

# Reform of College English Curriculum Setup for Non-English Majors: A Case Study of an Ordinary University in China\*

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English learning and teaching has been a hot research topic in China since the coming of the 21st century. By way of questionnaire surveys and interviews, the research group takes one ordinary Chinese university as a case to study the reform of College English curriculum setup. The paper focuses on study of extended courses, which are the most typical reflections of the reform in this university. In the first stage, 4,330 students are surveyed or interviewed in the pre-research process and another 1,270 participants from Grades 2013 and 2014 in the second stage finish the questionnaire about the reform. The paper analyses the results of 1,215 valid questionnaires. The analyses and discussions in the research include four aspects, which are participants' overall attitudes towards the reform of College English curriculum setup, current situation of course teaching and assessment, degree of satisfaction with the extended courses and participants' feedbacks and suggestions. In the end of the study the existing problems in the reform are listed and suggestions are given to further reform the College English curriculum.

*Keywords:* college English curriculum, extended courses, Non-English majors, questionnaire survey

## Introduction

“College English refers to a type of English course offered to non-English majors at tertiary level in mainland of China” (Chen, 2014, pp. 73-76). It is a compulsory course for all non-English majors in Chinese HEIs (regular higher education institutions). According to Educational Statistics, more than 16 million Chinese undergraduates (MOE, 2016a) are receiving English education in 1,237 offering-degree-programs regular HEIs (MOE, 2016b). In recent two decades, frequent international communications welcome college graduates with good competence in English. However, traditional College English courses no longer meet their needs. With the increasing demand of the huge number of young learners, in 2004 MOE (Ministry of Education of People's Republic of China) issued “Announcement on the publication and distributing of the College English Curriculum Requirements (for trial implementation)”, which clarifies new aims of College English in the new era. Since then, Chinese College English course gradually adjusts from a traditionally integrated course to a system of multiple courses focusing on different aspects. Some researches on College English curriculum setup are being carried out, but most of them target only 113 first-class universities in China. And many of them focus on one specific aspect like teaching modes, modern electronic learning methods or different purposes like

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ESP (English for specific purposes) and EGP (English for general purposes). For the benefit of undergraduates in other 1,124 ordinary regular HEIs, College English course should be studied and developed, hence the reform of College English curriculum setup is extremely valuable.

This paper presents the results of a survey done in an ordinary university about the reform of College English curriculum. It is a case study, which goes through two stages and three years, and the data come from a large number of participants. Thus, the evidence is sufficient for the further improvement of the College English curriculum setup in future.

### **Literatures Reviewing**

Many Chinese scholars have done a lot of researches on the College English reform. From 2006 to 2011, about 100 colleges and universities, most of which are top class ones, have been selected as the exemplary sites for reforming College English curriculum setup; some of them have attempted to do so by developing English extended courses (or called elective courses). Wang et al (2011) find in their study on 530 colleges and universities that 80% of ordinary universities have less than four extended (elective courses) or even none. Wu et al (2017) conduct a research on Mobile Learning Model of College. Peng (2017) analyzes scholastic grammar in College English teaching. Xu (2017) summarizes the 30 years' evolution of the college English curriculum in China. Peng (2015) focuses on Classroom discourse in College English teaching of China. Gu (2013) probes into the College English language teaching and learning in China. And Weng (2010) also gives a try to study the reform of College English teaching in China.

In the curriculum setup exploration, CBI (content-based instruction) serves as its theoretical foundation, which combines language skills with content and can make students learn new content effectively while they use language as medium and instrument. According to Duenas (2004), CBI proposals meet four characteristics: (a) subject matter core; (b) use of authentic texts; (c) learning of new information; (d) appropriate to the specific needs of students. Thus, to meet the students' needs is a must for curriculum setup. As for the relevant CBI research, Chen (2014) discusses the learners' needs in China. Short (2017) introduces how to integrate language learning and content to Americans. Besides, Hudson (2009) suggests Malaysian teachers learning to teach Science using English as the medium of instruction.

### **Research Design**

In order to explore the reform of College English curriculum setup, the mentioned ordinary university (T-university is used below) where the research is carried out introduces the extended courses (elective or follow-up courses) into the ordinary College English courses for the non-English majors. Students are given access to the website to select the course they prefer to learn in their fourth semester. The provided ten extended courses meet the undergraduates' certain needs in terms of their personal interest or development. The participants in the research are sophomores of different departments or schools from different grades.

Preparations for the development of College English extended courses in T-university began in 2013. After gaining beneficial experiences from other Chinese exemplary universities, the research team conducted a questionnaire in T-university before the extended courses were put into effect. The participants are 4,300 students of Grade 2012 from different majors and 30 students are elicited randomly to have interviews face to face. The questionnaires in the first stage of the research were issued in 2013, 85% of which are valid. Two aspects of questions are included: (a) students' majors and attitudes towards College English curriculum reform;

(b) students' needs and learning desires. 24 extended courses were displayed in the questionnaire for their voting. The results show that 78% students are for extended College English courses, 11% against and 11% not voting either way. And the data also show what courses are popular with them and what not. Based on the results and experiences in the first stage, in 2015 spring, the research team put ten compulsory extended courses into practice for Grade 2013, followed by sophomores of Grade 2014 in T-university who had their extended courses in 2016 spring. Ten offered courses are *College English Band 6*, *An Intermediate Course of Spoken English*, *Movie English: Watching, Listening & Speaking*, *Business English*, *Tourism English*, *IT English*, *Selective Readings of American and British Newspapers*, *Reading and Translating English for Science and Technology*, *British and American cultures* and *Chinese Culture*.

In the second stage of the research, the questionnaire is also the major instrument for another two surveys, with interviews being the minor. The surveys about the opinions on reform were carried out in two consecutive years with help of 1,270 non-English majors of Grade 2013 and Grade 2014 in T-university. 420 participants in the first survey were randomly chosen from ten different extended courses, with the second survey 850 participants of Grade 2014 from 20 classes. The research covers all the ten extended courses and tries to involve as many teachers as possible. Both of the two surveys include 15 questions (Q is the shortened form of *question* in the tables), in which the first 12 are *close-ended questions* and the last three *open-ended*. Four options are set for Questions 1 and 2, three options given to the rest. To ensure validity, the questionnaire surveys were done at the last session of every extended course. In order to get real and valid data, all questionnaires were filled out anonymously. In the first questionnaire survey, 420 questionnaires were distributed to participants with the result of 401 questionnaires being valid. In the second, 850 copies were handed out with the result of 814 copies being completed and valid.

### Data Analysis

The final results of the two surveys are discussed respectively from four aspects: (a) attitudes towards reform; (b) current class situation and course assessment method; (c) satisfaction degree; (d) feedbacks and suggestions.

#### Students' Overall Attitudes toward Reform of College English Curriculum Setup

Results of the answers to Question 1, which is about *students' attitudes towards the reform*, are presented in Table 1. It shows that the ten extended courses offered for Grade 2013 are welcome or very welcome to 62.37% participants with only 5.91% opposing. For Grade 2014, 61.49% welcome the reform and 4.53% oppose. It is clear that to develop extended courses in the fourth semester is in conformity with most of the participants' wishes.

Table 1

#### *Attitudes towards Reform of College English Curriculum*

	very welcome	welcome	neither welcome nor	not welcome
Grade 2013	27.96%	34.41%	31.72%	5.91%
Grade 2014	19.34%	42.15%	33.98%	4.53%

#### Current Situation of Class Teaching and Course Assessment Methods

Questions 5 and 11 are about current teaching situation and assessment methods, which are shown in Table 2. As for Question 5: "What paper material did you use in class?", the answers from Grade 2013

indicate 58.06% students have textbooks in class. 1.62% students do not have any paper materials. For Grade 2014 this situation has been improved—more students use textbooks, increasing by 22%. Question 11 is about *assessment methods of extended courses*. In the results of Grade 2013, more than a half of students, 53.76%, are examined through test papers, and 16.13% students are required to hand in essays for the final examination. 30.11% students are examined in other forms. And for Grade 2014, almost half of the participants are examined by paper, nearly one-third tested through essay writing and only 22.32% assessed in other ways.

Table 2

*Current Situation of Class Teaching and Course Assessment Methods*

		Option A	Option B	Option C
Q 5	Grade 2013	58.06%	40.32%	1.62%
	Grade 2014	80.82%	15.86%	3.32%
Q 11	Grade 2013	53.76%	16.13%	30.11%
	Grade 2014	48.86%	28.82%	22.32%

### Degree of Satisfaction with the Extended Courses

Questions 2, 3, 6, 7, 8 and 9 demonstrate *students' degree of satisfaction with extended courses*. Answers to Question 2 are shown in Table 3, the others in Table 4. Table 3 shows over half of the participants in both grades are very satisfied or satisfied with *the overall arrangement of the courses*. One-third students don't take a stand and 4.84% express dissatisfaction. It indicates that the reform of extended courses satisfies the majority of students, but still needs improving.

Table 3

*Students' Degree of Satisfaction with Extended Courses Development*

	very satisfied	satisfied	neither satisfied nor	unsatisfied
Grade 2013	16.13%	44.62%	34.41%	4.84%
Grade 2014	15.56%	48.79%	30.82%	4.83%

Question 3 is about *students' degree of satisfaction with the offered time blocks of courses*. Less than half of students, 44.09%, consider time blocks to be reasonable and the percentage of those who think the time blocks are unreasonable reaches 12.36. And one year later, participants' satisfaction degree rises obviously to 53.47%. That is an evidence of the improvement of the course development. As for Question 6, almost 88% students in both grades think extended courses are *useful*. It can be seen that extended courses are beneficial to most students. For Question 7, 41.4% participants in the first questionnaire view that extended courses are more *difficult* to learn while in the next survey this percentage reduces by 10%. About 30% students in both grades think that the courses are easier to pass. 26.88% in Grade 2013 maintain that extended courses are of same difficulty as general College English courses in the former three semesters and in the latter survey more students agree so. It can be found that the extended courses are of certain difficulty.

Table 4

*Students' Satisfaction Degree with Extended Courses*

		Option A	Option B	Option C
Q3	Grade 2013	44.09%	43.55%	12.36%
	Grade 2014	53.47%	38.37%	8.16%
Q6	Grade 2013	19.35%	68.28%	12.37%
	Grade 2014	26.28%	61.18%	12.54%
Q7	Grade 2013	41.40%	31.72%	26.88%
	Grade 2014	30.97%	30.51%	38.52%
Q8	Grade 2013	51.61%	8.60%	39.78%
	Grade 2014	61.18%	8.76%	30.06%
Q9	Grade 2013	46.24%	8.06%	45.70%
	Grade 2014	52.27%	12.39%	35.34%

Question 8 discusses about *total course hours*. Half of participants in the first questionnaire survey hold that total hours are appropriate and 10% more in Grade 2014 think so, while about 8.6% students from both grades think the arranged teaching hours are too limited. However, 39.78% students in Grade 2013 and 30% in Grade 2014 consider them too long. As a whole, 32 teaching hours for each course is suitable for the majority of students. Students' degree of satisfaction with *the number of extended courses* is covered in Question 9. 45.7% students in Grade 2013 think it is too limited, and one year later the percentage decreases by 10%. While 52.27% participants in Grade 2014 consider that ten is enough, 6% more than Grade 2013. It indicates that ten extended courses are to some extent sufficient for the students.

**Feedbacks and Suggestions**

Table 5 shows the results of the answers to Questions 4 and 12 regarding *the participants' feedbacks and suggestions*. Question 4 is about *extended courses teaching*. In the two grades, about 40% participants support that one course should be taught by only one teacher from beginning to the end. Another 40% or so insist that it is a better choice to have different teachers for different chapters. The rest think that neither does affect them. As for Question 12 about *the final examination forms*, 44.09% participants in the first survey and almost half in the second prefer essay writing as the form of final examination. 18.82% in Grade 2013 like to adopt testing papers and 37.09% are interested in other forms. It reflects that the majority of students are tired of ordinary examination form through test paper. Compared with Grade 2013, more participants in Grade 2014 prefer both testing papers and essay writing and fewer choose other forms.

Table 5

*Students' Feedbacks and Suggestions*

		Option A	Option B	Option C
Q4	Grade 2013	39.78%	45.01%	15.21%
	Grade 2014	41.69%	39.27%	19.04%
Q12	Grade 2013	18.82%	44.09%	37.09%
	Grade 2014	30.66%	49.40%	19.94%

In addition, for *open-ended Questions* 13 and 14 participants are expected to write down their suggestions. Among the answers to Question 13 with respect to *the exam forms*, many participants propose new ways of course assessment. Some even advise the respective percentage in the combination of assessing ways. They mention forms like regular assignments, presentation in class, team work, and quizzes in class. It shows that

students expect more assessment methods. Question 14 is designed for *suggestions on different aspects of the reform*. Major suggestions include enriching class activities with video watching, CET-6 (College English Test Band-6) guidance, oral English improvement, increasing the number of extended courses, detailed introduction of extended courses before courses selecting, and adjustment of course timing and course hours etc.. At last, in the answers to Question 15, many participants show their *wishes for the improvement of teaching content*, such as enhancing knowledge practicability, more interactions between teachers and students and speaking only English in class. Some participants complain about the website, server and systems of selecting courses. Some also suggest increasing of online learning periods. Besides, many participants express their satisfaction on the reform of College English curriculum in T-university.

### Discussion

The data analyses above show there are still a lot to improve in the implementation of College English curriculum setup reform in T-university. First, the number of developed extended courses is limited, which can't meet the needs of students in T-university. Next, there exist several problems in the process of course selecting. Many participants complain that they cannot choose the course they are really interested in because the student number for every course is limited, and that they can't find the course introduction before they make a choice. In addition, although there are 10 offered extended courses in total, only five to seven courses are provided for every specific school or department. Apart from those above, uninteresting teaching content is another problem in some courses, which lack fun. To integrate language learning with class content could have been an effective way. Yet, if the class content cannot attract students' attention, language learning will surely be less effective. According to the results of surveys and interviews the problem is closely related to teaching modes and the textbooks. What's more, paper-testing in the final examination is almost the only assessment form. The feedbacks tell most students learn just for examination, so it is impossible for them to be benefited from the course. The last problem is the inefficiency of website and server. The relevant equipment and system need updating. As extended courses development is at the primary stage in T-university, related management system and departments are not desirable.

### Conclusion

The reform of College English curriculum in T-university, starting in 2013, has been and is being put into practice since 2015. The study finds the on-going reform is not perfect, and still does have various limitations. But, the researchers hold the study can offer a good model for other colleges and universities with similar situations.

Here are some recommendations about future work for College English curriculum setup, which will provide help for both the future T-university and whoever else needs them. Firstly, both the related teaching and research sections should first attach emphasis on students' thoughts and needs, and then work out a plan about the reasonable number of the extended courses. Secondly, a better course setup system should be built in order to enable students with different English level to pick College English extended courses freely. Meanwhile, cooperation among different departments or schools needs improving. What's more, related departments should put out the information of extended course in advance for the selecting students. Thirdly, teachers' training is urgent in order to improve the teaching effect and perfect the reform of College English curriculum. And training courses should be arranged regularly for teachers. Moreover, reform of teaching

modes and selection of textbooks are of importance. And also, to develop a reasonable and comprehensive course assessment system is an effective way to avoid exam-oriented tendency and unfairness. Other forms of assessment like essay writing, presentation in class, team work, and quizzes are better to be adopted. Next, related departments need to optimize equipment to ensure the high efficiency of the website and server in order that students are able to choose the course they are really interested in. Last, the research is expected to go further in terms of curriculum development, reasonable course system setup, textbook compiling and reform of teaching modes.

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