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Transformation of English Teaching System Against the Background of the New Era

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Abstract

With the advancement of the times, English teaching systems, especially those for primary and secondary school English courses, have undergone continuous transformation. This paper analyzes the prominent existing problems in English courses, sorts out the driving forces behind English curriculum reforms in China's education, and outlines a comprehensive new blueprint for holistic student development. It summarizes the transformations of the new primary and secondary school English curriculum system with Chinese characteristics in the new era, focuses on four major breakthroughs brought by the new round of English curriculum reform, and finally discusses the remaining challenges and difficulties in fully implementing the reform, so as to provide references for the further development of English teaching.

Keywords

Core Competencies; Discourse Competence; Diversification; English Curriculum Reform; Challenges and Difficulties

1. Reasons for the Transformation of the English Teaching System in the New Era

As we enter the new era of socialism with Chinese characteristics, the previous English curriculum system can no longer meet the demands of the times. Driven by educational modernization, reform of the English curriculum system has become imperative.

1.1. The Macro Background of the New Era Drives Transformation

The existing English curriculum system fails to keep pace with the development of the new era. In this era, English, as a global lingua franca, has growing importance. Its functions extend far beyond verbal communication, serving as a vital vehicle for cultural communication and knowledge sharing. As a core component of language education at the basic education stage, English courses play an indispensable role in cultivating talents with global vision and international competitiveness.

Nevertheless, numerous defects persist in China's primary and secondary English curriculum system, including unitary curriculum objectives, insufficient diverse cultural content, rigid and traditional teaching models, and obstacles to the all-round development of students' core competencies. Such problems not only hinder students' comprehensive growth but also run counter to the national goal of educational modernization. Deepening globalization in the new era has amplified the international functions of languages. Against the backdrop of internationalization, enhancing national competitiveness relies heavily on talents equipped with linguistic proficiency, cross-cultural adaptability and global awareness. As a global common language, English enables students to access international knowledge and information. This requirement is clearly specified in national policy documents such as Education Modernization 2035, which calls for "comprehensively improving students' international understanding and cross-cultural communication competence". Accordingly, the reform of the English curriculum system centers on fostering students' international competence, translating practical demands arising from globalization into curriculum objectives (Ministry of Education, 2019).

Rapid advances in information technology are profoundly reshaping educational models, with modern technologies offering abundant resources for English teaching. Online learning platforms, AI-assisted language learning applications and virtual reality language practice environments empower teachers to break the temporal and spatial constraints of traditional classrooms and deliver more personalized learning experiences for students. For instance, AI-powered personalized learning systems record and analyze students' learning data in real time, generating customized learning suggestions and assignments to boost learning efficiency. Online educational resources also expand students' opportunities for language practice: students may watch speeches by native English speakers and join global language exchange communities to continuously upgrade their language proficiency. The popularization of such technologies poses challenges to the traditional English curriculum system, while creating opportunities for its optimization and reform.

1.2. Reform Needed for Teachers and Classroom Teaching

Against the backdrop of the new era, the transformation of the English teaching system also arises from prominent issues concerning teachers. Deficiencies in classroom teaching among some educators in previous English instruction have impaired teaching quality and outcomes. On the one hand, many teachers over-rely on or misuse multimedia courseware. Admittedly, multimedia serves as an auxiliary teaching tool that greatly enlivens English classes. Its vivid and intuitive presentation can convert abstract, tedious learning content into lively dynamic materials, enabling textbooks and digital media to complement and reinforce each other. Multimedia-assisted teaching can stimulate students' enthusiasm for learning,

inspire critical thinking, boost their interest in English, and create intuitive situational contexts that help students comprehend, memorize knowledge and correct pronunciation errors.

Nevertheless, the improper overuse of multimedia courseware has become prevalent in recent years. This leads to insufficient interaction between teachers and students, which in turn hinders the long-term development of students' critical thinking and communication abilities.

Moreover, the standards and expectations for teachers have been continuously elevated since the start of the new era. In multiple speeches and reply letters, General Secretary Xi Jinping set new expectations for teachers' roles: "All teachers should be guides for students to cultivate moral character, acquire knowledge, develop innovative thinking, and dedicate themselves to the motherland." From "dream builders" to "guides" and "engineers of the human soul", General Secretary Xi Jinping's instructions to teachers reflect a more diversified role and richer connotation of teachers' responsibilities (Xi, 2016).

1.3. Student-related Issues

Against the backdrop of the new era, students are confronted with various problems in English learning. A prevalent one is their impetuous mindset, which curtails their reading volume. They tend to favour objective questions and only read exam-oriented materials, neglecting the improvement of their cultural literacy. Plagued by impetuosity, students struggle to concentrate on reading, resulting in a sharp drop in their reading quantity. Their preference for objective questions stems from the fact that such items are easier to score with definite answers, quickly satisfying their desire to achieve good exam results. Nevertheless, this preference carries adverse consequences: most students fail to sustain prolonged focused reading and dread extensive reading tasks. This phenomenon reveals an overly utilitarian attitude towards English learning. Students fixate solely on exam-relevant content and seek quick shortcuts to high marks, yet overlook the cultural connotations embedded in the English language. This hinders the development of their comprehensive literacy. English learning is far more than exam preparation; its core goals include fostering students' practical language competence, cross-cultural communication skills and critical thinking abilities. Limiting reading to exam materials narrows students' scope of knowledge and deprives them of exposure to diverse cultures, leaving them unable to use English flexibly in real-life communication. In an era of globalisation, talents with sound cultural literacy and cross-cultural communication competence are highly sought-after. Failure to cultivate cultural awareness during English learning may hinder students' interpersonal communication in the future.

1.4. Teaching Assessment-related Issues

Traditional Chinese English examinations overly restrict students' thinking and free expression, which runs counter to the cultivation of their daily communicative competence. English education calls for reforms to teaching assessment in light of practical needs, alongside thorough reconsideration of exam paper layouts and question types. As the baton guiding classroom instruction, examinations largely shape students' learning priorities. Therefore, teaching assessment ought to attach greater importance to humanistic, cultural and scientific knowledge. Current English exams are highly exam-oriented, dominated by objective questions while short of blanks, subjective open-ended questions and other item types. Meanwhile, exam items are designed with excessive objectivity, leading to rampant guesswork among test-takers. Furthermore, the quantity and difficulty of exam questions require further optimisation, given the limited time allocated for short-response and reading tasks. In addition, assessments of English vocabulary and grammar need to be strengthened. Vocabulary and grammar constitute core components of English language testing, yet multiple flaws persist in current assessment designs: arbitrary vocabulary selection, unrealistic text materials and a lack of real-life contextual settings. Test items detached from real-life scenarios will inevitably fall out of step with social development.

2. Transformation: From "Foreign Language Teaching" to "Foreign Language Education"

With continuous social development, the English curriculum system needs multi-faceted optimization and reform to meet the challenges of modern foreign language education. English courses should not be confined merely to language instruction; more importantly, they should cultivate all-round foreign language talents through English teaching.

2.1. Transformation of Curriculum Objectives: From "Double Basics" to "Three Dimensions" and Then to "Core Competencies"

The reform has shifted the focus from the simple mastery of linguistic knowledge under the "Double Basics" framework to the cultivation of comprehensive language competence. The reform of basic English education in China has gone through three stages of curriculum objectives: the Double Basics, the Three Dimensions, and core competencies. The "Double Basics" objective centers on basic knowledge and basic skills. It highlights the learning of pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar and other linguistic knowledge, as well as training in listening, speaking, reading and writing skills, with the curriculum dominated by its instrumental value. The "Three Dimensions" objective was introduced in the Eighth Round of Basic Education Curriculum Reform in 2001. It shifted curriculum orientation from the Double Basics to comprehensive language competence. While consolidating linguistic knowledge and language skills, it also attaches importance to fostering students'

affective attitudes, cultural awareness and learning strategies. This transformed English courses from a purely instrumental subject to one that integrates instrumental and humanistic attributes.

Foreign language education in the new era places greater emphasis on balanced development of students' listening, speaking, reading, writing and translating skills, as well as their ability to communicate and solve problems in real-life contexts using English. Particularly in the era of core competencies, foreign language education advocates the integration of curriculum goals and core literacy. In accordance with the requirements of core competency cultivation, the 2017 Edition of the General High School English Curriculum Standards establishes curriculum content integrated with six elements: thematic contexts, text types, linguistic knowledge, cultural knowledge, language skills and learning strategies (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2018). Guided by themes and supported by texts, teachers adopt flexible language skills and learning strategies to activate, sort out and analyze static linguistic and cultural knowledge, enabling students to continuously deepen their understanding of texts and thematic meanings. As English curriculum objectives keep upgrading, the English education system has gradually formed a core competency framework covering four dimensions: linguistic competence, cultural awareness, thinking quality and learning ability. This indicates that English education no longer regards language only as a teaching tool, but as a carrier of culture and thought, embodying an educational philosophy that closely unites instrumentality and humanism. It can be seen that the evolution from "Double Basics" to "Three Dimensions" and then to "Core Competencies" marks a fundamental shift "from knowledge transmission to discipline-based education for holistic human development" (Zhao Ying, 2021).

2.2. Transformation of Curriculum Content: Diverse Selection of Language Materials

People's perceptions of curriculum content determine the screening and arrangement of teaching materials, and fundamentally reflect different outlooks on curriculum knowledge. Enriching traditional English textbooks with a wide range of authentic materials such as English news, literary works, films and television excerpts, and popular science articles exposes students to vivid, diverse and unadapted language input. This broadens their linguistic horizons and deepens their perception of various linguistic styles and cultural connotations. The selection, organization and presentation of subject knowledge are also critical factors determining whether knowledge can be transformed into core literacy. Traditional teaching usually follows a linear cognitive path: memorizing, understanding and then applying isolated knowledge points. Teachers explain vocabulary, texts and writing tasks within fixed class hours. Although students seem to finish reading, writing and drills, their comprehensive English literacy fails to develop effectively.

Such fragmented teaching severs the inherent connections between knowledge. While it may consolidate basic knowledge and skills to some extent, it greatly hinders the cultivation of core competencies, and exerts adverse impacts on the development of students' holistic and complex thinking capabilities. Against the backdrop of core literacy-oriented education, curriculum design lays greater stress on the educational value of knowledge in fostering students' core competencies. Among the six integrated elements of curriculum content, themes carry distinct educational orientations and define the scope of teaching resources for language learning and holistic student development. Cultural knowledge corresponds to the three major thematic categories and serves as the core content for realizing educational objectives (Zhao Ying, 2021).

2.3. Transformation of Teaching Approaches: The Rise of Big Unit Teaching in English Education

Achieving the educational goals embedded in the curriculum is a systematic and complex undertaking that cannot be accomplished through single-class or single-text learning alone. Cultivating students' core competencies is a long-term educational mission that relies on complete, extended unit learning cycles (Wang Qiang et al., 2022).

Current curriculum standards explicitly advocate presenting content by unit, conducting holistic unit teaching under the guidance of overarching themes, exploring the educational value of each unit, and constructing a holistic educational framework for every unit. Attainment of unit learning objectives relies on text-based instruction implemented lesson by lesson. After thorough text analysis, teachers should identify the central theme and meaning thread of each text. Guided by the English Learning Activity View that integrates learning, thinking and creative output, teachers design learning activities centered on exploring thematic meaning.

Student-centered activities consist of interconnected, progressive stages: learning and understanding, applying and practicing, as well as transferring and innovating. Jointly participated by teachers and students, these activities gradually lead learners from surface-level text comprehension to in-depth textual interpretation, facilitating integrated growth in linguistic competence, cultural awareness, thinking quality and learning ability (Wang Qiang et al., 2022). Meanwhile, education should uphold a student-centered philosophy, advocating autonomous, cooperative and inquiry-based learning. Teachers ought to respect individual differences and customize learning tasks for diverse learners, encouraging active participation in class discussions and group projects. Teaching arrangements such as group-based English research projects with presentation sessions help cultivate students' independent learning capacities and teamwork spirits.

2.4. Transformation of Education Evaluation System: A Diversified Evaluation System

The traditional single evaluation model dominated solely by teachers should be reformed. It is essential to encourage student self-evaluation, peer evaluation and parental participation in evaluation, so as to make the assessment process more objective and fair. For example, students conduct self-evaluation and mutual evaluation after completing group projects, while parents evaluate their children's English learning performance at home and feed back the results to teachers.

Evaluation indicators cover not only students' mastery of language knowledge and language skills, but also their learning attitudes, learning strategies, cross-cultural communication competence and innovative capabilities. For instance, students' thinking ability and teamwork competence can be assessed through their performance in classroom discussions, and their cross-cultural understanding and expression ability can be evaluated via their creation of English cultural works. A combination of multiple evaluation methods including examinations, homework completion, classroom performance, project achievements and learning portfolios is adopted to conduct comprehensive and dynamic assessment of students' learning processes and learning outcomes. Specifically, an English learning portfolio can be established for each student to collect their learning works, learning reflections, test scores and other materials, which fully presents the whole trajectory of students' academic growth.

3. Challenges of English Curriculum Reform in the New Era

Although the blueprint for the English curriculum system has been established, the complexity of the current educational situation and environment brings uncertainties to its practical implementation.

3.1. Conflicts Between Examination Orientation and Competency Cultivation

In the current English education system, examination scores remain the primary criterion for evaluating students' English proficiency. This exam-oriented education greatly restricts the space for curriculum reform. Due to the high emphasis placed on senior high school and junior high school entrance examinations, schools tend to center classroom teaching on intensive test drilling while neglecting the cultivation of students' practical language competence and cultural literacy.

Under such a teaching model, students gradually lose interest in English learning, and the curriculum fails to fulfill its educational functions. For example, most English classrooms still focus on grammar explanation and vocabulary memorization, lacking authentic situational language practice. As a result, students may achieve high scores in examinations but demonstrate obvious deficiencies in real-life communication. Therefore, balancing academic assessment pressure with the cultivation of core competencies remains the primary challenge of English curriculum reform.

3.2. Shortcomings in Teachers' Professional Capacity

The implementation of curriculum reform relies heavily on a high-quality teaching workforce. However, significant disparities exist in the professional proficiency and practical teaching abilities of English teachers across China, especially in rural and remote areas where teacher shortages are more severe.

Many teachers lack systematic training in modern educational theories and digital teaching tools, making it difficult for them to meet the requirements of new-era curriculum reform. In addition, most teachers lack sufficient experience in cross-cultural teaching. Integrating diverse cultural elements into English teaching requires teachers to possess an international vision and cross-cultural awareness, which have not been fully emphasized in current teacher training systems and remain a prominent difficulty in educational practice.

4. Conclusion

Against the background of global transformation, the optimization and reconstruction of the primary and secondary school English curriculum system in the new era is essential for adapting to global development and fulfilling national strategic talent demands. By analyzing the driving factors and existing challenges of curriculum transformation, this study proposes strategies for constructing a core competency-oriented, culturally diverse, and technology-empowered English curriculum system.

The successful implementation of future curriculum reform requires strong policy support, continuous teacher professional development, and the full application of modern educational technology. Through persistent curriculum optimization, schools can cultivate more talented students with global vision and solid cross-cultural communication abilities, thereby contributing to the modernization of national education.

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