College English is more than a course in Chinese higher education: Orientation towards L2 user concept and liberal education
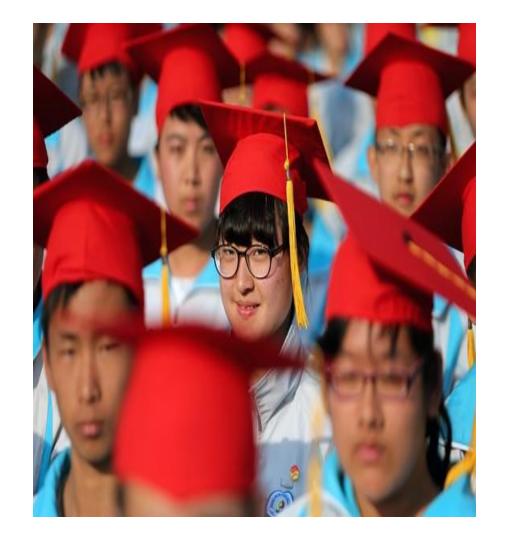
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Part One: New Context for EFL Education

The Claim

China's current competitiveness and future prosperity that are underlying China Dream depend critically on our capacity to produce excellently-trained degree holders of high English proficiency level prepared to address the challenges and opportunities in the increasing **popularization** of higher education and China's resolute defense of **globalization**

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The National Requirements

■The nature and objectives of College English
◆Nature：College English, an integral part of higher learning, is a required basic course for undergraduate students. Under the guidance of theories of foreign language teaching, College English has as its main components knowledge and practical skills of the English language, learning strategies and intercultural communication. It is a systematic whole, incorporating different teaching models and approaches.

◆**Objectives: The objective of College English is to develop students' ability to use English in a well-rounded way**, especially in listening and speaking, so that in their future studies and careers as well as social interactions they will be able to **communicate effectively**, and at the same time enhance their ability to study independently and improve their general cultural awareness so as to meet the needs of China's social development and international exchanges.

(College English Curriculum Requirements, 2017)

A British skeptic of the late 19th Century wanted these three words carved above the church door

Important, if true

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If true, who supports the claim?

- Universities believe it is so.
- Economists say it is so.
- Chinese students behave as if it is so.
- The market rewards suggest it is so.
- Overseas competitors expect it to be so.

BUT:

- **The Chinese family say they hope so.**
  - ◆ Language corruption in vogue inflicts damage on their investments, and on their dreams, too.
  - ◆ Their dreams have been obsessed with the wish of their children's future success, but the outcome is discouraging.

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■And, EFL education in both Chinese school education and university education seems **NOT** to be rewarding the family, and the market, either.

◆The employers complain about the efficacy of EFL teaching in terms of students' language use and their actual practices.

◆The universities complain about the employers' high expectations for the immediate competency of their product/graduates

Fulfilling the promise of the claim possibly means:

- **Understanding** link between the goal of EFL education and the students' future career

- **Knowing** trends & new requirements for EFL education in the upcoming popularization of higher education in China, and

- **Pinpointing** key levers to address weaknesses in the current system of EFL education in China (e.g. Need to develop elite EFL education in the process of popularization of higher education?)

What preparation is required for new jobs?

- **Expertise in English speaking, apart from methods, techniques, knowledge of a particular field**
- **Capacity to integrate concepts across disciplines**
- **Facility with "transferable skills" acquired in EFL learning:** Aptitude and knowledge acquired through personal experience and actual practice
- **Deep understanding of ethical standards and professional practices**
- **On-/off-line learning and life-long learning ability**
- **Intercultural and international communicative competence**

However:

- Did EFL education fulfill the promise in the past 40 years?
- Are we able to fulfill the promise in future if armed with the still huger EFL educational resources?
- Should we relocate the role of the course of College English in the approaching popularization of higher education?

Students' Aspirations DOMatter

■**High school students' aspirations to higher EFL education have changed significantly:**

- ■No more "first choice" in their applications for university education: The choice to major in English.

- ■The traditional boundaries between English majors and non-English majors have been obscured

- ■Non-English majors perform better than English majors in many aspects: Their ability to communicate, academically, linguistically and culturally

Whose fault?

■In the general sense, it is no one's fault!

■It is likely ours. To some degree, it IS ours!

■We fail to respond to the call for a change in the rapid development.

Part Two: The Call for a Change

Levers to address vulnerabilities in the current system of EFL education

■Attritional struggle: The current state of attrition in ELT courses wastes HR and the students' investment of time (Minority report)

■Instrumentally motived: Most students fail to go beyond their functional goals of passing an exam (Phenomena).

■EFL teachers' reward: Respect, dignity, esteem need (Some titles DO say what you do within the Chinese system, but how difficult to get promoted for EFL teachers in comparison with other teachers!)

Levers to address vulnerabilities in the current system of EFL education

- **Goals of ELT: Confusing concepts, doctrines and beliefs**
  - **The goal of ELT:** Reproducing native-speakers traditionally or promoting L2 users' multi-competence?
  - **The categorical feature of the ELT course:** Language course or general educational course in the new context of the popularization of higher education in China?
  - **Teaching excellence:** Dominant research-led excellence?
  - **University's vison** of the student as consumer or producer?

Some points of view reviewed

- **Vivian Cook (1983, 2002, 2007): External goals and internal goals**
  - External goals relate to the students' use of language outside the classroom
  - Internal goals relate to the students' mental development as individuals

■**According to Cook (2002), goals of language teaching:**

■**self-development:** Become a "better" person
■**a method of training new cognitive processes:** Ss acquire methods of learning or new perspectives.
■**a way-in to the mother-tongue:** Ss' awareness of their L1 enhanced by learning L2.
■**an entrée to another culture:** Ss appreciate the music and art of other cultures.
■**a form of religious observance:** L2 is part of their religion.
■**a means of communicating with those who speak another language:** Need to cope with people from other parts of the world, whether for business or pleasure.
■**the promotion of intercultural understanding and peace:** For some the highest goals of language teaching are to foster negotiation rather than war or changes in the society outside the classroom.

■**The platitude** that has **obsessed EFL teaching for the last 40 years has been** that the goal of **language teaching is** *communication.*

■If the goal is external communication with other people who do not speak your L1, this is beside the point for many EFL students

■Few students in China can realistically expect to speak with people in English outside the classroom.

- Equating language with communication misses its other functions.
- Communication is only one role of language in human life (as proclaimed by Malinowski's phatic communion or Halliday's interpersonal function or Canale's pragmatic competence).
- Enabling students to use L2 does not just give them a tool for talking to people through a different language but changes their lives and minds in all sorts of ways (Cook, 2002).

Distinction between N- and C-bound perspectives
(Nicos C. Sifakis, 2004)

■ **N-bound perspective:** which emphasises matters of regularity, codification and standardness：

- ■ Traditional N-bound approaches generally correlate the languages around the world with their native speakers (NSs). It is common for L2 learners to adapt to all aspects of the native speakers' uses of these languages.
- ■ In most cases, the standardisation principles adhered to by language planners typically exclude variability (as it is evidenced, for example, in the different dialects and accents of different NSs) and nominate a central variety as the standard norm of the language.

Similarly

- **Stern (1983, 1992):** Students are successful according to how close they get to the NSs;

- "The NSs' 'competence' or 'proficiency' or 'knowledge of the language' is a necessary point of reference for the second language proficiency concept used in language teaching".

Misconceptions

■ **What is successful L2 learners' target: NSs?**

■ **If native-like targeted, but who are the native speakers, anyway?**

◆ **Hidden idea:** The point of reference is deeply rooted in native speaker norms both linguistically and culturally. If such an idea were not changed, we would be able to make a long list of the problems with the current EFL education but without any solution and it is almost impossible to push forward ELT Reforms of any kind in China(YU, 2016)

C-bound perspective

■**C-bound perspective:** which prioritises the process of cross-cultural comprehensibility between learners as a communicative goal in itself rather than on notions of accuracy and standards.

■**Three operative "C" words:** Communication, comprehensibility, culture.

Status of English language(EIL) in the globalised, post-modern era

- **Maurais & Morris(2003):**
  - **Relate it to native and non-native speakers' and teachers' linguistic, national and cultural identities;**
  - **Link it with the notions of linguistic and cultural diversity and their impact on the linguistic human rights movement;**
- **Widdowson (1994): Question its ownership by native and non-native speakers alike.**
- **Crystal(2003): What singles English out as a natural language is the fact that it is essentially the first choice in the communication between different non-native speakers**

Misconceptions

■ Language functions ≠ communicative functions ≠ communicative effectiveness/success.

■ What is communicative effectiveness/success, then?

  ■ Broadly, communicative effectiveness/success is message success or cultural effectiveness at any level in the context of any kind

The goal of ELT: The choice of two concepts

"The native speaker concept"

- **The native speaker taken as the target of language teaching?**
  - The external goal implicit in much language teaching has been to make the students approximate to native speakers. "After all, the ultimate goal – perhaps unattainable for some – is, nonetheless, to 'sound like a native speaker' in all aspects of the language" (González-Nueno, 1997: 261).

■In China, it is virtually impossible and impractical to take native speaker as the target of language teaching, except for professionals.

■Slogan: All the employed teachers are native speakers of English? Learn French from the French, Japanese from the Japanese?

■BUT: It could be practical if the NSs were all a China hand.

Some arguments:

- Unlike DNA, nobody has copyrighted a natural language!
- The denial of the right of L2 users to sound as if they come from a particular place speaks of power; but native speaker are not treated in the same way
- It is acceptable for someone speaking English to sound as if they come from London, Chicago, Sydney or Auckland but not from Paris, Beijing or Santiago.
- "The native speaker concept" has contributed to denying the rights of human beings to show their membership of particular groups.
  - Holliday(2005, 2006, 2009): Cultural chauvinism underlying native-speakerism unaware or ignored
  - Phillipson(1992): Sustaining the native speaker as an expert may link to "linguistic imperialism".

■**The native speaker concept** has little meaning as an L2 goal. In the literal sense it is impossible for an L2 user to become a native speaker, since by definition you cannot be a native speaker of anything other than your first language.

■Phrasing the goal in terms of the native speaker means no one can possibly achieve it.

■In a wider sense accepting the native speaker goal does not specify which native speaker in what roles: NSs of English come from all parts of the globe, classes of society, genders and ages.

"The L2 user concept"

- **The L2 user concept :** An overall alternative to the native speaker goal is which refers to people who know and use a second language at any level.

- **L2 user** is preferred to bilingual because of the numerous definitions for bilingualism, many of which refer to the native speaker: bilingualism, native-like control of two languages (Bloomfield, 1933) – the bilingual is the sum of two monolinguals rather than something *sui generis*.

■Both SLA research and language teaching have primarily taken the monolingual native speaker as their starting point. Both language teachers and students have seen their goal as getting close to native speakers.

■To people who treat L2 users as deviating from native speaker norms, the important questions are the cognitive problems of bilingualism, not the cognitive deficits of monolingualism, and why L2 students can't speak like natives, rather than why monolinguals can't speak two languages.

- **The L2 user concept** arose in the context of the multi-competence approach to SLA: "the knowledge of two or more languages in the same mind" **(Cook, 1992).**
- **The continual presence of L1 has to be recognized in the learner's mind alongside L2;** there is little point in studying L2 as an isolated interlanguage system since its *raison d'être* is that it is added to a first language.
- **The L2 user concept** is rooted in difference rather than deficit (Labov 1969).

■**L2 user** is conceptually different from **L2 learner** even when it refers to the same person:

  ■**L2 users** are exploiting whatever linguistic resources they have for a real-life purpose.

  ■**L2 learners** are acquiring a system for later use.

■**So what is the purpose of L2 teaching?**

  ■L2 teaching is more than a language course. There are always some qualities in people who use L2 that society or the individual student values.

  ■Language teaching serves to foster these qualities in students.

■Code-switching is a highly skilled L2 use.

■Grosjean (1989) distinguishes two modes of language in L2 users:

   ■a monolingual mode in which one language is used at a time.

   ■a bilingual mode in which both are used simultaneously.

■Whether or not code-switching should be encouraged in the classroom is a separate matter for methodologists to decide; traditionally the teacher was supposed to frown upon students using their L1 in group and pair-work, though Jacobson (1990) has described a teaching method based on systematic code-switching.

■Clearly, most effective L2 users are capable of this feat of using two languages at once.

■Ina certain sense, L1 use is part of L2 user conceptual framework.

Part Three:
What does the future hold for Tertiary EFL education and what can we do about it?

A New Round of Tertiary ELT Reforms

- Be the change you wish to see in the world.
- Don't follow the crowd, let the crowd follow you.
- Necessary reforms in new era: Adventure may hurt you, but monotony will kill you.

- **The platitudinous questions per teaching objectives and approaches**
  - **What should we teach?**
  - **How should we teach?**

Key levers: Address weakness in the current system of EFL education (Revisited)

- ■ **The goal of ELT:** Reproducing native-speakers traditionally or promoting L2 users' multi-competence in the post-modern era**?**
- ■**The categorical feature of the ELT course:** A simple language course or part of general or liberal educational in the new context of the imminent popularization of higher education in China**?**
- ■**Teaching excellence:** Dominant research-led teaching excellence in terms of teacher development within the system of Chinese higher education**?**

The cardinal natures of the course

- **The fundamental problems are NOT merely those symptomatic :**
  - of the distinction between N- and C-bound perspectives on L2 learning objectives
  - of the debates on the choice of native speaker concept or L2 user concept
  - of the debates on the choice of EGP or ESP based on *College English Curriculum Requirements* issued in 2017

The cardinal natures of the course

- **Rather, the fundamental problems are related :**
  - To the notion that the ELT in the Chinese new higher educational discourse is more than a language course.
  - To the L2 learning outcome: L2 learning can only lead to different degrees of failure, not degrees of success (Kasper & Kellerman, 1997).
  - To the notion of "student-centeredness", intended to enrich the student experience by emphasising active engagement, self-direction, critical thinking and reflexivity
  - To the introducing of outcome-based education into the ELT curriculum

- **Other important problems are those related:**

  - To the advancement of ELT introduced into undergraduate curriculum of general education with new value and new standard (exploring questions that are most relevant to students)
  - To the choice of research-led teaching/learning or teaching-led research in the framework of teaching excellence
  - To the environments which may promote all the students to grow and develop (rather than a few), academically and professionally
  - …

Current prevailing ELT notions:

■ **Switch from**

◆ **input-based to output-driven instruction**

◆ **skill-based teaching to content-based instruction**

◆ **form-focused to meaning-focused instruction**

◆ **linguistic accuracy targeted to communicative success targeted**

◆ **teacher-centred to learner-centered approach**

◆ **comprehension-based to production-oriented to translation-oriented approach**

■**If oriented by L2 user concept, what changes can we make about EFL education in China?**

■ **The goal of becoming an L2 user appears more valid and more achievable for most L2 students, emphasising both external and internal goals of language teaching.**

  ■ developing whatever linguistic resources on-/off-line they have for a real-life purpose

  ■ foster the qualities, virtues and values in students through L2 education.

One approach: The attempted use of translation in EFL classes as L2 learning practice (Eda Calis, 2012)

- The use of L1 in EFL classes has always been discussed controversially. Some even claim that the use of translation can become a helpful EFL learning practice technique.
- It has been argued that the Grammar-translation Approach has over the years had a remarkable success.
  - Millions of people have successfully learnt foreign languages to a high degree of proficiency and, in numerous cases, without any contact whatsoever with native speakers of the language, as was the case in China in the 1970s and 80s.

■Certain types of Chinese learner respond very positively to a grammatical syllabus as it can give them both a set of clear objectives and a clear sense of achievement as they had in the school education. (Above all, this approach can give learners a basic foundation upon which they can then build their communicative skills.)

■However, it has been felt that translation itself is an academic exercise rather than one which would actually help learners to use language, and an overt focus on grammar is to learn ABOUT the target language rather than to learn it. (This approach may create a teacher-centric classroom, with no opportunity for speaking practice and does not prepare students to communicate in real-world situations.)

- **… a single specific methodology … is unlikely to be universally effective.**

- It is a question of mixing and matching the different options according to the individual teacher's needs, and professional judgment. (Ur, 2011: 818)

■**Suggestions:**

◆**New role of the students: Shifted from L2 learner to L2 user**

◆**L2 user concept: Shifted from monolingual mode of teaching to the bilingual mode**

- **Encourage L2 users to speak and write in Chinese culture:** L1 use is part of L2 user conceptual framework:

- **Make L2 uses become enhanced by L1 cultural studies：** Integrate more use of L1 and its cultural values into ELT rather than teaching English for the sake of English teaching

- **Develop a teaching approach based on a systematic code-switching:** A L2 user's multi-competence approach encouraged by Chomsky's notion of language

Theoretical support

- Chomsky's notion revisited: The mental reality is a grammar, not a language (Chomsky, 1986)

- It may be wrong to count languages in people's minds – L1, L2, L3 as the language system exists in a single mind as a whole.

- Thus, L2 user concept may embrace more foreign languages other than English

■**If ELT is relocated by part of general or liberal education other than a language course, what changes can we make about EFL education in China?**

- If the new **ELT** reforms are reoriented not simply as a language course (a required basic course) but as part of general education in the integrative curriculum of undergraduate education, the notion, objectives and approaches of **ELT** teaching will be changed fundamentally.
- **Possible changes and problems:**
  - **General or liberal education:** Encompassing cognitive, moral, and emotional education.
  - **Amoral perspective:** Identification of liberal education with an amoral training in cognitive skills and linguistic skills alike, commonly presupposing that we live in a competitive environment and that we learn English to help us to become winners.

◆**Moral perspective:** The content of EFL education should be primarily moral problems, provided by history, sociology, economics, and politics and other disciplines in the Chinese context. (Howard Zinn and Noam Chomsky are looking at history and events from a moral perspective.)

◆EFL education bestowed with new values: Assume the mission of fostering the qualities, virtues and values in students through EFL education.

◆**L2 user conceptual framework:**

◆L2 users' multi-competence approaches, and

◆L2 users' multi-language competence approaches.

◆Content-based approaches extended and diversified centering on the L2 use.

■ **All these discussed thus far will lead to the building of the following:**

- ◆ The framework of L2 user' multi-competence with **new** approaches
- ◆ The framework of tertiary College English education as part of liberal or general education with **new** values
- ◆ The framework of College English teaching excellence in **new** era

■ **There is certainly a lot of work to do, and a long way to go…**

■ **We need actions and active participation!**

"The best thing about the future is that it comes only one day at a time."

Abraham Lincoln

Thank you!

Q&A...