

## **Is College English Over?**

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### **Abstract**

*The integration of world economy asks for interdisciplinary talents with good English efficiency. Teachers and scholars have made joint efforts to meet the increasing demand for practical English competence in the talent market. A survey conducted in Wuhan University shows that the College English learners are not pleased with the teaching effect, though they claim they are not dissatisfied with the teachers. In order to explain the factors that affect learners' satisfaction degree, after studying the connections and differences between high school English and College English teaching materials, teaching methods and learning motivation, the research explored the correlation between learners' satisfaction level and teaching method, teaching content and the factor of teachers. The statistical analysis reveals that, although most learners feel discouraged by insufficient information inputs from the textbooks, maladjustment and inadequate motivation, the factors that affect their satisfaction degree are teaching method and teachers. As a result, what should be prioritized in reforming and improving is the factors of teachers and teaching method, which means that College English is still alive with appropriate reforms in the teaching methods.*

**Keywords:** College English; learner satisfaction level ; teaching content; teaching method

### **1. Introduction**

It is estimated by the British Council that the number of English language learners keeps growing and currently there are over 1 billion people who are actively learning or using English either as a foreign language or second language. In China, College English is a compulsory subject that almost all college students are required to take. English learning takes students much more efficient learning time than other subjects because English proficiency has been regarded as an essential quality for students at different levels.

English is a lingua franca in international communication and cooperation. The *Instruction Guide for College English Teaching* (Instruction for short), requires that the purpose of English learning and using help the learners to be informed of the latest development of science and technology, to give them access to managerial experiences and advanced ideas, and to enhance their language proficiency therefore boosting the Chinese culture and promote international communications, thus to upgrade the soft power of the country. In the new century China is playing an increasingly important role in the international arena, both politically and economically. China is a top destination for foreign direct investment, the second largest trading nation and it is doing investment in other countries through merger and acquisition, joint venture and cooperation, which entails a greater and greater demand for inter-disciplinary foreign language talents, English in particular. College English, the compulsory subject that makes up 10% of the total credits and has the longest course duration in higher education, has contributed substantially to the overall improvement of English in the country, yet faced with a better challenge from the demand for top level talents with English proficiency.

EF English Proficiency Index by *Education First* shows that China ranks the 47<sup>th</sup> among the 70 sample countries and area surveyed, the 16<sup>th</sup> among the 16 Asian countries. Despite slowly rising, the overall efficiency remains low. The top three countries of high proficiency in Asia are Singapore, ranking 12<sup>th</sup>, Malaysia the 16<sup>th</sup> and India the 20<sup>th</sup> globally. What is more disappointing and frustrating is that College English learners show low level of satisfaction. Some learners feel dissatisfied with the teaching so that they regard it as time-consuming and low efficient. Is there any interrelationship between low proficiency and high dissatisfaction?

What are the factors that affect learners' satisfaction degree? Is the dissatisfaction caused by bad teaching quality or teaching approaches? In order to explore answers to the above questions, it was premised by the author that the low proficiency stems from high level of dissatisfaction that is caused by the inappropriate curriculum design of College English, maladjustment of students to different learning modes, and the inadequacy of motivation.

## ***2. Analysis from the perspective of College English and High School English Differences and Connections***

College English learners are different from before since about 10% freshmen have reached *NSEFC* band 8 level (advanced level for senior school students) (Wen, 2012) and some high students have learned the English they are supposed to learn in college (Cai, 2012). *NSEFC* is graded into 9 levels and Band 7 is the standard for graduation level and Band 8 is the advanced level. No quantitative measures can be used to compare the 9 bands in *NSEFC* with the 6 bands in College English. Anyhow, differences and connections can be compared in teaching materials, teaching methods, learners' motivation and course criteria.

### **2.1 College English Shows no Significant Disparity in Rigor**

For the great majority of high school students, *NSEFC Book 7* and *Book 8* are the last textbooks for high school students. Therefore, there should be significant increase in rigor between *Book 8* and *New College English (NCE) Book 2*, which most students (about 90%) in Wuhan University take as their initial textbook for College English learning. There are ten units in *Book 2* and each unit is composed of one In-class Reading passage and two After-class Reading passages with the total number of 21314 words. The average length of reading passages is 710, 156 words more than that in *NSEFC Book 7* and *Book 8*. However, with the pressure for grammar learning relieved, this amount of increase in passage length and new word number does not constitute a good challenge for freshmen. Furthermore, the topics involved in *NCE* are general, almost the same as in *NSEFC*. In *NCE Book 2* the topics include: Love, Communication Problem, Born to Win, Psychology in Our Daily Life, Dreams, Food, Money, Shopping, Emotions and Health. Topics in *Book 5* are Suspense, Manners, Business Strategies, Friends and Friendship, Happiness, Human Behavior, Heroes, The Open Window, Public Speaking, Women in the Workplace. Topics in *NSEFC Book 8* are History and geography of the USA, Nationality and people, Customs and culture, Natural clones and man-made clones, Controversy about cloning, Inventions, Patent application, Great inventors, Literary work, Drama, General knowledge of archaeology, Anthropology as well as History.

Topics in *NCE* are focused on humanities and social issues. Only two units are partly related to expertise topics in *Book 2* (Unit 4 about psychology in daily life and Unit 8 about money). Topics in *Book 5* are also popular except Unit 3 (Business Strategies) and Unit 10 (Women in the Workplace). Compared with *NCE*, it seems that *NSEFC* shows more concern about technology and nature. For example, Unit 2 in *Book 7* is about robots and Unit 3 is about animals and plants under the sea. In *Book 8*, Unit 2 is about clones and Unit 3 is focused on invention and patent.

Humanities topics are necessary for language learning, but topics concerning professional studies and work-related topics are complementary and essential because College English learners come from different schools and departments and they are different majors. The *Instruction* requests that learners master 400 words related to specialties and future work. Without enough specialty-oriented content in the textbooks, it is hard to meet the *Instruction* requirements. Curriculum design theories require that a course be designed on three bases, namely the development demand of students, the development of society and the development of the subject (Wen, 2012).

However, without enough input of relative information in College English teaching content, none of three demands can be satisfied. In these circumstances, the learners' satisfaction degree is lowered with the limited input of specialty-focused language knowledge and inadequate significant disparity in rigor.

### **2.2 Adapting to College English Learning is Difficult for Some Learners**

The readjustment to college life is an extended process and difficult project to complete for some students. Studies on transition from High School English to College English show that freshmen are anxious and curious about College English. Focus on listening and speaking causes anxiety for freshmen, especially those from the countryside or remote areas.

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<sup>1</sup>Initially published in 2008 by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, a most widely adopted textbook series for College English in China.

They suffer from heavier doses of anxiety due to the fact that listening is not included in the Entrance Examination held by the local education authorities. If they cannot overcome difficulties in listening and speaking they have problems adjusting themselves to College English learning. Under these circumstances they tend to blame College English. For those who are used to being aided and supervised by the teachers, they might have problems dealing with the new teacher-student relationship in college when teachers suppose they can become active and autonomous learners. When they fail to achieve the expected learning efficiency, they are inclined to criticize College English. And for the students who are good at listening and speaking, their dissatisfaction may be higher than others when they see no difference between College English and *NSEFC* because they believe they are forced to be autonomous learners and they do not know what they can get from the teachers and teaching materials to improve the learning.

### 2.3 College English Course Requirement Priority is Hard to Take

*NSEFC* is composed of 11 books, among which **Book 1** to **Book 6** are for compulsory studies and the rest are for selective studies. Despite regional differences in educational resources, **Book 8** is usually included in the teaching plan for the sake of College Entrance Examination. A priority for Senior School English is grammar including tense, clause, non-finite verb, agreement between subject and verb, etc. *NSEFC* is initiated in 2004 and by 2014 it had been executed at the national level. It requires that the minimum level for Senior School English be band 7, which means a vocabulary of 3300 words, and 400-500 phrases, 24 topics and 66 functional notions. Students' ability to do autonomous learning has been impaired by the exam-oriented teaching in high school (Wang, 2012). Senior English learners are always learning something new so that they know what new grammar knowledge they have obtained, what topics they have learned about, which explains why high school students have high satisfaction in English learning.

College English is divided into three target levels, namely the basic, the improved and the advanced according to the *Instruction*. The basic requirement aims to satisfy the need for information communication related to the learners' daily life, study and future work. It includes an increase of 2000 vocabulary, among which 400 words are related to specialty or future work. At improved level the target vocabulary is 3000 words and its focus is on efficient communication. But, for College English learners, especially freshmen, communication efficiency is too abstract to be quantified. Additionally, without significant change in rigor and efficient evaluation measures taken to guarantee the implementation of course requirements, the priority of communication is hard to take in College English teaching practice.

### 2.4 Difference in Teaching Methods May Affect Learning

Senior school students are highly motivated to learn English and English learning is exam-oriented and teacher-centered, which explains why they are making quick progress in vocabulary and grammar. But in College English learning, with the College Entrance pressure relieved, and a role change of teachers from the guide and supervisor to a facilitator and coordinator, freshmen are entangled with expectation, anxiety and curiosity. Studies show that listening problem arouses classroom anxiety that may reduce learning efficiency. Under these circumstances, students tend to blame the teaching itself. As they get a better understanding of the course the anxiety disappears gradually. But meanwhile, the discontentment with College English increases with the decrease of anxiety. Many colleagues of the author observe an obvious downturn of classroom attendance from the second semester on.

### 3.A Survey on Learners' Self-evaluation and Data Analysis

Without a survey conducted among Business English learners in Wuhan University in 2016, the research might have reached the conclusion that College English learners' low satisfaction level is caused by the lack of significant disparity in rigor in College English teaching materials (textbooks), difficulties in adapting to College English learning and alleviation of pressure from Entrance Examination. However, the questionnaire data analysis provides new findings.

Business English, in Wuhan University, is a substitute course for College English 5 taken by sophomores in the second semester. 437 effective copies of questionnaire were returned among 450 copies handed out. Business English was taken by about 900 students as a substitute for College English 5 (the compulsory course of College English, band four), 10% of the total. Most students chose the course to improve English proficiency (64%) and 37% students took Business English because they had lost interest in College English. 16% students believed that they had not made any progress in English learning. What's more, 26.7% students thought they were better English learners in high school. The result defies College English teachers' diligent work.

However, 32% students never changed English teachers and 45% changed once in the four semesters. Does it mean that the factor of teachers does not influence learners' self-evaluation since most students are not dissatisfied with the teachers because they could have transferred to other teachers' classes if necessary? In Wuhan University, students are granted the freedom to choose their favorite teachers and transfer to the classes they teach. But how is it possible that students accept the teachers while they are not contented with the class and they think they have not made adequate progress in English learning? What are the factors that affect learners' self-evaluation of College English?

The research further hypothesizes that students' self-evaluation is influenced by factors including teachers' performance, textbook quality, teaching methods and the interrelations among the three. Before building a model to test the relationships between the explanatory variables and the response variable, it is necessary to examine the correlations and independencies between each two so as to better understand the interactions among the three factors.

To begin with, the author uses Pearson correlation coefficient to examine the strength and direction of the linear relationships between each two. However, Pearson correlation coefficient cannot test out complicated non-linear relationships and interdependencies between the three factors.

To further explore the causality between the explanatory factors and the response variable, the researcher fitted 437 data into an Analysis of Variance (Anova) model. To explain what the factors that influence students' self-evaluation results are, the author ran a backward selection based on the Akaike Information Criterion (AIC) to choose the optimum model. The initial Anova model includes students' satisfaction degrees of teachers, satisfaction degrees of textbooks, group activity participation levels, correlation between the first two variables, and the correlation of frequencies of changing teachers and group activity participation levels.

The statistical results show that there is no notable relationship between textbook satisfaction degree and learners' self-evaluation of College English. Frequencies of changing teachers and group activity participation levels are notably related to learners' self-evaluation of College English, so they can partly explain the learners' self-evaluation, but the relationship between the explaining variables and the explained variable is nonlinear, which suggests that other factors may be involved, and it is worth further studies. There is a linear correlation between group activity participation levels and the gain they think that they have obtained from the activities, which supports the workability of learning by doing. Besides, there exists no linear correlation between the gain they feel they have obtained and the learners' self-evaluation of College English, which means the gain they have got from Business English group activities is not the same as the learners' self-evaluation, because it is not the evaluation of College English. Before the statistical analysis, the researcher got the result that textbook was an important factor by studying the factors that influenced the learners' self-evaluation from the perspective of differences and connections between College English and High School English. However, the quantitative analysis offers different findings.

#### ***4.Reform in Wuhan University***

Both College English Teacher and authorities have made efforts to reform College English so that it can satisfy the new demand from the learners and the changed society. Students are encouraged to play a more active role in teaching practice by doing role plays, tasks, presentations and so on. But, the results are questionable (Shu, 2014), because teachers are inputting knowledge and all the activities are designed to aid teachers' input or add to the diversity of classroom teaching methods. Namely, the tasks are not authentic, which helps with improving instead of reforming College English (Cai, 2014). Recently, colleges and universities are investing much in building computer-aided autonomous learning centers, and various teaching modes come into being like Mooc, Micro-Course and flipped classroom. Whatever teaching modes are innovated, with humanities and arts topics focused in College English, the ***Instruction*** requirements can hardly be met, which requires that students understand specialty course teaching in English, participate in international academic conference, read literature to get reference in the professional field without difficulty, write brief report and paper, and translate professional literature with the help of dictionaries. As far as these requirements are concerned, qualitative reform of teaching content should be the priority.

English for general purpose is the basis for ESP (English for specific purpose) including academic English. Basis is important, but what matters is how much time should be spent on the basis. Freshmen come to college with over a vocabulary of more than 3000 words, grammar knowledge, basic communication skills and writing skills.

It seems that the basis enhancing teaching practice is continued in College English, which deviates from the demand for specialty learning and future work.

The author of this paper thought that it was fundamental that College English reform the teaching content, paving a way to shifting from the traditional language and culture-oriented teaching to content-based English for specific purpose. College English reforms made in Wuhan University are innovative and effective. Freshmen are put into four different scales according to the grading examination for freshmen. Each scale has a different combination scheme. The duration of College English is shortened from four semesters to three or two semesters. 90% of the students take College English (Type **A** courses) for three semesters and they are free to choose a ESP course or skill-oriented English course (Type **B courses**) in the fourth semester. For the rest 10%, they are granted the freedom they choose their favorite courses in the last two semesters. The difference is made by a grading examination.

Type **A** courses refer to the traditional comprehensive reading of College English and Type **B** courses are English skill-oriented courses, cultural courses and English for specific purpose. Skill-oriented courses include advanced listening and speaking, advanced reading, writing translation, speech skills and examination skills. Cultural courses include cross-cultural communication, movie appreciation, appreciation of classical English short stories, poetry appreciation, selected reading from mass media, speech and debate on current news, language and society and so on. Courses of English for specific purpose include law English, journalism English, business English, economics English, humanities and social science English, English in science and technology, and medicine English. The combination schemes offer students corresponding schedules to reduce time on College English for content-based English for specific purpose and skill-oriented English and choose course types that may facilitate their future studies and work. The connections between College English and high school English and the freshmen English proficiency at Wuhan University show that College English starting levels could be further upgraded, giving students more freedom and better chances to take skill-oriented courses and content-based courses(Li,2014).

Content-based language teaching integrates subject knowledge with the language of English, in the way natural language acquisition happens(Yuan,2008). Increasing ESP teaching proportion in College English can not only motivate autonomous learning, but also enhance learning satisfaction and help realize the teaching goals set by the Instruction.

### ***5. Conclusion and Suggestion***

The findings obtained from the quantitative analysis suggest that the final solution to the problems faced with College English is not necessarily to replace College English by ESP or skill-oriented courses. As shown in the data analysis, textbook is not notably correlated with the learners' self-evaluation and what is directly related to the satisfaction level is the teachers themselves. Teaching performance is decided by the teacher's professional quality, devotion and teaching method. The survey shows that language learning group activities are welcome among learners and this factor improves learners' self-evaluation. In other words, what matters is not what to teach. Instead, a very important thing in education is how to do the teaching. If changes are made in College English to reduce the time dominated by teachers so that learners have better chances to learn by doing (Li,2015), College English is to be revitalized. It is far from being over if the teaching method of learning by doing is implemented.

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**Table I: Business English Questionnaire and Statistics**

How many times have you changed English teachers from the second term on?
1. A.0 (141 people) B. 1 (195 people) C. 2 (78 people) D. 3 (21people)
2. Do/did you have a plan for BEC? A. Yes (71 people/16.2% B. No (366 people/83.2%)
3. Reasons for choosing the course (multiple choices allowed): A. obtaining business knowledge (224 people) B. no more interested in College English (162 people) C. improving English proficiency (283 people) D. getting higher score (99 people)
4. Your self-evaluation of English after three terms' College English learning: A. obviously better (20 people/4.6%) B. a little bit better (230 people/52.6%) C. the same as in high school (70 people/16%) D. worse than in high school (117 people/26.7%)
5. How do you think of the <i>New College English</i> and other textbooks? (multiple choices allowed) A. fresh and new content (22 people) B. old content (137 people) C. limited practical use (196 people) D. no practical use (184 people)
6. Your comment on College English: A. interesting and useful (40 people) B. boring but useful (127 people) C. boring and useless (338 people) D. hard to comment (321 people)
7. How do you think of the frequent group activities in Business English class? A. fruitful (134people/30.6%) B. limited beneficial (247people/56.5%) C. fruitless (45 people/10.3%) D. a waste of time (11 people/2.5%)
8. Your reaction to the assignment of each group activity: A. happy with it (183 people/41.8%) B. ok with it (247people/56.5%) C. trying to avoid it (7 people/1.6%) D. hating it (0 people)
9. Compared with College English, the most significant difference that Business English shows is (multiple choices allowed): A. more practice opportunities offered(313 people) B. more practical knowledge and skills involved (272 people) C. easier to pass the final exam (94 people) D. more interesting (160 people)
10. What's the biggest gain from Business English or the pity you feel? (open)