

Research on the Debate over the Orientation of College English Teaching and Its Influences in China

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Abstract: English language teaching has regained its prominent status since the reform and opening-up in China. To meet with the challenges of the time, scholars and educators in China have initiated a spirited debate over the orientation of the English teaching for non-English majors in Chinese tertiary education. Through a critical analysis of the research literature, this paper explores the theoretical bases and main arguments of “instrumentalists” and “humanists”. Drawn up the relevant documents, it further studies the influences of the debate on College English teaching policy planning and implementation from a tripartite perspective.

Keywords: College English Teaching; Instrumentality; Humanism

1. Introduction

The global spread of English has made it a lingua franca in international communication of business, science, technology, and culture. Against this background, English language teaching (ELT) has been accorded significant importance in China. For instance, English has been made a compulsory course from elementary school to tertiary institution since the mid 1980s^[1]. To improve the ELT, the past four decades have witnessed several major reforms and discussions engaged by scholars and experts in China. The most heated one is on the orientation of English language education at the tertiary level for non-English majors (known as College English) – “whether it should be instrumentally-oriented or humanistically-oriented”^[2]. Proponents of the former assert that College English should focus on the cultivation of students’ ability to use English as a tool to communicate and acquire knowledge in various settings, while advocates of the latter argue that students’ “understanding of foreign societies, history, and culture”^[2], as well as the development of their whole person should be prioritized. To date, this discussion has exerted significant influences on the College English curricula both national and local, the teaching contents, and the classroom teaching practices.

This paper explores how the topic issue- the debate over Instrumentality and Humanism was created and contested through a review of the relevant literature. Beyond critical literature review, this paper takes a critical lens to study what has been influenced by the debate from national to local and individual level.

2. The development of College English

To get a full understanding of the topic issue, this section offers a review of the development of College English, which falls into four stages according to significant historical and social events in the past four decades in China.

1978-1990: Two years after the Cultural Revolution, China initiated its Reform and Opening-up policy in 1978 so as to reconnect with the world and to remake its devastated economy. English, once the language of “decadent capitalism”, was soon acknowledged by the government and the public as a key tool in advancing science and technology and boosting economy. In a document issued by the Ministry of Education (MOE), it claimed that in order to achieve ‘Four Modernizations’, there’s an urgent need to strengthen foreign language, especially English language education. One of the suggestions was to “vigorously develop” EFL teaching for non-English majors in higher institutions. Hence English became

the priority foreign language in the higher education system. In 1985, MOE issued the *College English Teaching Syllabus for Science and Engineering Undergraduates (1985 Syllabus)* and one year later, the *College English Teaching Syllabus for Arts and Sciences Undergraduates (1986 Syllabus)*, which marked the birth of College English. By then, the main objective of College English was to develop students' reading competence to be able "extract information from readings in her/his own field of specialization" [3]. The syllabi also suggested that all non-English majors should be enrolled in College English course for at least two years or four semesters. Since then, College English has become the most important compulsory course in Chinese universities.

1990s: The 1990s has witnessed China's further integration with the world despite the political turmoil in the late 1980s. Many international events such as the 1990 Beijing Asian Games and the 1995 International Women's Conference were hosted by Chinese government [4]. The number of international tourists and students studying aboard grew steadily and reached a record high by the end of twentieth century. Against this background, the importance of English was further emphasized. All non-English major college students were required by the *College English Syllabus (1999 Syllabus)* to pass the College English Test- Band IV (CET-4, general standard), a national-wide standardized English test administered by National College English Test Committee on behalf of the MOE, as a prerequisite to gain a bachelor's degree. Some prestigious Universities would normally require their students to pass Band VI (CET-6, higher standard). In the job market, Graduates holding CET certificates or other English qualifications were more favored by employers and more easily to get well-paid jobs. This "Certificate Craze" caused great concern in academia because it led to an examination-oriented teaching practice in College English.

2000s: At the turn of the new millennium, China completed its protracted negotiations to join the World Trade Organization (WTO) and became the WTO's 143rd member. It also won the bid for the 29th Olympic Games and successfully hold it in Beijing. Along with the rapid development of international trade and greater interaction with westerners, there was an increasing demand of competent English users particularly those with good communicative skills. College English was criticized for failing to deliver the goods [5], because of college graduates' perceived weakness in listening and speaking. Consequently, a major reform of College English teaching was initiated in 2002 and resulted in the release of the *College English Curriculum Requirement (2007 Requirement)*. The most innovative feature of the *2007 Requirement* was its prioritizing of listening and speaking abilities. Another notable feature was its recognition of the enlarging disparities among different institutions due to the college expansion since 1999 by encouraging them to develop their own College English curriculum.

2010-present: In 2010, China surpassed Japan to become the world's second largest economy. To maintain a steady economic growth, the country deepened its reform and further expanded the scope of opening-up. It had replaced the USA to play the leading role in promoting trade liberalization and globalization in the last five years. Meanwhile, the great economic success led to an unprecedented national self-confidence. It was widely believed that China has never been so close to its dream of national rejuvenation. In such a delicate situation College English embarked on a new journey. On the one hand, to resolve the mismatch between the market's needs and students' poor proficiency, College English underwent constant reforms towards being more focused on practical use of language, diversifying evaluation and innovating instructional approach. On the other hand, amid mounting criticism of the English Mania and a growing nationalism that casts suspicion toward the west, the status of College English was inevitably diminished. College English was no longer mandatory for non-English majors in the latest national curriculum *Guidelines on College English Teaching (2015/2020 Guideline)*. Although most universities kept it as a compulsory one, the length of College English course was significantly reduced.

3. Contested notions: "Renwen" (Humanism) and Instrumentality

English, as a foreign language, had for some time been regarded as a vehicle in China. Under the influence of the thought *zhongxue weiti, xixue weiyong* (study classical Chinese philosophies for essence, study the western knowledges for practical use), the purposes of English teaching and learning, through most of its history, were mainly functional, rather than cultural [6]. As shown in the previous discussion, much of this tradition remained its appeal in College English. Over time, however, a growing number of scholars came to argue against the mere instrumental interpretation of College English

teaching, contending that “*renwen*” (humanism) should be highlighted in College English teaching.

Language has been widely acknowledged and defined as a tool to communicate. However, “Humanists” hold different understandings regarding this concept. Qian rethinks the theory of organon from an ontological perspective, he discusses the defectiveness of the function-definition and presents four non-tool manners of language [7]. Miao goes further, vigorously stating that “one important attribute of language is its humanistic feature”, in other words, language embodies the concept of “humanism orientation” [8]. Some educators such as Yang argue that the metaphor of “language as a tool” is one-sided, it only partially recognizes the nature of language [9]. In their view, language is multifaceted, it is not only the carrier of culture and human thought, but also is an indispensable part of culture.

Humanists also asserted that the “instrumental training” is the main cause of a widely perceived low efficiency of College English teaching [10][11]. They argued that under the influence of instrumental view, classroom College English teaching tends to focus only on the processing of texts lexically and syntactically while neglecting the semantic and contextual aspects of language. Therefore, students’ overall communicative competence cannot be well developed [12]. What’s more, research reveals that there is a loss of subjectivity and lack of motivation among students in those “instrumentally guided” College English classrooms [13]. Some educators such as Zhang also relate it with the prevalence of exam-oriented education in China, arguing that together with the deeply rooted ‘learning by rote’ tradition, instrumentality has become a major hindrance to the development of College English [14].

As the traditional concept and practices of teaching English as a tool were increasingly viewed as ineffective by academia and the public, humanists argued that humanism should be highlighted in theory and practice in College English for the following reasons: first, since humanistic feature is an attribute of language, there is no reason why it should be neglected in College English teaching [15]; second, College English, like arts, history and philosophy, is a humanities subject which can help students expand their humanistic knowledge and improve their humanistic literature [16]; third, a humanistic approach to College English can promote students’ whole-person development- “cultivate the full suite of human potentialities” [17]. What’s more, a humanistic oriented College English teaching helps students to understand the society and culture of the western country and to achieve the aim of spreading the Chinese culture and enhancing “the culture confidence” [18]. With humanists’ continuous efforts, there is a growing consensus that College English teaching possesses both humanism and instrumentality value. However, which value should be prioritized remains highly contested.

One of the most comprehensive and vigorous challenges of “*renwen*” is given by Cai who regards himself as a staunch ‘instrumentalist’. The negative consequences caused by the “*renwen*” orientation of College English teaching are particularly among Cai’s concern. After a study of foreign language teaching in the USA, Cai noted that foreign languages of potential rival countries such as Arabic and Chinese are mainly taught as a tool, while Latin and Greek were much valued for the cultures and values they embedded, hence, Cai claimed that “abandoning the instrumental value and pursuing the western values in the English language are what the western countries want” [19]. Moreover, in his review of 40 years’ development of tertiary English education in China since 1978, Cai attributes the failure of producing sufficient amount of graduates who are competent users of English language in the international arena of business, science and technology to the neglect of teaching English as a tool [20]. Cai further challenges the theoretical underpinnings of “*renwen*”. For one thing, in terms of the nature of language, in his 2017 paper, Cai asserts that the humanistic feature of language is seldom discussed in western society, the “*renwen*” property of language under debate is different from “humanism” and can find its equivalence to “culture” which is a basic property of language embedded in every single word and can’t be separated from that language. While instrumentality is universally acknowledged as the main attribute of language, people use language as a tool to communicate, to acquire knowledge and to learn foreign culture. Therefore, the discussion of “*renwen*” value of College English teaching cannot find its theoretical basis in the language properties [21]. For another, Cai maintains in his 2020 paper that what ‘humanists’ advocate for is not a liberal education as denoted in the connotation of “*renwen*” in language but a cultural education which can be fulfilled by the instrumental functions of language [22].

Furthermore, in his latest 2021 paper, Cai traces the root of the differentiation of “*renwen*” and instrumentality to the Chinese tradition *zhongtao qingqi* (pay more attention to thoughts than to tools) which was a serious impediment to the advancement of science and technology in ancient China, noting that it is a mistake for College English to focus on the

cultivation of learners' cross-cultural awareness and humanistic quality given the limited credit-bearing status quo of College English [23]. To tackle all the aforementioned problems, Cai forcibly argues that there will be an "inevitable death of College English" and the future of foreign language education in China belongs to English for Academic Purpose (EAP) [24].

4. Influences of the debate

The debates over "renwen" and "instrumentality" led by the distinguished scholars and experts have exerted significant influences on College English policy making and implementation. Inspired by Kaplan and Baldauf's multi-layered view of individual agency's role on language policy making [25], this section explores the impact of the current debate from national to local level so as to provide a comprehensive understanding of how the topic issue is consumed by policy makers, professionals and practitioners.

4.1 National level: College English Curricula

As discussed above, China has initiated several rounds of top-down reforms of English language education at the tertiary level in an effort to improve English language teaching since the reform and opening-up. Adopting a centralized education system, these reforms were led by the MOE, "an authoritative governmental agency" [26], in the form of the promulgation of six seminal national English curricula documents. This study explores the impact of the contested notions on the syllabi from the following three aspects: teaching objectives, "course orientation" and "course arrangement".

Table 1 Teaching objectives of national College English curricula

Syllabus/Requirement/ Guideline	Teaching Objectives
1985/1986 Syllabuses	Cultivate students with strong reading ability, intermediate listening ability, preliminary writing and speaking ability, enable them to use English as a tool to obtain professional information, and lay a good foundation for further improving their English level [3]
1999 Syllabus	Cultivate students with strong reading ability, intermediate listening, speaking, writing, and translating ability, enable them to exchange information in English, help students to lay a solid language foundation, master good language learning methods, and improve their cultural literacy [27]
2007 Requirement	Cultivate students' comprehensive ability of using English, especially listening and speaking abilities, enable them to effectively communicate in English in future study, work and social communication, and at the same time enhance their independent learning ability and improve their comprehensive cultural literacy [28]
2015/2020 Guideline	Cultivate students' ability of using English, enhance cross-cultural communication awareness and communicative ability, develop independent learning ability, improve comprehensive cultural literacy, enable them to use English effectively in study, life, social communication and future work [29]

In prescribing their teaching objectives (see Table 1), the *1985/1986 Syllabuses* made an explicit preference to reading ability and emphasized a practical use of English as a tool to gain professional knowledge, both of which are clear indications of an instrumental orientation of College English teaching. The *1999 Syllabus* removed the "English as a tool" assertion and replaced the objective of obtaining information with a rather general "exchanging information" [27]. Furthermore, it stressed the importance of enhancing students' cultural literacy which was a sign of the gradual recognition of the humanistic value of College English. The *2007 Requirement* stressed the importance of developing students' communicative competence with a particular emphasis on listening and speaking skills, meanwhile, it reiterated the need to improve students' "comprehensive cultural literacy". The *2015/2020 Guideline* made its humanistic inclination more apparent by further incorporating "to enhance cross-cultural communication awareness and skills" into its teaching objectives [29].

In terms of "course orientation", the *1985/1986 Syllabuses*, the *1999 Syllabus*, and the *2007 Requirement* all defined

the College English as the “compulsory basic course” or “public basic course” [28]. A significant change can be noted in the 2015/2020 Guideline, College English was redefined as General education (or liberal education) which was a clear endorsement of a humanistic language education. Furthermore, the 2015/2020 Guideline went a step further by explicitly describing that College English possesses “both instrumental and humanistic characteristics” in its unique “Course Nature” section [29].

The ideologies underpinning the making of these syllabi were also reflected on the “Course Arrangement” sections. The 1985/1986 *Syllabus* stipulated a two-staged teaching of College English. In the “Fundamental Stage”, the primary focus should be on the linguistic knowledge and separate language skills so as to help students to meet the required standards—College English Bands 4 or 6. In the “Professional Reading Stage”, the focus was shifted to develop students’ academic reading skills in their own disciplines, original textbooks published in western countries were highly recommended as the teaching masteries. Subtle changes were made in the 1999 *Syllabus*, the second stage was renamed as “Application and Improvement” in which English of Specialty and Advanced English courses were prescribed. The 2007 *Requirement* gave autonomy to different tertiary institutions by suggesting that they should develop their own curricula. The guideline for designing English courses stated:

“College English course is not only a basic language course, but also a quality-oriented education to broaden knowledge and understand world culture, possessing both instrumental and humanistic value. Therefore, when designing college English courses, full consideration should be given to the cultivation of students’ cultural quality and the teaching of international cultural knowledge” [28]

The 2020 *Guideline* stipulated that the main teaching content of College English teaching consists of three groups of courses: General English, English for Specific Purposes, and Intercultural Communication English, it further claimed that the instrumental value and humanistic value were highlighted by the latter two types of courses respectively.

The above exploration of the innovations of the six College English curricula shows that the heated debate over instrumental and humanistic value among the academia has significantly influenced the top policy makers and their decisions of the making of nation-wide language policies in China. It is found that one noticeable development trend regarding the nature of College English is a gradual transition from instrumentality to an integration of instrumentality and humanity which is manifested in their prescriptions of the teaching objectives, course orientation, and course arrangement.

4.2 Local level: College English reformation in a Chinese Medicine

University

In their 2021 paper, Cheng and Li illustrate that meso-level universities enjoy a “disproportionate” amount of impact not only on “reinterpreting top-down policy, but also on making school-based” language policy in China [26]. Hence, it is worthwhile to explore how the debate and the relevant changes in the national College English curricula are negotiated, reinterpreted, and implemented in a specific tertiary institution.

This paper chooses a Chinese Medicine university (abbreviated as UCM) in a capital city in an East China province as the setting to discuss the local level consumption of the contested knowledge. The author has worked in UCM for 11 years, first as an English teacher, then the director of College English office for Long-schooling medical students (students who study Chinese Medicine for consecutive 8 or 9 years to get a master’s or doctor’s degree) at the School of Foreign Languages (SOFL). College English is offered by the SOFL under the guidance of the Dean’s office and the university president in UCM. As a university that mainly cultivates Traditional Chinese Medicine talents, UCM has always struggled to seek a balance between adhering to tradition and embracing innovation. Under the top-down system, UCM has initiated several rounds of relatively cautious College English teaching reform. The following discusses the post-2010 situation through an examination of the College English curricula in UCM.

In 2010, UCM began to implement a small-scale graded College English teaching. Students who majored in Chinese medicine and pharmacy were divided into three grades based on the placement test they took in their first week of college. The purpose of this reform as declared by the school dean and the provost was to respond to the call for reform of the MOE

and to cultivate Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) talents with comprehensive English ability. One important teaching objective set by the curriculum was to develop students' listening and speaking abilities as stipulated by MOE in its *2007 Requirement*. To achieve the teaching objectives, different courses were offered at different grades (see Table 2).

Table 2 Course Arrangement of the 2010 curriculum

Semester	Graded teaching			Regular teaching	
	Grade A	Grade B	Grade C		
1	R & W 3	V, L & S 3	R & W 2	V, L & S 2	R & W 1 V, L & S 1
2	R & W 3	V, L & S 3	R & W 3	V, L & S 3	R & W 2 V, L & S 2
3	Adv. Course	R & W 4	V, L & S 4		R & W 3 V, L & S 3
4	Adv. Course	Adv. Course			R & W 4 V, L & S 4

For Grade A students, after two semesters foundation courses which consist of Comprehensive Reading & Writing (R & W) Band 3 & 4 and Viewing, Listening & Speaking (V, L & S) Band 3 & 4, they proceeded to advanced courses in their second academic year. For Grade B students, the foundation courses lasted for three semesters, starting from Band 2 to Band 4. In the fourth semester, advanced courses were provided for them. For Grade C students, only foundation courses were available all through the two years, the same as the regular teaching model. The textbooks used in the foundation courses were *New Horizon College English* series published by Foreign Language and Research Press in Beijing. The contents of the textbooks were organized around a variety of themes, involving cultural communication, moral emotion, information technology, science education, social foci, and other aspects. These textbooks, as argued by Cai, were mainly focused on teaching British and American culture and literature which embodies a strong humanistic orientation^[30]. As for the Advanced courses, teachers were given complete autonomy to develop their own syllabi and choose their own textbooks. However, what courses students take depended on what courses their respective teachers would like to offer. The courses offered in 2011 academic year were *General Introduction of Britain and America*, *General Introduction to Western Culture*, and *Academic English for Medicine*. It remains unclear whether the offering of Academic English course has anything to do with the outcry for an instrumentally oriented College English teaching or the course teachers' sheer personal interest, most students in this course did appreciate that their need to use English as a tool to acquire disciplinary knowledge are catered for.

The 2010 College English teaching reform lasted for four years, and since 2014 all non-English major students were included in the graded teaching, grading methods and course arrangement similar to 2010 reform were implemented, except that more types of Advanced courses such as *Academic English Listening* and *Introducing China in English* are offered. One noteworthy phenomenon during this phase was that teachers were more willing to pay attention to students' opinions as to what kind of advanced course they'd like to have.

The 2020 reform introduced a comparatively greater change. College English teaching was developed into two types according to students' majors. Type A was for non-English majors other than Long-schooling medical students, while Type B was specially designed for Long-schooling medical students (students who study Chinese Medicine for consecutive 8 or 9 years to get a master's or doctor's degree). In Type A, textbooks used in the foundation courses were replaced by *Intercultural Communication* series (IC) published by Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press. As their name suggests, the textbooks focused on the improvement of students' humanistic qualities such as cross-cultural awareness and critical thinking. Similar advanced courses like 2014 curriculum were provided in semester 3 and 4, except that Academic English (EAP) reading and writing course was prescribed for Grade A students in semester 3. With half to almost all the teaching hours devoted to the study of culture and literature, the 2020 Type A Curriculum seemed to be the most humanistically oriented curriculum to date.

Table 3 Course Arrangement of the 2020 Type A Curriculum

Semester	Graded teaching					
	Grade A		Grade B		Grade C	
1	IC 3	V, L & S 3	IC 2	V, L & S 2	IC 1	V, L & S 1
2	IC 3	V, L & S 3	IC 3	V, L & S 3	IC 2	V, L & S 2
3	EAP. R & W		IC 4	V, L & S 4	IC 3	V, L & S 3
4	Adv. Course		Adv. Course		IC 4	V, L & S 4

On the contrary to Type A, there was a radical instrumental turn in Type B curriculum which was a result of the intense negotiations between the SOFL, the School of Medicine (SOM), the School of Pharmacy (SOP), and the Dean's Office. For quite a long time, the SOM and the SOP had criticized the SOFL for its failure to recognize Long-schooling students' needs to use English to access academic knowledge and communicate research ideas. The deans of these two schools also argued that there is no need to provide foundation courses to Long-schooling students regarding their high-level English proficiency. Against this background, English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP), English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP) and English for Medical Purposes (EMP) courses were provided in Type B (see Table 4). To be more specific, EGAP were mandatory for all Long-schooling students in the first two semesters, differentiations were made according to students' majors from the third semester. EMP and Medical paper writing and communication at international conferences were available for Eight-year TCM students in the third and fourth semester, Paper writing and communication at international conferences and EMP for Nine-year TCM students, Paper writing and Communication at international conferences for Nine-year TCP students respectively.

Table 4 Course Arrangement of the 2020 Type B Curriculum

Semester	Long-schooling					
	Eight-year TCM		Nine-year TCM		Nine-year TCP	
1	EGAP R & W	L & S 1	EGAP R & W 1	L & S 1	EGAP R & W 1	L & S 1
2	EGAP R & W	L & S 1	EGAP R & W 2	L & S 1	EGAP R & W 2	L & S 2
3	EMP		ESAP PW & Com.		ESAP PW.	
4	EMP PW & Com.		EMP		ESAP Com.	

The above discussion reveals that in UCM, College English teaching has mostly lent itself more to a humanism education so as to comply with the top-down national curricula in the last eleven years. However, as the powerful policy maker in the meso level^[31], UCM also managed to cope with the changing needs of its students by developing a divergent local sub-curriculum which focuses solely on the instrumentally oriented goals.

4.3 Individual level: College English teachers in UCM

Many scholars such as Zhou and Zhu (cited in Cheng & Li) argue that College English teachers in China are more likely to follow the top-down orders mechanically and "uninvolved in anything other than teaching"^[26]. However, this is not entirely true in UCM as discovered by this study. According to an interview, some College English teachers in UCM have resisted or at least argued against the de facto exam-oriented English teaching practice in UCM for quite a long time. Encouraged by the discussion of humanistic value of College English teaching among the academia and the promulgation of the *2007 Requirement*, the 2010 teaching reform in UCM was in fact a bottom-up action led by a group of reformists. There

is another fact to note about the reform: it would be a much easier job to focus on the teaching of western culture and literature since most of the College English teachers were majored in western literature. This might be the reason why they would prefer to offer courses such as *General Introduction of Britain and America* in the advanced courses when complete autonomy was given to them. The same logic could be applied to the offering of Academic English courses by some other teachers in SOFL for they were majored in EMP. In the interview, these teachers complained a lot about UCM's failure to offer undergraduate EMP program. They had been trying hard to find their places in the traditional College English system. Therefore, they were very much in favor of the instrumentality notion and would grasp every chance to advocate EAP and EMP courses.

5. Conclusion

Drawn up the relevant literature, this paper has examined the theoretical bases and main arguments of the “humanists” and the “instrumentalists”. It is found that the divergence of the orientation of College English teaching has its roots in the unique nature of language which possess both instrumental and humanistic (cultural) properties. However, as for which aspect should be prioritized in College English teaching, there is still no consensus since a variety of socio-political factors have also been taken into account by the proponents of each side. The protracted debate has affected the ELT policy planning and implementation both nationally and locally as demonstrated in the analysis of the documents of six national curricula and UCM College English syllabi, and the observations of the teaching practices of individual teachers.

The debate reveals the complex relationship among language theory, language policy and planning, and stake holders' perceptions and attitudes in College English teaching. What is really needed is, as suggested in Feng and Adamson, “a holistic perspective” to understand the topic [32]. In future studies, to promote a humanism College English education, investigations should be carried out to explore humanism education thoughts, second language acquisition studies, as well as stake holders' interests, political and economic implications, and so on.

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