main route to universities for Chinese students, and the access to universities could represent a better chance of a better life. As such, NCEE becomes the main route to upward mobility in China [10]. NCEE has three main features: Firstly, it consists of three compulsory subjects: Chinese, English and Mathematics, and optional subjects are divided into two categories: arts and

sciences. Secondly, the number of examinees far exceeds available university places, especially prestigious ones. Thirdly, despite a very small number of students that can be recommended to universities, most students are evaluated by the exam scores solely when applying for universities [10]. As a result, the NCEE has a strong backlash and guiding role for secondary education and inevitably, it has been placed at the very centre of China’s secondary education system. It is thus vital for students to succeed in the NCEE in order to gain a better chance of a better life, which places great pressure on both teachers and students.

Given the special position of NCEE in China’s secondary education system, it could be difficult and risky to conduct a systematic NCEE reform, as NCEE could have a significant influence on students’ choices, life paths, even China’s education equality and social mobility [16], [45]. It is stated that a slight move in one part of NCEE may affect China’s education situation as a whole [18]. Before the 2017’s new NCEE reform, there was no NCEE reform since its restoration in 1977 (NCEE had been abandoned for 10 years because of the political upheaval of the Great Cultural Revolution in 1967 in China) [9].

From 2017 to 2020’s NCEE reforms, English was the only compulsory subject that was constantly reformed, which justified the research interests of investigating this particular subject. In 1977, when firstly restored NCEE, there were only two compulsory subjects, Chinese and Mathematics, which were designed to cultivate students’ literacy and logical thinking ability. English has gradually gained its importance with the pace of the Opening-up policy since its initiation in 1977 [1]. Though English has been included in the NCEE since 1977, only 10% of its score was included in the total scores, then its included score percentage increased to 30%, and 70% year by year until 1983, when the percentage of English score included increased to 100% and became the third compulsory subject [47]. In order to assist China’s Opening-up policy, the English curriculum implemented in 1978 focused more on forming new images of foreign countries, pursuing economical and technical goals; for example, in the 1978’s new English textbooks, the reading materials include the dustman’s strike in the UK, but the situation of blacks in America has been

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removed from it; some new passages include scientific and commercial themes. Efforts were made to help students use English as a crucial tool for outreaching interactions. In order to assist the new English syllabus, a new series of English textbooks were produced by a group of experts and experienced practitioners to enable students to learn grammar and vocabulary mostly for reading and writing purposes. The new set of national English textbooks consists of short dialogues and sentence patterns for teachers to apply audio-linguistic and grammar-translation methods for drilling [1]. The English exam in NCEE only assesses students' reading and writing abilities. There had been no listening and speaking tests until 1997 [47]. In order to achieve a higher score in the NCEE, the major pedagogical approach in English instruction was teacher-centered rote learning, the most effective method for vocabulary and grammar teaching and learning in big classes [23], [4].

This paper mainly aims at exploring the reform possibility of pedagogical approach in secondary English classes in China at practicing level under the new curriculum and NCEE reform.

II. CURRICULUM REFORM

A. Quality Education

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) put forward the term "knowledge-based economy" in 1996, starting a new era which was characterised as "the information society" and giving new demands for nurturing talents compared with traditional industrial models [28]. Competitive students in the new era should not only master basic language tools, but also develop skills, moral values and a worldview that can adapt to an ever-changing modern society. However, China's highly unified and standardized NCEE education system could not meet the demands of the new era, as it was intensely inclined to exam scores while the cultivation of students' ability to connect knowledge acquired from formal education with practical life was neglected. Therefore, started from 1999, China initiated 'the Basic Education Curriculum Reform' to help its populace keep up with the rapid societal changes in the increasingly globalised world [47]. These initiatives were collectively named "quality education" (suzhi jiaoyu). The desired student with "high quality" (gao sushi) should be well-rounded, physically active, intelligent, moral and nationalistic [22]. In other words, students are expected to develop abilities beyond good exam performance, i.e., aesthetics, skillful in creative and cooperative learning and etc. [11]. This "quality education" reform was the most extensive and comprehensive curriculum reform since 1978, as it covers two fundamental education topics: curriculum and pedagogy, and covers all subjects of secondary level in all provinces' secondary schools in China. In 2001, 'Guidelines for Basic Education Curriculum Reform' was hammered out by the Chinese Ministry of Education, which has been regarded as the real implementation policy documents of "quality education" reform [20]. There are three main goals in the 'Guidelines for Basic Education Curriculum Reform': first, reform the content of the outdated textbook; second, reform the curriculum aim

and suit it with the times; third, reform pedagogy by implementing Student-Centered Practice (SCP) [50].

Reiss and White argue that, when designing a curriculum, the aims of the curriculum should be firstly considered. After the implementation of the "quality education" reform, two cultivation aims were brought out in the ideal "quality education" curriculum for English subject [30], [8]:

- a) The curriculum is designed to promote students' personal development through all kinds of learning activities. Personal development includes students' emotional, learning interests, and learning confidence development; positive life attitude and thinking patterns development; and interpersonal skills development.
- b) Students should learn English subject-factual knowledge, which should be context-based, task-based and related to students' life experience.

According to Reiss and White, the central aim in their proposed curriculum is personal flourishing. The first objective of China's "quality education" English curriculum used a similar expression: personal development. Reiss and White explained "self-flourishing life" as a life with worthwhile pursuits, such as meaningful activities, relationships and careers. In order to help students achieve a self-flourishing life, Reiss and White suggested that schools and teachers should allow students to gain first-hand experiences which may help them find their interests and pursue them autonomously, i.e., reading. Similarly, the meaningful activities suggestion in the first objective echoes with this proposal [30].

The second objective emphasizes the importance of subject and knowledge. Young's curriculum theory is also based on the necessity of subjects by defining what should be the knowledge that students are entitled to learn [42]. According to Young, "powerful knowledge" is every students' education entitlement. "Powerful knowledge" refers to the "better" knowledge in all fields, that is, abstract objectified reliable thoughts that students can use to explain the world and predict experience. It has two essential characteristics: First, it is specialized and should be produced, transmitted and expressed via clearly defined disciplines and subjects [41]. Similarly, China's "quality education" also values the necessity of subjects, as Young proposed. However, the second character of "powerful knowledge" differs from the knowledge characteristics in "quality education" of English subject in China. As Young proposed, "powerful knowledge" is context-independent and thus distinguishes everyday knowledge and experiences obtained outside the school place from the abstract knowledge transmitted in the classroom [41]. This discrepancy could be attributed to the special natures of English subjects in China and the weakness of "powerful knowledge" itself. As White critiqued, "powerful knowledge" is suitable for the "core subjects" that value the abstract concepts, such as math and science, while many other social sciences, humanities subjects, like history and foreign language, fall short on "powerful knowledge" requirements [35]. English is a foreign language in China, which is not a form of powerful knowledge, because it does not aim at developing students' conceptual understanding of the language that they did not know previously, but to use

different expressions to express in another language concepts which they already familiar. But Young also responded to this critique in an interview, "In humanities, powerful knowledge has the ability to stimulate students' imagination, such as English masterpieces and literature." This idea is inspirational as China's English "quality education" knowledge could perfect itself by including selected English masterpieces to cultivate students' language learning interests [43].

After observing the correlation between the two objectives of English curriculum in "quality education" with "self-flourishing" and "powerful knowledge" theory, the conclusion can be drawn: in order to achieve the cultivation objectives, English subject-knowledge is preferred to be delivered through living-context related activities. Schwartz stated that context-based activities should adopt student-centred pedagogy and inquiry-based practices, which strongly supported China's "quality education" pedagogical reform aim: SCP [32].

B. Failed Reform of SCP

SCP encourages students to be independent-minded knowledge seekers; it is suggested that dialoguing with teachers and communicating with peers in their educational environment will help students gain first-hand experience during the learning process [29]. SCP will help to achieve the cultivation goal of "quality education" by enriching students' learning experience, and cultivating a series of skills during the interactive learning process.

Guided by the goal of implementing SCP, specific pedagogical approaches for secondary English classes have been proposed by researchers and educators from universities' education departments and Normal Universities. Two approaches were particularly promoted by education expertise: inquiry-based teaching and communicative language teaching (CLT). While both of them focus on student-centred activities, CLT provides opportunities to improve students' language level in many areas, including: grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation; inquiry-based learning stimulates students' highly motivational language learning experiences [25], [48].

It is argued that in the new version of secondary English teacher's books, teachers should focus not only on language knowledge, but also on the development of students' communicative ability [49]. The recommended teaching sequence in current secondary English classes is called the 'Five Steps' (revision, presentation, controlled practice, production, consolidation), which is adapted from the PPP sequence (Presentation-Practice-Production), a teaching method promoted by the CLT approach [19], [2]. The 'Five Steps' pedagogy envisages English teachers playing a range of roles in the classroom, such as language models, instructors, and scaffolders of students' learning. However, the implementation of CLT in China has encountered some obstacles as its value sometimes conflicts with Chinese traditional education values [17].

Inquiry-based language teaching is based on a certain context, starting with questions, using situational materials, and thus enables students to explore, solve problems, and construct meanings [48]. The whole teaching process is under the

teacher's guidance and support, but the core part of learning is completed by students themselves. Inquiry-based teaching may help change the passive mode of learning in traditional lecture-based classes in China, and effectively improve students' learning ability and skills [33]. With the implementation of the new curriculum, inquiry-based teaching has gradually entered middle school classrooms and has become one of the most suggested English teaching methods. However, Mr. Yang, an experienced secondary English teacher, expressed his concern of the inquiry-based pedagogy, he complained that inquiry-based teaching is time-consuming, so that the language points been practiced in an average lesson are very limited, which makes it impossible to meet the need of the language requirement level, or scored high in NCEE's test in the given teaching time [26]. Therefore, the two popular SCP pedagogical approaches: inquiry-based teaching and CLT, all failed to achieve the objectives proposed by the curriculum reform. Chinese scholars have also noted poor implementation levels of SCP strategies in China's schools and classrooms [14], [27]. To date, the research claimed that SCP-related policy efforts have failed to yield desired outcomes. Teacher practices related to SCP appear to be symbolic rather than actual, and little or no adaptation of SCP principles has occurred at the classroom level [40].

C. Challenges Faced by the Reform

The main reason for this failure is believed to be the rigid and unchanged NCEE [27]. The education system has shaped the school system and further influenced teachers' attitudes and teaching styles.

1. Rigid NCEE System

The rigid outcome-oriented education system, NCEE, leaves limited space for English teachers to apply new pedagogical approaches. Bolman and Deal stated that behaviour is shaped by goals, and rational behaviour will more likely to increase when the degree of goal consistency increases [3]. In other words, the difficulties of behaviour changing might occur when "goal inconsistency" comes up. In this case, the goal of increasing students score competency in NCEE conflicts with the goal of cultivating all-rounded "quality" students by applying SCP. When the core of China's education system, the NCEE, remains unchanged, the goal inconsistency will remain unchanged. As such, though teachers might test out some new SCP approaches to meet the need of "quality education", actions may appear symbolic and inauthentic rather than actual, as teacher's main teaching aim still remain unchanged, which is catering for NCEE— improve students test scores [23], [5], [40].

Besides the inconsistency of goals, a series of interrelated factors in the NCEE-based education system also hinders the effectiveness of the implementation of SCP, such as students' reluctant, unbalanced score structure in NCEE, limited class time, large classes, and most importantly, insufficient support from schools and local education bureaus due to the backlash of the pervasive score-based teacher and school evaluation system.

First of all, students are not willing to participate in inquiry-based teaching or CLT, because these language learning activities did not effectively prepare them for NCEE. Quoted from an English secondary teacher:

“Students and their parents regard SCP as arduous but fruitless methods, they are very practical, they just want a high score in a short time, and will not read out-of-class English literature or do group activities.” [27]

China has a large student population and rather limited educational resources. There were around 11 million Chinese students who attended 2021's NCEE, which implies that most secondary schools have to maintain their relatively large class scales (60-70 students per class), making it highly challenging to introduce interactive teaching activities in classrooms [40]. Besides, “quality education” also requires a balanced development of speaking, listening, reading and writing in English learning, but the proportion of listening and speaking scores only occupied a very limited proportion in the NCEE's English test (only 10% of the full marks). It seems impossible to apply SCP pedagogical approaches, which mainly focus on the cultivation of students' language communication ability, given the unbalanced score allocation structure in the NCEE's English test and the high demand of scores from students [46]. Moreover, one obstacle for secondary school English teachers to reform their pedagogical approach at the class level is the conflict between the high demand of "quality education" of the curriculum and the rather restricted time given to English teachers. For example, the designed English class number for one-term in grade one is 90 (each class lasts 40-minute), teachers have to finish 10 teaching units, each unit needs no less than 8 classes to finish six learning steps: warming up; reading; using language; grammar; listening; speaking and writing. It is rather difficult to finish all the teaching content in the given teaching time, not to mention applying the very “time-consuming” pedagogical approaches of SCP.

Caught in the middle of limited teaching time, exceedingly large amount of teaching contents, teachers' teaching behaviour is also under the strict control of education bureaus, which makes it even harder to introduce new ways of instruction. It has been reported that the education bureau holds too tight a control over the day-to-day practice of teaching, forcing teachers to spare a substantial amount of energy to cope with the requirements and inspections imposed by the overpowered administrative forces [49].

Scarce support provided by schools is another reason for the shoddy implementation of SCP. Some Chinese researches revealed that there is a negative correlation between the frequency of apply SCP and secondary students' academic performance in China's current education environment [48]. Similar findings were also presented at the global level: “The most problematic finding is that PISA-scores correlate negatively with nearly all aspects of inquiry-based (one of the SCP pedagogy) teaching.” [31] Therefore, Chinese schools can hardly give sufficient support to teachers to implement SCP since there might be severe consequences for both teachers and schools if students' NCEE outcomes are not endurable. Affected by the exam-oriented education system, secondary

schools are evaluated mainly based on students' performance in NCEE [21]. The result of the school evaluation is very influential, which might influence the funding allocated for public secondary schools by local education bureaus; schools' reputations and rankings; the assessment of high-level school administrators and etc. [40]. Therefore, the school boards attach greater importance to students' NCEE performance rather than underscore students' all-rounded development as suggested by the “quality education”. It further influenced the ways in which teachers are evaluated by schools. In order to improve university admission rate and teachers' work efficiency, secondary school boards often link teachers' payment and future promotion opportunities to students' university admission rate in classes they are responsible for [36]. Under this evaluation, funding allocation and interrelated promotion system, even if some teachers try to apply new teaching methods promoted by SCP, they can hardly succeed due to the pressure of schools and sometimes their own interests.

2. Low Pedagogical Content Knowledge Literacy

In addition to the NCEE system related factors that prevent practitioners from implementing SCP, the lack of pedagogical training received by teachers may also lead to their incapability of implementing SCP. China's normal universities are moving their educational focus away from cultivating teachers. Under the fierce competition among universities for better funding and brighter students, normal universities in China tend to cancel majors that focus on pedagogy and instead installs more generally applicable majors, such as Business English major; English for science and technology major and etc. [7].

In terms of English education, the prevalent belief that pedagogical education is irrelevant to English teaching as long as the teachers-to-be have strong English skills also contributes to the downplay of the pedagogical element in teacher training [24]. For example, the credit weight on English courses can be twice that on pedagogy courses in English majors in normal universities, making the major which should have been designed to cultivate educators only slightly more relevant to pedagogy compared with English Literature majors. However, teachers' pedagogy competence is of greater importance in second language teaching compared with teachers' grammatical competence [29]. The marginalization of pedagogy education in normal universities produces relatively incompetent graduates, most of whom will later become teachers. Additionally, a substantial amount of teachers did not graduate from normal universities or education majors, further lowering the average capability of implementing SCP among current teachers [51].

Besides the insufficient teacher training, teachers' own conservative attitude and low self-efficacy is another influential factor that hinders the implementation of SCP. First, the implementation of the new teaching method might trigger negative feelings of distrust in their expertise and self-efficacy on classroom instruction and the brought out justification for adopting an ‘ideological’ approach, particularly for English teachers who strongly and firmly believe in their traditional pedagogical approach (teacher- dominate, grammar-focused

and exam-oriented) [5]. Also, teachers with a low sense of instructional efficacy are more likely to use strict classroom regulation and negative sanctions to control classroom behaviours, which is on the opposite side of the new SCP's values [39].

III. NCEE REFORM AND NEW OPPORTUNITIES

Examination always functions as the actual mechanism to monitor teaching and learning practices [37]. As is discussed above, the deep-rooted NCEE education system hinders the achievement of the new pedagogical goal proposed by the "quality education" reform. Therefore, in order to successfully meet the new needs of "quality education", it is vital to reform the long-established NCEE's assessment contents and score structure, while widening the ways in which universities recruit students.

In 2018, a pilot reform of NCEE and university enrollment was initiated by the Chinese Ministry of Education in some provinces and municipalities in China. For example, there are more elements been taken into accounts by some universities in Beijing when they select students, such as NCEE scores; interview scores; student's past academic achievements; students' off-campus experience and etc. [12].

There are some pivotal principles proposed in 2020's English subject reform, which includes:

- a) Reduce the burden on students. The English test was changed from once a year to twice a year, while the higher score will be counted in the final scores of NCEE.
- b) Emphasize the language communication. The new NCEE English test increases the weight of listening and speaking scores. Taking Guangdong Province as an example, the score of listening and speaking part increased from 20 to 25 points from 2018 to 2019 (from 15% to 17% in full marks).
- c) Emphasis on practical life skills. The question styles of NCEE's English subject have also changed from the mostly language knowledge-based style to a more context-based style. For example, in Guangdong Province's 2018 NCEE English test, there was a writing task designed for students to set up a situation to teach their foreign friends to learn Chinese by learning a Tang poem and the history of the Tang dynasty, and asked students to write an email to illustrate their teaching plan.

The changes in the mode of NCEE English test brought new hopes to a deeper reform of SCP. First, the more balanced score structure on four language skills in NCEE requires English teachers to adjust their pedagogy from "Silent English" to "Communicative English", which greatly promoted the implementation of CLT in English classes; Second, the new context-based question styles in NCEE encouraging English teachers to modify their teaching content to more closely related to students' daily life experience. Therefore, a series of context-based learning activities would be designed to help students practice, such as role play; story telling and etc. The activity-based teaching practice is highly promoted by the inquiry-based pedagogy, as SCP suggested.

IV. CONCLUSION

Reform is a complicated, uncertain and unpredictable process, and that policymakers' intentions alone could not lead to change because of the intertwined reform factors [6]. Based on the NCEE reform challenges analyzed in this paper, it would be conducive for further policy analysis to focus on the decentralization policies of Chinese educational system, and to look into policies on teachers' evaluation system, which includes teachers' performance culture, school level accountability, and teachers' autonomy.

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