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From Government Policies to University Practices: Experiences and Lessons from the Recent College English Teaching Reform in China

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ABSTRACT: *A small scale conference held in Beijing Yanshan Hotel in 2002 marked the beginning of a new round of reform in College English teaching in China. Since then a series of government policies and guidelines has been introduced and government funded explorative projects have been launched aiming at setting new objectives for College English teaching as well as introducing new models of teaching and new approaches to testing and assessment at both institutional and national levels. It was the hope of the government that the top-down approach to reform could bring immediate and nation-wide effects in all aspects of College English teaching. Surveys and observations of the current practices in China's colleges and universities do indicate that the reform efforts made by the government have yielded remarkable achievements and many proposed theories and practices have not only been accepted but also put into actual implementation. However, due to the differences in educational resources and local demands, there also exist considerable variations among different types of colleges and universities in China. These variations manifest themselves in all aspects of College English teaching, from the formation of teaching objectives, to the design of the school-based curriculum, the approaches to teaching and learning, and the methods of testing and assessment. This paper will review the changes or the lack of change in College English teaching in recent years. Some reflections will be made about this latest round of reform.*

Introduction

The last two decades of the 20th century witnessed a dramatic change in the teaching of College English¹ in China, turning a little-known course into one that was often regarded as determining the fate of tens and thousands of college students. Among the forces that initiated this change were two measures adopted by the Ministry of Education (MOE), i.e., the implementation of the national *College English Syllabus* in 1985, and the introduction of the College English Test (CET) in 1987, the former setting up a nationally unified standard in terms of teaching objectives, academic credit requirements, course structure, teaching methodology and assessment, and the latter providing an objective measure with which students, teachers and even colleges and universities across the nation could be assessed and compared.

Towards the end of the 1990s, as the College English course was gaining attention from all corners of the Chinese society, there was also growing dissatisfaction with the status quo of the program from both inside and outside the College English teaching circle (Cen, 1999; Wu, 2003). The general public was unhappy with college graduates who could not put what they

¹ The term "College English" is used to describe a program of teaching designed for non-English majors in colleges and universities in China.

learned in English classes to actual use, especially in oral communication. Students complained about the monotonous lecture style of instruction and the pressure of the national CET. Teachers were burdened with heavy work load in teaching and could spare no energy for reflection and research, which in turn hindered their career development. Employers were disappointed to find that graduates with high scores from the CET could neither speak nor write in English in most job-related situations. So there was an urgent need to reform College English teaching to meet the needs of the rapidly changing Chinese society.

In 2002, a small scale conference held in Beijing Yanshan Hotel marked the beginning of a new round of reform in College English teaching in China. Present at this conference was not only the Minister of Education but also the leading officials from the Higher Education Department of the Ministry of Education (HED–MOE). Since then a series of government policies and guidelines have been introduced and government funded explorative projects launched aiming at setting new objectives for College English teaching as well as introducing new models of teaching and new approaches to testing and assessment at both institutional and national levels. The following section of this paper will introduce some of the key measures formulated and implemented by the MOE and then discuss the changes or sometimes the lack of change in College English teaching in recent years. Some reflections will then be made about this latest round of reform.

The top-down fashion of China's College English reform

In his *Managing Curricular Innovation*, Markee (1997) summarizes five common models of educational change, among which the center-periphery model describes an innovation process in which “the power to promote educational change rests with a small number of senior ministry of education officials who are at the center of the decision-making process. Teachers, who are on the periphery of this decision-making process, merely implement the decisions that are handed down to them” (p. 63). Furthermore, decision makers also “use rewards or sanctions to ensure that subordinates comply with institutional policies and goals” (p. 64). It was almost in this same fashion that the recent reform of China's College English teaching was carried out (Zhang, 2003).

The process of the reform could roughly be divided into three stages preceded by an almost futile trial stage between 1998 and 2002.

Pre-reform trial stage: 1998–2002

In response to the general social dissatisfaction with English teaching in general and College English teaching in particular, the MOE commissioned a group of experts in 1998 to revise the old *College English Syllabus* and allowed nine universities to experiment with the reform of College English in their own ways. However, the year-long project of the revision resulted in a version that was not much different from the old one and the experimentation by the universities also failed to produce any promising new models that could save the program. Part of the reason might be explained by the fact that despite the general dissatisfaction with the teaching program, there was equally apparent resistance to change, given the remarkable achievements made in College English teaching in the preceding two decades.

Initiation stage: 2002–2004

Realizing the lack of real innovative spirit from the grassroots level, the Ministry of Education decided to take charge of the design and implementation of the reform. After the Yanshan Conference in August 2002, the Higher Education Department (HED)–MOE issued a document in December announcing two key projects of the reform. One was to draft the new national *College English Curriculum Requirements (CECR)* and the other to experiment with a new model of College English teaching which called for the combination of regular classroom teaching with computer-assisted self-teaching. In 2003, the HED–MOE listed College English teaching reform

as one of the four key components of its “College Teaching Quality and Teaching Reform Project”. As specific measures for the implementation of the reform plan, four publishing companies were commissioned in February to design the Web-based teaching systems and the first meeting of the *CECR* drafting team was held in March to discuss the general framework of the new document. By the end of the year, the four teaching systems were ready for trial use and in January 2004, the *CECR* (for trial implementation) was also completed. In August 2004 the Ministry officially launched the reform of CET. By now the major part of the preparation was done for the subsequent large scale reform of College English teaching.

Experimentation stage: 2004–2006

In February 2004, the HED–MOE selected 180 colleges and universities across China for trial experimentation. To provide more incentive for the reform effort and to generate more innovative measures from the local institutions, the department provided funds to support over 400 reform projects in the 180 experimental colleges and universities in the following two years. In the reform of the CET, a series of changes was made in 2005 in its content and format, the weighting of different skill components, and the method of score reporting, introducing new sub-skill components and more subjective test items, giving more weight to the listening component and converting the original full score of 100 to 710 for score reporting. A cutoff score of 60 for “Pass” has been regarded as a norm in Chinese educational practices. With the full score changed to 710, it was hoped that different universities could adopt different passing scores according to the actual English proficiency of their students.

Based on the practices of the 180 experimental colleges and universities, in 2006, the HED–MOE started to select the first group of 31 schools and provided each with 200,000 yuan so as to build them into models whose experiences could then be copied by other experimental and eventually non-experimental colleges and universities across China. This group was later expanded to 65 so as to better represent the different types of colleges and universities in different parts of China. During this period of time, the HED–MOE also organized several short-term programs for the training of provincial and university administrators and college English teachers.

Expansion stage: 2006 onward

When commenting on the achievements of the new round of College English teaching reform in May 2006, the Minister of Education said that the endeavor was of strategic significance and asked that further efforts be made to deepen the reform and to disseminate the experience to all colleges and universities in China (Wu & Liu, 2008). Following the Minister’s remark, the MOE issued a government decree mandating a formal and full scale implementation of the *Curriculum Requirements* across China. The Minister’s remark and the government decree thus started the expansion stage of College English reform.

In 2006, the HED–MOE invited experts to revise the *CECR* (for trial implementation) and a year later, the *CECR* was officially issued. In the same year, further measures were also introduced for the reform of the CET and more training programs were held for teachers as well as administrators.

Major changes brought by the reform

It was the hope of the government that this top-down approach to reform could bring immediate and nation-wide effects in all aspects of College English teaching. Surveys and observations of the current practices in China’s colleges and universities do indicate that the reform efforts made by the government have yielded remarkable achievements and many proposed theories and practices have not only been accepted but also put into actual implementation. However, due to the differences in educational resources and local demands, there also exist considerable variations among different types of colleges and universities in China. These variations manifest

themselves in all aspects of College English teaching, from the formation of teaching objectives, to the design of the school-based curriculum, the approaches to teaching and learning, and the methods of testing and assessment.

The data presented in the following discussion were mainly drawn from the author's onsite observations of the experimental universities and a questionnaire survey of 530 universities the author conducted in 2010. During the discussion, distinctions will be made of different types of universities in China. In the mid 1990s, the Chinese government started a project which aimed at enhancing the quality of one hundred colleges and universities in China in the 21st century, hence the name Project 211, by providing extra funding and setting higher standards for their education and academic research. Consequently, the colleges and universities of Project 211 often enjoy higher ranking in university appraisal systems. Towards the end of the 1990s, in answer to the call of President Jiang Zemin to promote several top Chinese universities to the internationally renowned status, the Chinese government started Project 985 which would provide further funding from the state and provincial governments. Those universities naturally would enjoy even higher status in official and social evaluation.

Another distinction will be made among colleges and universities which are under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education, provincial and or local governments because the difference in jurisdiction often means difference in funding, with those under the jurisdiction of the higher level government enjoying more favorable funding. Furthermore, these government run institutions are also differentiated from private colleges which tend to have shorter history and lower social status. In the analysis of the practices of College English reform, these distinctions will be made to reflect the different practices in different types of higher educational institutions.

Changes relating to teaching objectives

According to the old *College English Syllabus*, the College English course aimed at building in the students a strong ability in reading and fair abilities in listening, speaking, writing and translating so that they could exchange information in English. Students were also expected to lay a solid linguistic foundation and have a good command of the methods of learning, which in turn would contribute to their all-round development. In the new *Curriculum Requirements*, the objectives are to develop students' ability to use English in an all-round way so that they could use English to communicate effectively. The course also aims at enhancing students' intercultural communication competence and autonomous learning abilities.

Observations made in the experimental institutions revealed that the *Curriculum Requirements* was comprehensively adopted, with the new teaching objectives accepted and basic requirements generally reached. However, when the experimental and non-experimental institutions were grouped together, the situation was not the same as was expected. The survey of 530 colleges and universities (which included 180 experimental and 350 non-experimental institutions) showed that 321 of them claimed complete compliance with the national *Curriculum Requirements* while 192, or more than 1/3, of them admitted to partial compliance. When it comes to different types of universities, a greater percentage of ministerial colleges and universities claimed complete compliance than other types of schools (Table 1). Similarly, more Project 211 colleges and universities complied completely with the CECE than non-Project 211 schools (Table 2).

The answers to two other survey questions might explain why complete compliance to the CECE was not as what would be expected by the authorities. One question asked about the importance of the different components of the teaching objectives set in the CECE and another asked to select the most important skill as the teaching objective. Table 3 shows most universities regarded the "basic knowledge and skills of English" and the "practical skills of English" as the most important and gave second place of importance to "English learning strategies" and "cross-cultural communication competence". On the other hand, the aspect of "English grammar and vocabulary" still received a fair amount of attention from the universities surveyed. Table 4 shows how universities ranked the five basic English skills. Again, contrary to the greater emphasis the

Table 1: Whether following the *CECR* (for universities of different administrative jurisdiction)

	Types of Universities					Total
	Ministerial	Provincial	Local	Private	Others	
Complete compliance	65 (81.3%)	179 (59.1%)	29 (55.8%)	41 (59.4%)	5 (62.5%)	319 (62.3%)
Partial compliance	15 (18.8%)	124 (40.9%)	22 (42.3%)	28 (40.6%)	3 (37.5%)	192 (37.5%)
No compliance	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (1.9%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (0.2%)
Total	80 (100.0%)	303 (100.0%)	52 (100.0%)	69 (100.0%)	8 (100.0%)	512 ² (100.0%)

Table 2: Whether following the *CECR* (for Project 211 and non-Project 211 universities)

	Project 211 universities	Non-Project 211 universities	Total
Complete compliance	69 (82.1%)	243 (58.6%)	312 (62.5%)
Partial compliance	15 (17.9%)	171 (41.2%)	186 (37.3%)
No compliance	0 (0.0%)	1 (0.2%)	1 (0.2%)
Total	84 (100.0%)	415 (100.0%)	499 (100.0%)

Table 3: Importance of teaching objectives

	A	B	C	D	E
Basic knowledge and skills of English	62.6%	34.8%	2.0%	0.6%	0.0%
Practical skills of English	62.6%	34.4%	2.3%	0.4%	0.2%
English learning strategies	29.8%	54.5%	14.3%	1.4%	0.0%
Cross-cultural communication competence	22.5%	57.6%	17.8%	2.0%	0.2%
English grammar and vocabulary	15.7%	59.3%	22.4%	2.2%	0.4%
Translation ability	9.7%	57.4%	30.6%	2.2%	0.2%

Note: **A** = Most important; **B** = Fairly important; **C** = Somewhat important; **D** = Not very important; **E** = Not the least important

Table 4: Importance of basic skills

	Listening	Speaking	Reading	Writing	Translating
The most important skill	35.9%	16.1%	44.9%	2.0%	1.2%

HED–MOE attached to listening and speaking, more universities ranked reading before listening and speaking, which was the same as that prescribed by the old *College English Syllabus*.

Further analysis of the survey data shows that although the overall ranking of reading was the highest, more Project 985 and Project 211 universities selected listening as the most important skill while the other universities chose reading as the most important (see Tables 5 and 6). This indicates that the change in the teaching objectives better reflected the actual needs of the elite

² 530 participated in the survey but not all respondents answered all the questions. So the totals of this and the following tables may not be 530.

Table 5: The most important skill selected by Project 985 and non-Project 985 universities

	Listening	Speaking	Reading	Writing	Translating	Total
Project 985 universities	15 (42.9%)	9 (25.7%)	10 (28.6%)	1 (2.9%)	0 (0.0%)	35 (100.0%)
Non-project 985 universities	161 (34.8%)	71 (15.4%)	216 (46.8%)	9 (1.9%)	5 (1.1%)	462 (100.0%)

Table 6: The most important skill selected by Project 211 and non-Project 211 universities

	Listening	Speaking	Reading	Writing	Translating	Total
Project 211 universities	33 (41.3%)	13 (16.3%)	31 (38.8%)	2 (2.5%)	1 (1.3%)	80 (100.0%)
Non-project 211 universities	144 (34.7%)	66 (15.9%)	192 (46.3%)	8 (1.9%)	5 (1.2%)	415 (100.0%)

universities while it might be too early to expect the same change happening in less prestigious universities.

Changes relating to school-based curriculum

Recognizing the differences in the entry levels of students' English language proficiency and in the teaching resources possessed by different colleges and universities across China, the new *CECR* asks for the design of school-based College English teaching syllabus, "providing different guidance for different groups of students and instructing them in accordance with their aptitude so as to meet the specific needs of individualized teaching" (HED-MOE, 2007, p. 23).

The survey of the 530 colleges and universities shows that over 90% of the universities claimed that they followed the *CECR* and designed their own syllabuses. But from the author's observation of the actual syllabuses submitted by the schools, it was found that most of the so-called school-based syllabuses were close imitations of the national *Curriculum Requirements* with some teaching plans based on the particular textbooks adopted by the universities.

There could be several reasons for the difficulty for universities to develop College English syllabuses based on their specific needs and bearing their own characteristics. One reason could be traced to the national *CECR*, for although it encourages colleges and universities to develop their own syllabuses according to their specific situations, the document not only provides general guidelines for College English teaching but also contains specific directions on methodologies which need to be adopted and assessment of teaching and learning. There was not much need for universities to make the additional effort to design drastically different syllabuses.

Other reasons could be related to the new teaching models promoted by the MOE and the nationally unified College English Test, which will be discussed in later parts of the paper.

Concerning the differentiated requirements for students with different entry level English language proficiency, the new *CECR* sets the Basic Requirements as compulsory for all non-English major college graduates, and at the same time puts forward Intermediate and Advanced Requirements so as to "enable those students who have a relatively higher English proficiency and stronger capacity for learning" (HED-MOE, 2007, p. 23-24). In addition to compulsory courses at the three prescribed levels, colleges and universities are required to offer a series of elective courses so as to "ensure that students at different levels receive adequate training and make improvement in their ability to use English" (p. 29).

Observations of the experimental universities show that the concepts of the three-level division and the combination of compulsory and elective courses have been popularly accepted. In actual practice, however, variations also exist among different types of universities.

Table 7: Whether offering different courses for different students (for universities of different administrative jurisdiction)

	Types of Universities					Total
	Ministerial	Provincial	Local	Private	Others	
Yes	72 (93.5%)	172 (57.9%)	40 (78.4%)	38 (55.1%)	4 (50.0%)	326 (64.9%)
No	5 (6.5%)	125 (42.1%)	11 (21.6%)	31 (44.9%)	4 (50.0%)	176 (35.1%)
Total	77 (100.0%)	297 (100.0%)	51 (100.0%)	69 (100.0%)	8 (100.0%)	502 (100.0%)

Table 8: Whether offering different courses for different students (for Project 211 and non-Project 211 universities)

	Project 211 universities	Non-Project 211 universities	Total
Yes	76 (91.6%)	244 (60.1%)	320 (65.4%)
No	7 (8.4%)	162 (39.9%)	169 (34.6%)
Total	83 (100.0%)	406 (100.0%)	489 (100.0%)

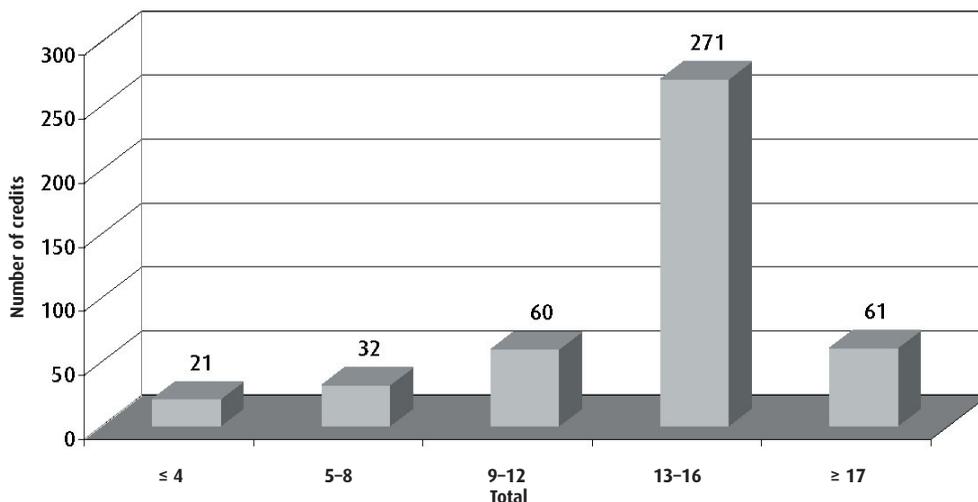
When responding to the question of whether students with different entry levels of English language proficiencies were offered different courses, more ministerial and Project 211 universities gave positive answers while close to half of the other universities were still offering unified courses for all their students (see Tables 7 and 8).

The survey results also revealed that few universities offered the compulsory courses that met the Intermediate and Advanced Requirements. With the improvement in the secondary school graduates' English language proficiency, the *CECR* designers hoped that more advanced English courses could be developed and offered as a compulsory component of their college education. However, many universities seemed to take this as an opportunity to reallocate the academic credits to other subject courses, because they thought that English learning consumed too much of their students' time and affected their subject learning. In this case, it was the ministerial and Project 211 universities that took the lead in reducing the academic credits for College English. Before the reform, the popular practice for almost all the colleges and universities was to allow 16 compulsory credits for College English. But as is shown in Figure 1, the new round of reform has resulted in an obvious decrease in compulsory credits for many of the universities surveyed. Tables 9 and 10 show a more obvious decrease for ministerial and Project 211 universities.

Changes relating to the teaching model

In response to the sharp increase in college student enrolment at the turn of the century and the growing dissatisfaction with the lecturing model of teaching, the *CECR* requires that colleges and universities should introduce a new model of teaching which combines the use of information technology with classroom teaching "so that English language teaching and learning will be, to a certain extent, free from the constraints of time or place and geared towards students' individualized and autonomous learning" (HED-MOE, 2007, p. 30). At the same time it was hoped that the new teaching model could relieve some of the heavy burdens of College English teachers incurred by the sudden college enrollment expansion.

Realizing the drastic change from the old model to the new one, the designers of the *CECR* went to such lengths as to provide detailed plans of class arrangement, the design of the online

Figure 1: Compulsory academic credits**Table 9: Compulsory academic credits (for universities of different administrative jurisdiction)**

Number of credits	Types of Universities					Total
	Ministerial	Provincial	Local	Private	Others	
≤ 4	2 (2.6%)	17 (6.3%)	0 (0.0%)	4 (6.7%)	0 (0.0%)	23 (5.0%)
5-8	9 (11.5%)	19 (7.0%)	2 (4.5%)	2 (3.3%)	1 (20.0%)	33 (7.2%)
9-12	20 (25.6%)	33 (12.2%)	5 (11.4%)	4 (6.7%)	1 (20.0%)	63 (13.8%)
13-16	42 (53.8%)	163 (60.4%)	34 (77.3%)	32 (53.3%)	2 (40.0%)	273 (59.7%)
≥ 17	5 (6.4%)	38 (14.1%)	3 (6.8%)	18 (30.0%)	1 (20.0%)	65 (14.2%)
Total	78 (100.0%)	270 (100.0%)	44 (100.0%)	60 (100.0%)	5 (100.0%)	457 (100.0%)

Table 10: Compulsory academic credits (for Project 211 and non-Project 211 universities)

Number of credits	Project 211 universities	Non-Project 211 universities	Total
≤ 4	3 (3.7%)	18 (5.0%)	21 (4.7%)
5-8	8 (9.8%)	24 (6.6%)	32 (7.2%)
9-12	26 (31.7%)	34 (9.4%)	60 (13.5%)
13-16	44 (53.7%)	227 (62.5%)	271 (60.9%)
≥ 17	1 (1.2%)	60 (16.5%)	61 (13.7%)
Total	82 (100.0%)	363 (100.0%)	445 (100.0%)

learning/teaching system, and the procedures of Web assisted learning. This also explained why there was little need for universities to design their own syllabuses (see previous discussion on school-based curriculum design).

Observations from colleges and universities in China showed that the use of PowerPoint presentation almost became the norm of classroom teaching and most experimental universities delivered College English course by combining regular classroom teaching with organized or independent computer-assisted learning. Different ways of class arrangement were adopted by different universities, which include:

- Speaking (Small class) + Reading/Writing/Translation (Big class)
- Regular teaching (Small class) + Students' self-teaching with teacher supervision (Big class)
- Lecturing (Big class) + Practice (small class) + Computer-assisted self-teaching
- Lecturing (Big class) + Organized computer-assisted self-teaching and group coaching

Electronic data from the courseware collected from the experimental universities showed teachers' and students' active use of the Web for various purposes of teaching, learning, interaction and assessment. However, colleges and universities that were surveyed showed differing adoptions of Web-based instruction.

When responding to the question of how the model of "classroom teaching + computer assisted learning" was applied in their universities, 29.6% of the respondents chose "All classes", 33.5% chose "Some classes" and 36.9% chose "None". This means, despite all the efforts made by the MOE to introduce the new model to all colleges and universities, more than a third of the schools still retained the old model of teaching. There might be reasons related to the lack of necessary hardware or software or to the shortage of technical personnel. But responses to one of the survey questions concerning the teachers' attitudes towards the effectiveness of the new model seemed to suggest further training was needed before university teachers could be expected to fully adopt the new model. Table 11 clearly shows that less than 1/5 of the universities believed that the new model was very effective and 13.4% of the respondents even had no idea of the effectiveness of the model.

Changes relating to the approaches to learning

The old of model of College English teaching was characterized by the passive role taken by the students whose main task was to obtain the knowledge of English from teachers and textbooks. This approach to learning had been proved ineffective in cultivating students' abilities to use English for communicative purposes. As a corrective measure, the *CECR* requires that the new model of teaching "should enable students to select materials and methods suited to their individual needs, obtain guidance in learning strategies, and gradually improve their autonomous learning ability" (HED-MOE, 2007, p. 31).

To promote autonomy in learning, different experimental universities came up with different and innovative measures. Some designed a separate component of student training at the beginning of their course; others offered a series of lectures on the cultivation of autonomous learning and uploaded them to the online course center; and still others conducted online forums devoted to questions addressed to autonomous learning. In addition to these direct measures, software programs or the components in online course center which cater to students' independent learning were made good use of. Furthermore, in designing classroom activities, teachers were frequently using group work, presentations, research-oriented learning, and teacher talk occupied less class time.

Table 11: Attitudes towards the effectiveness of the new model

	High	Fair	Low	Don't know	Total
All colleges and universities	74 (19.1%)	247 (63.8%)	14 (3.6%)	52 (13.4%)	387 (100.0%)

Table 12: Effectiveness of teaching methods

	Very effective	Fairly effective	Not effective	No idea	Total
A	8 (1.7%)	351 (74.8%)	91 (19.4%)	19 (4.1%)	469 (100.0%)
B	199 (41.2%)	273 (56.5%)	4 (0.8%)	7 (1.4%)	483 (100.0%)
C	157 (32.6%)	270 (56.0%)	10 (2.1%)	45 (9.3%)	482 (100.0%)
D	146 (30.9%)	234 (49.5%)	8 (1.7%)	85 (18.0%)	473 (100.0%)
E	19 (4.1%)	173 (37.3%)	156 (33.6%)	116 (25.0%)	464 (100.0%)
F	7 (1.5%)	85 (18.2%)	175 (37.4%)	201 (43.1%)	468 (100.0%)

Note: **A** = Lecture by teacher

B = Teacher's lecture + appropriate amount of practice in class

C = Teacher's lecture + students' independent learning based on online courseware

D = Teacher's lecture in big class + students' practice in small class

E = Teacher-organized communicative activities, without systematic introduction to linguistic knowledge

F = Students' independent learning based on online courseware

Since the enhancement of students' ability to learn independently is one of main objectives of the *CECR*, people's attitudes towards this objective becomes very important. However, as is shown in Table 3 in the earlier section of the paper, less than one third of the respondents in our recent survey regarded it as very important. A further question in the survey addressed the effectiveness of different teaching methods. Responses to this question also show that people still had reservations about the effectiveness of autonomous learning.

Changes relating to testing and assessment

As one of the key measures used by the HED–MOE to steer the reform, the CET has always been a regulating force for the College English teaching in China. But testing is a two-edged sword. It could help to bring more resources to College English teaching, but it may also result in teaching to the test, making the course deviate from the correct goals prescribed by the *CECR*. It has been the hope of the HED–MOE to reduce the negative backwash effect of the CET by increasing the ratio of subjective test items, introducing more sub-skill components into the test, adopting new test formats that bear closer resemblance to authentic language use, encouraging universities to turn CET into a non-compulsory requirement for undergraduate qualification, and issuing score reports rather than passing certificates (thus giving room for universities to set varying passing scores according to the actual English proficiencies of their students).

In addition to the reforms in the national CET, the *CECR* also lays out a number of principles for university-based practices of testing and assessment. Among the measures introduced, the document gives particular importance to the combination of summative and formative assessments because such an evaluation system not only "helps teachers obtain feedback, improve the administration of teaching, and ensure teaching quality but also provides students with an effective means to adjust their learning strategies and methods, improve their learning efficiency and achieve the desired learning effects" (HED–MOE, 2007, p. 32).

The responses to our survey question of whether the CET certificate was required for undergraduate qualification show that close to two thirds of the universities followed the directions of the MOE (see Table 13). But this government request seemed to have met with some resistance from local and private universities (see Table 14). And the same tendency was also true for Project-985/211 versus Non-Project-985/211 universities. This could probably be explained by the fact that, while the elite universities could attract applicants with higher English language proficiency and better incentive for learning the language (hence, less need for externally imposed pressure for learning), the low ranking colleges and universities needed the test to force their students to keep up with learning English because English was the only way that these colleges and universities could compete with their higher ranking peers.

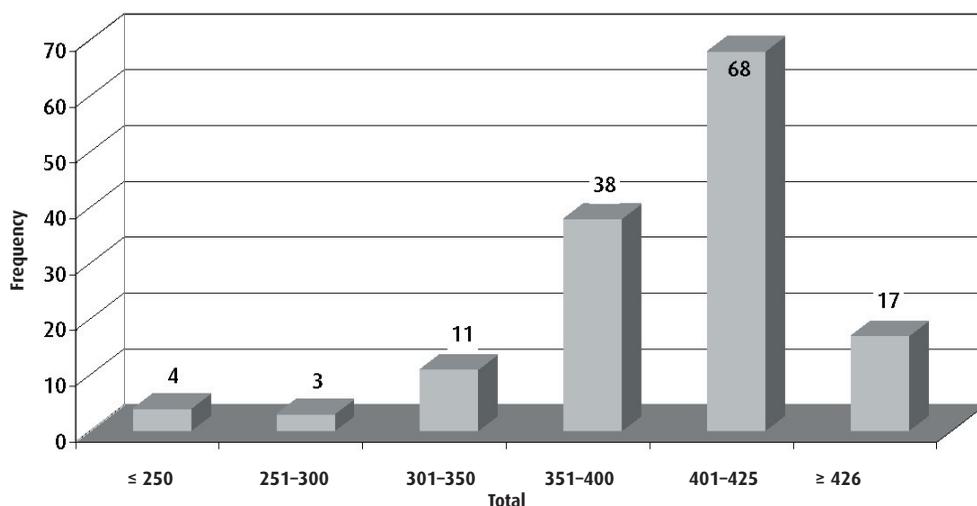
Table 13: Whether requiring CET certification for undergraduate qualification (for all universities surveyed³)

Yes	126	(35.7%)
No	227	(64.3%)
Total	353	(100.0%)

Table 14: Whether requiring CET certificate for undergraduate qualification (for universities of different administrative jurisdiction)

	Types of Universities					Total
	Ministerial	Provincial	Local	Private	Others	
Yes	13 (22.0%)	74 (34.7%)	18 (56.3%)	17 (41.5%)	3 (75.0%)	125 (35.8%)
No	46 (78.0%)	139 (65.3%)	14 (43.8%)	24 (58.5%)	1 (25.0%)	224 (64.2%)
Total	59 (100.0%)	213 (100.0%)	32 (100.0%)	41 (100.0%)	4 (100.0%)	349 (100.0%)

Figure 2: Cutoff scores for passing CET



Another desired effect of the CET reform shown by the survey was that, among the universities that still required their students to pass the CET, there was clear variation in the cutoff scores for what constituted a “Pass”, as shown in Figure 2.

Observations from the experimental universities show instances of flexible and innovative utilization of the national CET results. Some ran their own English qualification examinations but students could be exempted from this examination if they obtained a certain score from the CET. Others counted the CET score as half of the total score for undergraduate qualification. Still others linked the CET score with the results of other domestic or internationally accepted tests and allowed their students a free choice of the tests they preferred.

Concerning course work evaluation, different experimental universities also came up with different measures. Most incorporated oral and written components in their achievement tests. Students’ classroom performance, use of online learning systems, and their participation in

³ Due to a technical error, of the 530 colleges and universities surveyed, only 353 answered this question.

various other curricular and extracurricular activities related to English language learning could all count toward their final grade. More and more functions had been built into the online learning systems that could provide instant feedback on students' oral and written practices and statistics showing students' progress or relative standing in a class were also made available to both teachers and students, enabling them to make timely adjustments in their teaching and learning.

Reflections and conclusions

After eight years of intensive efforts made by government leaders, university teachers and students, as well as publishers and education software developers, College English, a compulsory course affecting the life of millions of college students, has undergone tremendous transformation. One of the most important driving forces behind these apparent changes was undoubtedly the direct leadership of the state government, especially the MOE (Wu & Liu, 2008). Many of the measures initiated by the government have been at least partially accepted and implemented.

The success of this top-down model of reform was attributable not only to the particular socio-political traditions which provided a favorable environment for the center-periphery model, but also to the urgency of the situation which called for immediate and effective measures to curb the growing social dissatisfaction with College English teaching. More importantly, along with the promulgation and the ensuing revision of the *CECR* and the reform of the CET, the government also took a series of supportive measures, including providing financial support to four publishers for the development of online learning systems, selecting 180 experimental and then 65 model colleges and universities for the generation of ideas and experiences to be disseminated in the later stages of the reform, supporting 437 research projects related to the reform, and organizing training programs which were attended by over 15,000 teachers from more than 1,000 colleges and universities (Zhang, 2008). These measures contributed immeasurably to the success of the endeavor.

Top-down as it was on the whole, the recent College English reform also encouraged local participation and innovation. Many colleges and universities came up with innovative ideas and practices which were either suited to their particular needs or circumstances or ready to be adopted by other institutions of a similar nature. It was the combined efforts from both the top and the grassroots level that could guarantee the sustainability of innovation (Markee, 1997).

Behind the apparent achievements made by the recent College English reform, it must be recognized at the same time that disparities still exist among different types of colleges and universities. On the whole, it seems that most of the innovative measures have been well received by most of the elite universities. But some of these measures have met with misunderstanding or even resistance. Initiators and implementers of these measures may not take the lack of action from the universities as hostility towards reform or mere irresponsibility for their students. Reasons may lie in the specific conditions the teachers and students are in, which are not ready for the kind of reform that is promoted, or in the specific social and educational environment which is different from that for which the new reform has been designed.

The lack of action may also be due to the fact that more training for both the teachers and students should be provided and more time should be allowed before real changes can be expected to take place. After all, "[c]hange is a human necessity. It evolves rather than take shape in fits and starts. Change in education is no exception (Mukhopadhyay, Pillai, Murthy, Sagar, & Ramanujam, 2009). Furthermore, teachers' psychological reactions should be taken into serious consideration, as Waters (2009) points out that resistance is a natural response to change. Instead of suppressing different voices, the government should encourage people with different opinions to express their concerns. Only in this way can new solutions be worked out and timely corrections be made of the possibly erroneous policies that the implementors of innovation are trying to push.

In the initial designing stage of the reform, great emphasis was given not only to what was

to be reformed but also to how the reform was to be carried out. In other words, implementors fully realized that there should be diversified requirements for colleges and universities with different educational resources and in different geographical locations, and sufficient training and education should be provided to teachers, students and university administrators. But along with the progression of the reform, more and more attention was focused on a unified format of change and a change that was expected to come at the lowest possible cost in terms of financial and human resources investment. At this time, it is important to keep in mind the lessons from countless past educational reform projects that flexibility in the goals and methodologies of an innovative program and sustained support from the reform initiators are essential for the successful incorporation of the principles and practices introduced by the reform (Waters, 2009; White, Martin, Stimson, & Hodge, 1991).

To conclude, it seems appropriate to quote White et al. (1991),

Curriculum innovation may be thought of as being on-going and developmental rather than as the installation of ready-made and complete solutions in a system ready and waiting to receive them. Indeed the implementation of an innovation may be only the beginning of a process of adaptation, adjustment and refinement and the innovation may require continuing support before it becomes institutionalized as part of the routines of the organization (pp. 191-192).

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