Problems and Countermeasures in the Implementation of the New EFL Syllabus for Non-English Majors in Colleges in China

Rui WANG
Shaanxi Normal University, Xi’an, Shaanxi, China

Keywords: EFL, new syllabus, non-English majors.

Abstract. English as a foreign language (EFL) has been taught in Shaanxi Normal University for several decades, the pre-test supplementary classes are more popular than those scheduled on the timetable, because they are mainly orientated to test skills and prediction of the coming examinations. This paper briefly introduces the background of the EFL and the developing of the new syllabus in China to show that the syllabus is the work of meticulous effort. Then some problems of the implementation of the new syllabus are revealed by analyzing the expectations both from students and EFL teachers. Finally some suggestions are made as countermeasures.

I. Introduction

English as a foreign language (EFL) has been taught in Shaanxi Normal University (SNNU) for several decades, but when the teachers in the English Department were issued with the first national syllabus—Syllabus for College English (Revised) (SCE), they were not as excited as they had been expected to. The reason for this may be (1) they had been used to teaching without a syllabus; (2) nobody wanted to bother to read it since the teaching was test-oriented. However, the fact that implementation of a significant document guiding teaching was given a cold shoulder is nothing negligible either from a theoretical or from a practical point of view.

Thus, in this paper I will first brief the EFL in China, the developing process of the new syllabus, and its main features, through which I hope to show that the syllabus is the work of meticulous effort. Then I will detail the state quo of EFL teaching in CTC, which hopefully will reveal some possible problems with the implementation of the new syllabus. The theory I learned and the literature I’ve read will evidence my analysis here. Finally I will make some suggestions as countermeasures.

II. Background and the New Syllabus

In China, 1980s saw EFL teaching begin to gain its priority in tertiary, secondary and primary education successively all over the country along with the pace of reform in economy and opening to the outside world. Given the scanty fundamental facilities and faculties essential for foreign language teaching at that time, you will not be puzzled with the unusual order I put them in—even at tertiary levels for the first few years foreign language teaching started almost from scratch.

In 1985, the first national EFL syllabus for majors of technology-engineering was issued, and that for literal arts was issued in the following year. But because of the differences in both hardware and software between large cities and smaller ones and countryside, between developed areas and less developed areas, implementation of the syllabus then was unrealistic. Consequently, each province had their own guiding document for the secondary and primary EFL education, and as for tertiary education, some universities and colleges had their own syllabi. So the national English Proficiency Test (EPT), which was assumed to be an authoritative evaluation means was not carried out in a sense of nation-width. The College English Test (CET) was actually organised by provincial test committees though the certificates were awarded in the name of the state test committee.

In 1996, the National Commission of Education established a special team to develop and formulate the new national EFL syllabus. Here I don’t want to detail every stage of their work, which is nothing but a copy of what the designers exposit in the Specification of the Syllabus. But
the needs analysis they made will exhibit to some extent that their work on the new syllabus was serious and earnest:

- a survey of graduates EFL proficiency and use of English in their career (target group)
- employers’ evaluation and expectation of graduates EFL proficiency (resource group)
- descriptions of experts, scholars and professors about their expectation of graduates EFL proficiency and objectives (resource group, audience, needs analysts)
- opinions of EFL teachers (audience, target group, resource)
- vocabulary of freshmen (target group)
- English competence of freshmen (target group) (SCE, 176) (My translation)

The investigation covered over 40,000 people of all the four needs analysis categories made by Brown [1]. Based on the investigation, survey and analysis, the working team made a report to the Commission of Education—the program administrator, which is assumed as another audience by Brown, and began their drafting. In May of 1998, the first draft was pronounced for discussion after several times of revision. In September of the same year, another discussion/debate was held in Shanghai followed by the final revision. The present syllabus got its approval and began to be promulgated in December of 1998. (SCE, 176~7)

Besides the preliminary work, the implementation of the old syllabi in some areas, the circulation of various course books, and different evaluation systems all gave some additional ideas to the work of the project team. Even thus, the designers of the syllabus specially caution that situations in all the universities and colleges across the country vary in terms of teaching conditions, teachers quality, students proficiency and so on, and hope every institution will accommodate the syllabus to their own situations.

The main features of the new syllabus are:

- No division between technology-engineering and literal arts
- Explicit exposition of curriculum goals
- And more precise and observable objectives for different grades (See Appendix 4)
- Emphasis on the continuity of EFL learning across the programme with specifications of objectives for Subject-Based English and Advanced English to propel English learning
- Enlarge the requirements for vocabulary with reference to the high school syllabus and survey of students from 12 key universities/colleges and five provinces in broad distribution
- Graded vocabulary list based on quantitative and qualitative analysis
- Grammatical Summary, Functional and Notional Category, Language Skills as appendices, with some deletion of useless or impractical items (SCE, 177~82) (My translation)

III. Implementation Context

3.1 The students’ expectations of studying in the college

The students admitted are the last batch of the candidates enrolled after the national college entrance examination, most of the students are not satisfied to be admitted by this college as a result of their twelve years of hard working in primary and secondary schools, and the students, mostly from the countryside, after three years of study in this college will probably be employed in the cities, which will give them a better-being future life than in the countryside.

3.2 Students’ expectations of the EFL learning in CTC

After at least twelve years of examination-oriented education, most of them are fed up with the rote learning of texts and words, mechanic repetition of pattern drills, exercises of tedious grammar rules, etc. They certainly hope to improve their English proficiency in this higher educational institution with better qualified professionals and teaching resources. If any of them could get a good command of English, he/she will probably have an opportunity to get a better job. So they are
desirous of learning before they realize that English is rather a hurdle to their graduation than an advantage in labour market.

3.3 The college’s expectation of the EFL teaching

English and computer science are compulsory here because they are the only two subjects which have the opportunity to be enrolled in national examinations. In light of this the number of students who could pass the examination is assumed to be a conceivable criteria to judge the quality of the college: the more students pass the national examination, the better expectant enrolment of students the college will have. ‘As a result, program decisions that can dramatically affect the lives of the students may be irresponsibly based on tests consisting of test questions that are quite unrelated to the needs of the particular group of students or to the curriculum being taught in the specific program involved.’ [1]

And so the pressure the college authority imposes on the teachers is to try to get as many students as possible pass the examination. The teachers’ assessment is therefore based on their achievement in this sense.

3.4 Problems that may arise in the implementation of the new syllabus

Under the pressure mentioned above, the teachers come to a complete agreement in goals and objectives with each other and with the college authority as well: teaching with examinations, towards examinations and for examinations. By teaching with examinations, I mean their teaching emphasis/focus changes with that of examinations; by teaching towards examinations, I mean that having more students pass the examinations is their destination; and teaching for examinations means that all the teaching activities focus on preparation for examinations. So it is no wonder that the pre-test supplementary classes are more popular than those scheduled on the timetable, because they are mainly orientated to test skills and prediction of the coming examinations.

Teaching methodology is presumably grammar-translation and audio-lingual, though speaking has not got its due priority. There is nothing wrong with the teachers’ choice in teaching methodology as far as their objectives are concerned: accuracy in grammatical structures. No approach is absolutely ‘right’, a given methodology represents one perspective on the nature and goals of language teaching. That is to say, whatever choice is made on the methodological approach, it is a representative of the participants’ attitudes and expectations, their conceptualisation of language learning [12].

Fluency is not ignored here, However, it is a revised version—fluency of spotting the right answers, and detecting the false answers among the multiple choices. This skill is obtained through large amount of practice. For them language points equal examination scores. As a result, though the college holds a higher than average position in percentile in CET, the students’ language competence is very poor. What is worse, for a large number of the students the award of the certificates announced the stop of the their EFL learning because they did not benefit much from the language learning. Instead they wasted too much time on narrow exam practice [13] which unfortunately suffocated their enthusiasm in EFL leaning.

IV. Suggestions

People might have probably seen where the problem lie with the appropriate teaching approaches, and the nearly invulnerable syllabus: discrepancy of goals between the college and the national syllabi. So here are some suggestions tackling the implementation of the new syllabus.

First and foremost, I want to assert the incontrovertibility of implementing the new syllabus. Here, I mean (1) the promulgation of the new syllabus will occasion the regularity of the evaluation system, whose authoritativeness will hopefully benefit both the college and students; (2) rather than adopting the syllabus, I suggest adapting it taking into account the given context in the college; (3) the implementation must be utilitarian and down-to-earth, not decorative or kind of lip-service. To this end, the college should establish its own work team for needs analysis before adapting it, ‘Since sound needs analysis forms a rational basis for all the other components of a systematic language
curriculum, examining the aims, procedures, and applications of needs assessment will create a sound foundation for further discussion of the curriculum’ [1].

In adapting the syllabus, to analyse the study or professional context in which the learner will be using the target language is necessary for clear specification of the eventual goals of a language programme [10].

Teacher training in this particular context is especially important because most the teachers are carrying on traditional didactic teaching approaches in which they were taught as university students. They need to be trained in language theory, applied linguistics, educational theory, psychology underpinning their teaching. Brown said (1995:184) ‘Teachers who have had little or no teacher training may do little more than present the material in the textbook.’ [1] Finney refers to the necessity of teacher training as an ongoing process of development which involves the exploration of a range of materials, methods and approaches to learner training and evaluation. She thinks that teachers must be reflective, analytic and creative, open to new methods and ideas, so teacher-training courses must aim to develop teachers who are researchers, not just technicians and deliverers of the syllabus. [3] So well trained teaching staff is one of the keys to successful implementation of a sound syllabus.

Another point I would like to remind the college administrators of is what Grasse describes as burnout of teachers. As a matter of fact, most of the teachers have been working on incessantly for years since their graduation. ‘…the exhaustion that results from excessive drain on a person’s energy and resources because of overwhelming problems’ make them ‘feel frustrated and cynical about their work and gradually lose their effectiveness on the job.’[5]

If teaching and learning are examination-oriented, motivation is restricted rather than fostered, so evaluation system needs diversifying. In terms of teaching, examinations tend to fix the priorities of certain methods though they might not necessarily have created any of them. On the other hand, ‘There is more to evaluation than grading students and deciding whether they should pass or fail.’ [4] Brown (1995: 108~38) gave every details about tests in its function, types, purposes and development and so on [1]. However, in addition to the reliability, validity and usability, I want to emphasise here its practical side. As graduates of a junior college, say, English for Academic Purposes (EAP) is not pragmatic. So, more practical, needs specific evaluation system will be motivating.

Connected with needs specific evaluation system is the student grouping. I am considering the feasibilities of needs-based grouping. That is to say, grouping the students according to their personal aspirations. For example, for those who want to continue their education in other universities home and abroad, EAP may be appropriate, while for those who will work as white collars in corporate settings, ESP may be more popular. Of course, we should also take into consideration their language levels. So placement tests of language levels and language learning orientations are necessary for grouping.

A sound syllabus, well trained teaching staff and practical testing system may necessarily call for a regular exposure to the foreign language in both spoken and written forms. Corson (1989:208) thought that the most valuable exposure aimed to teach ‘little and often’, avoiding fatigue and superficial levels of learning [2]. Since regular exposure to native language users is rare for the students in this isolated area, regular exposure to authentic written and recorded materials drawn from the real world is a major benefit. So instead of three average hours a week, they should have the number doubled, with other exposures like extra-curriculum reading activities, English corner, speaking contests, and so on. To sum up, time available for the acquisition of the target language is a key factor.

With the mention of exposures, what firstly occurs to our mind may be textbooks. Here, I want to recommend the textbooks published by Shanghai Foreign Language Press—College English (New edition). The appendix I will attach will give you some general idea about the textbooks. Other factors like classroom settings, the size of classes, the availability of equipment such as tape
recorders, slides, films, pictures, posters, and other such visual and audio features may greatly affect some of the activities carried out in class.

V. Conclusion

To sum up, the brief description of the syllabus, exposition of the college indicate that implementing the new syllabus will hopefully benefit the EFL teaching of the college provided that the implementation is context specific. Yet, it is far from enough. Smooth and successful implementation needs a great deal of work and essentially, is an ongoing process of finely tuning.

References

[1] Brown, J. D. 1995, The elements of language curriculum: a systematic approach to program development, Boston: Heinle & Heinle Publishers, An International Thomson Publishing Company.
[2] Corson, D. 1989, Language policy across the curriculum. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters Ltd.
[3] Finney, D. 2002, The ELT curriculum: a flexible model for a changing world. In: Richards, J. C. and Renandya, W. A. (eds.) (2002).
[4] Genesee, F. & Upshur, J. 1996, Classroom-based evaluation in second language education, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
[5] Grasse, C. 1982, Burnout in teachers of second languages. TESOL Newsletter, 16 (1).
[6] Johnson, K. & Johnson, H. 1999, Encyclopedic dictionary of applied linguistics: A handbook for language teaching, Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, Blackwell Publishers Ltd.
[7] Krashen, S & Terrell, T. 1983, The natural approach: language acquisition in the classroom. Oxford: Pergamon.
[8] Larsen-Freeman, D. 2000, Techniques and principles in language teaching, Oxford: Oxford University Press (2nd Ed).
[9] Nunan, D. 1988, Syllabus design, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
[10] Richterich, R. (ed.) 1983, Case studies in Identifying language needs, Oxford: Pergamon.
[11] Syllabus for College English (Revised version) Revision & Design Team 1999, Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press & Higher Education Press.
[12] Tudor, I. 2001, The dynamics of the language classroom, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
[13] Wharton, S. 1996, Testing innovations, In: Willis, J & Willis, D. (eds.) (1996) Challenge and Change in Language Teaching. Oxford: Heinemann.