

COLLEGE ENGLISH CURRICULUM REQUIREMENTS IN CHINA: EXPECTATIONS AND RESPONSES

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Abstract

The purpose of the research reported here was firstly to examine the expectations placed on university teachers of English in China in relation to curriculum changes as evidenced in the College English Curriculum Requirements (For Trial Implementation, 2004), designed for non-English majors (hereafter CECR 2004). It further reports on a study of responses to these changes on the part of teachers, administrators and policy-makers as revealed in interviews. The study adopts a mixed method of inquiry to deal with how teachers made sense of multiple realities and constructed complicated interactions between CECR and themselves. Additionally, some aspects of the work of Bourdieu and Bernstein are taken to analyse and interpret the issues. The findings show that CECR gives the impression of being forward-looking, making reference to contemporary English language teaching (ELT) concepts. This leaves a great deal of freedom for individual universities to flesh out the details and adapt the content to their own contexts. However, teachers feel either frustrated with the lack of real change in the syllabus or threatened by new challenges such as the emphasis on speaking and listening for which they believe they have not been adequately prepared.

Key words: *College English Curriculum Requirements, tertiary English teaching.*

Introduction

English language curricula have been developing in most non-English speaking Western countries with an emphasis on such perspectives as communicative strategies, genre theory, English for specific purposes, and sociocultural considerations (Dixon 2009; Ferguson 2009; Valle and Villa 2006). English language curricula in China have developed over the past twenty years with uniquely Chinese characteristics (Liu and Dai 2003). Recently, the pace of reform in English curriculum has quickened. For instance, a 2005 report entitled Education in China observed that ‘China is trying to move away from its traditional didactic teaching practices with their heavy emphasis on rote memorization to a curriculum that incorporates inquiry methods, classroom discussion, applications of knowledge, and use of technology’ (2005, p. 6).

However, in the context of tertiary English teaching (hereafter TET) in China, Liu and Dai (2003) argue most teachers are inadequately prepared to confront significant upheavals. The study reported here attempts to address the following research questions: i) what expectations were placed on university teachers of English in relation to curriculum changes with the introduction of the College English Curriculum Requirements (hereafter CECR 2004);

ii). What were the responses to these expectations from teachers, administrators and policy-makers?

To answer these questions an historical overview of changes in tertiary English curricula in China has been presented below and more specifically CECR 2004 has been examined. Then a review of the literature regarding issues surrounding tertiary English curricula will be reported, followed by an outline of the research study. Data from 19 teachers, administrators

and policy makers from seven institutes across China has been drawn upon to offer answers to the research questions.

Historical Overview of Curriculum Change at University Level

In the traditional Chinese context where, in the words of Confucius, ‘schooling is superior to all other things,’ (wéi yǒu dú shū gāo), in order to be considered educated and cultured, language learning involves a thorough knowledge of the Chinese Classics that were deemed to be essential. Formal Chinese language education, therefore, was not focused on achieving communicative proficiency. Instead, formal language learning consisted of attaining a mastery of the classical literature and the ability to replicate the form and content of the classics as well as developing language knowledge in established poetic genres (Wang, 1960; Zhao and Zhang, 1981). Traditionally, literature was considered the most important content. This attitude has prevailed in foreign language teaching in China, and for many Chinese, the goal of a good English language education is to cultivate an elite scholarly group with a strong background in literature rather than with communicative competence. This can be seen in most curriculum designs for English students in English departments of Chinese universities, with the graduates from these programs going on to perpetuate the same approach in schools and universities.

The English language curriculum produced by the Ministry of Education in China has developed over the past twenty years with distinctive Chinese characteristics (Liu et al 2003). After the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), English language teaching began to reflect a more formal and academic mode which was demonstrated by the publication of a series of national English curricula. In 1980, the first college English curriculum for all students was published with the requirements that reading speed be emphasised with a goal of seventeen words per minute whereas listening, speaking and writing were downplayed with few requirements addressing these skills (ME, 1980). In 1985, the then State Educational Commission, which is the present Ministry of Education, issued a College English Curriculum (ME) for science students (1985), and in 1986, a College English Curriculum for arts students was also issued (1986) (Han et al 1995). In these two curricula, as expressed by their designers’ opinions (Han et al 1995), a common core of language was emphasised as vocabulary and grammar. In order to improve the requirement of vocabulary, *General Reference Words of College English Curriculum* (CEC, 1986; 1995), which combined the vocabulary requirements of the two curricula, was subsequently published. In addition, English was emphasised as a communicative tool not only for study but also for common use for non-English majors (that is, students whose majors are, for example, IT, Engineering, or Medicine and therefore are required to study general English). Moreover, textbooks were taken as the most important means to implement the curricula (ME 1985/1986). Finally, the College English Test – Band Four and Six (hereafter CET-4/6) was designated as the guarantor of successful learning (ME 1985/1986).

A modified version of the College English Curriculum, which combined the two curricula from 1985 and 1986 into one for all undergraduates with non-English majors was issued in 1999. It required college English teaching ‘to foster stronger reading ability of students and certain abilities of listening, speaking, writing and translation in order to help students communicate with English’ (ME, 1999). Five years later saw the College English Curriculum Requirements (For Trial Implementation) (CECR 2004) for non-English majors at universities introduced.

College English Curriculum Requirements (CECR 2004)

The CECR (2004) is the most current Ministry document that offers changes in the English language policy for Chinese universities. The document was designed ‘with a view to keeping up with the new developments of higher education in China, deepening the teaching

reform, improving teaching quality, incorporating technology to support the teaching process (see *Author, L.*, 2012, for an analysis of this aspect of CECR 2004) and meeting the needs of the country and society for qualified personnel in the new era' (p. 3).

The version of CECR 2004 used for the study reported here is the English translation issued by Tsinghua University Press in 2004. The main content is covered in 16 pages in total. It is appended with a Computer- and Classroom-based Multimedia College English Teaching Model, Self-Assessment/Peer Assessment Form of Students' English Competence, and Reference Word List of College English Curriculum Requirements (for trial implementation), Reference Phrase List of CECR and Active Word List of CECR. The latter lists of lexical items consume 185 pages (pp. 56-243). Table 1 outlines the major characteristics of CECR 2004

Table 1. Changes in CECR 2004.

Content	The College English Curriculum Requirement 2004 (By Tsinghua university press)
Purpose	Attempt to provide guidelines for English instruction in CET (p. 3)
Objective	To foster listening & speaking ability (p. 5)
Requirements of students' language level	Three levels of achievement: in terms of listening, speaking, reading, writing, translating & vocabulary (pp. 5-19)
Vocabulary	4,500-6,500 among three requirements (pp. 5-19)
Length of student texts	120 – 200w among three requirements (pp. 5-19)
School-based syllabus	Emphasises the content of university syllabus based on students' abilities & needs and the content of vocabulary and 5 skills (p. 19)
Teaching methodology	Provides a new teaching methodology: Computer- & Classroom-based Multimedia College English Teaching Model (pp. 21-25)
Assessment	By individual university; by region; by the national exam, including summative and formative (pp. 25-27); and self-assessment (pp. 36-55)
Management	Teaching documents, the credit system & Teachers' Training (pp. 29-31)

Theoretical Rationale of CECR 2004

When major changes to curriculum policy are introduced, it is reasonable to expect that the rationale underpinning such changes would be readily available, and preferably accompanying the policy document, so that those who need to implement the policy have a clear understanding of the theoretical basis and practical implications of the changes. Despite extensive searching, including through well known journals¹ in China after the publication of CECR (2004), no such rationale for the decisions made in designing CECR 2004 appears to be available.

From the document, however, an eclectic theoretical approach can be inferred. Several researchers point to the content-driven nature of the curriculum (Zheng et al 1997; Wang 2002; Feng 2003). In his research on learners' and teachers' beliefs, Wang (2002) finds a 'magic circle' that he identifies as 'teachers teach knowledge, learners learn knowledge, the tests test knowledge; knowledge is recited before the test and is forgotten after it' (p. 30). Wang provides the results of his survey on content teaching in which more than half of the teachers believed that the purpose of their teaching is the transmission of knowledge. This is evidenced, for example, in the following vocabulary requirement:

Basic requirements:

6. Recommended Vocabulary: Students should acquire a total of 4,500 words and 700 phrases (including those that have been covered in high school English courses), among which 2,000 are active words (see appendix IV: Reference Word List of College English Curriculum Requirements (for Trial Implementation) (2004, p. 11).

There is still a strong emphasis on the traditional skill of translation, including precise specifications of speed:

With the help of dictionaries, students should be able to translate essays on familiar topics from English into Chinese and vice versa. The speed of translating from English into Chinese should be 300 English words per hour whereas the speed of translating from Chinese into English should be 250 Chinese characters per hour. The translation should read smoothly. Students are expected to be able to use appropriate translation techniques (CECR 2004, pp. 9-11).

Alongside this ‘content-driven’ approach, there are indirect references to language in use, communicative functions, genre theory, English for specialised purposes, and so on without explanation as to how these diverse elements form a coherent theoretical basis for curriculum. Without this information the policy document risks misinterpretation and confusion on the part of teachers.

Issues Surrounding Tertiary English Curriculum

There is little available research on the use and implementation of CECR 2004. However, in 2002, Wang concluded that the intended goal of the tertiary English teaching curriculum in China was discrete knowledge rather than a process of language use. While this study addressed the impact of the nature of the College English Curriculum 1999 rather than the nature of CECR 2004, it shows that before CECR 2004, teachers believed that the transmission of content was their main task.

Another issue raised in the research literature is the place of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) in the curriculum. Problems surrounding ESP in the national curricula have been recently recognised (Zhang 2003; Cai 2004a, 2004b). Zhang (2003) argues that English language learning in TET should be based on the needs of students rather than on a general English course that is required for completion of an undergraduate programme. Cai (2004a; 2004b) points out how English for specific purposes (ESP) has been resisted by national curricula in TET. He claims that the two curricula in 1985 and 1999 designated ESP to be the responsibility of teachers in other non-English subjects and was required to be introduced in subject areas after the first four semesters’ of general English instruction. CECR 2004 does not reflect the trend of developing tertiary English by focusing on ESP, but rather on successfully completing general English course books. Cai believes that ESP in CECR 2004 is merely mentioned without adequate interpretation.

Cai (2005) claims that what has mostly affected general English teaching is the fact that the period for general English learning is too long from primary school to doctorate language learning, which lasts around 20 years. He explains the reasons for this as a) inconsistency of English teaching between primary school, secondary school and university learning; b) general English teaching is the generally preferred paradigm among Chinese intellectuals; c) other pressures coming from CET-4/6, teachers and textbooks. He also emphasises that around 60,000 English teachers at universities would face great challenges if general English teaching was replaced by teaching English for specific purposes.

A further issue in the literature is the shift in emphasis from reading and writing to listening and speaking in CECR 2004. The objective of university English teaching is now described as follows (CECR 2004):

... to develop students' ability to use English in an all-round way, especially in listening and speaking (p.5).

The change in emphasis to listening/speaking is also emphasised in the course design:

In designing College English courses, requirements of competence in listening and speaking should be fully considered (p. 19).

This change of focus has the potential to provoke a reaction from university English language instructors who are more accustomed to teaching literacy skills than oral/aural communicative skills. It appears that listening and speaking have been highlighted because they have been overlooked or undervalued in previous versions of national college English curricula and classroom instruction. There is limited research on what this shift in focus in CECR 2004 really means to teachers and their teaching. Nevertheless, Liu et al (2003) provided a report on the Reform of Foreign Language Teaching at Universities in China where they present a survey on what language abilities should be developed at universities. The survey shows that 66.2% of college English teachers believed that all the skills of listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translation should be developed; 19.2% of them suggested teaching four of the skills without translation; 7.9% preferred listening and speaking; 6.7 % of the teachers indicated a preference for reading and writing. They pointed out that while what was required in the 1999 version of the curriculum, where reading and writing were over-emphasised, did not meet teachers' expectations, what is now required in CECR 2004, where listening and speaking are the focus, might still not match the ideas of general teachers who believed that all five skills should be equally developed.

Finally, there is the issue of the influence of textbooks on CECR 2004. In Chinese tertiary English classes textbooks are used as the main resource for course and syllabus design instead of a university or departmental developed syllabus (Feng 2003). When examining ELT methodology in tertiary English teaching, Feng (2003) concludes that 'teachers use textbooks as their syllabus to guide their lesson planning' (p. 15). He also observes that the perceived necessity for teaching substantial textbook content makes it difficult for teachers to carry out a communicative approach.

Most of the studies discussed above cannot be considered as responses to the changes of CECR 2004 since they were almost all published before the introduction of CECR 2004. However, some articles published after CECR 2004 highlight some characteristics of TET, which persisted, even after the introduction of CECR 2004. Cai (2004b; 2005) proposed that the following characteristics of TET have persisted:

- a) the tertiary curriculum is seen as content-oriented teaching with teachers perceiving the transmission of knowledge as their main task;
- b) tertiary English teaching in China does not reflect the trend of an increasing focus on ESP, but rather on successfully completing English course books;
- c) English for General Purposes continues to be taught at the tertiary level because of i) a lack of continuity and coordination between primary, secondary school and university learning, ii) pressure from the CET-4/6 examination, iii) the vested interests of the textbook producers, and iv) teachers' limited knowledge of ESP;
- d) there is general dissatisfaction among students because what they learn in English courses at universities cannot be put into practice;
- e) the abrupt shift in emphasis from reading and writing to speaking and listening is problematic and doesn't satisfy teachers' preference for a balanced approach to all five skills (Cai 2004b, 2005).

The literature on English language curriculum in China has tended to focus mainly on the primary and secondary levels and has been well developed (Ng & Tang 1997; Adamson 2002;

2004; Nunan 2003) whereas university English language curricula in China has had insufficient attention (Wu, 2001). Wu claims that ‘the reformers are still far from knowing a sound basis on which to plan the sequence of learning’ and ‘research is needed to address these curriculum and evaluation issues’ (2001, p. 192).

While the above findings shed light on some of the issues surrounding changes in tertiary English curriculum in China, they say nothing about the demands placed on teachers by these changes and how teachers have responded to these demands. The study reported here will partially fill this gap.

Research Methodology

Research Design

In order to demonstrate the tension between the CECR (2004) policy and the views of teachers, administrators and policy-makers, a mixed method inquiry was used to investigate the research questions posed, i.e.

- i). What are the expectations of higher education English teachers in the use of ICT in implementing the CECR policy?
- ii). What is the perception of higher education English teachers, administrators and policy-makers to the expectations of these mandatory syllabus requirements?

Research design is always contingent upon the nature of the research problem (Bouma 2000; Creswell 2003) and for this study a mixed method was used. In practical terms, a qualitative paradigm seeks to understand a particular social situations, event, role, group, or interaction in a broader societal context (Cohen et al 2000; Gay et al, 2006) and allows the researcher to consider a variety of phenomena that focus on ‘the properties, the state, and the character (i.e., the nature) of phenomena’ (Labuschagne 2003:100). It assists the researchers, as an insider participant, to understand the complexity of views, including the different ‘voices’, which are seldom heard and even ignored. A qualitative paradigm was used for this part of the study to seek to identify causal relationships. This study sought to understand the interactions of teachers, administrators and policy makers with the CECR policy.

Research Strategy

The research strategy involved a document review, a survey of 510 academics (293 responses) and individual interviews with 19 teachers, 6 administrators and 3 policy makers selected from six universities across China

The document review informed questions designed for the teacher interviews, such as issues of ICT skills, pedagogy, and the use of ICTs in CALL. The documents reviewed consisted of policy statements (official syllabus documents including the national curricula (1985/1986; 1999; 2004) and their relevant reports (ME 2002; 2005), syllabus documents and course programs from three national universities, a nationally approved textbook and CET exam papers (CET 4, 200106). The teacher interviews in turn provided the context for interviews with administrators and policy-makers. In this sense, the document analysis and the responses of interviews were coded to map out the complicated picture of tertiary English teachers at university level in China and to answer the research questions.

The survey instrument developed for the study made use of a Likert scale to provide a range of responses to a given question. The survey consisted of 14 questions with 3 open questions. A semi-structured interview schedule, composed of 4 questions with 34 sub-questions, was designed to collect responses from teachers in order to describe, compare, contrast, classify, analyse and interpret the perceptions of teachers in tertiary English teaching. Following the

teacher interviews, semi-structured interview protocols were developed for administrators and policy makers. Each tool was reviewed by academics working in the field for clarity, ambiguity and alignment with the research questions before being translated into Chinese. In order to ensure the quality of the survey and interview data, a pilot survey was conducted to trial the survey items with around 50 teachers and three pilot interviews were conducted with three teachers. Changes were made to the survey and interview questions to address any issues that arose. The revised interview consisted of a semi-structured schedule with opportunities for probing where necessary and for free response where the interviewees indicated the desire to go beyond the schedule. The questions were based on the findings from the survey, where more extensive responses were thought to be needed, and also drawn from the document analysis. The advantage of the interview was that it allowed participants to introduce their own perspectives, unlike the more restrictive survey, and to clarify their responses in a more discursive context.

Participants

The participants were selected from six universities from Harbin, Beijing and Shanghai and initially identified by their respective Deans. Additionally teachers were recruited directly, in their staff rooms, by the researcher with the consent of their respective Deans. During the selection process, to ensure a range of age, gender, institutions, qualifications and experience, some initial short interviews took place as part of the participant selection process to ensure variability in the sample of teachers.

Of the administrators, all were Deans of foreign languages departments. Three were from Beijing; one was from Harbin, and the other two were from Shanghai. Of the three policy makers, one was the Chancellor of a university, one was a member of the committee for the national curriculum (2004) and one was from the Ministry of Education in a province.

To maintain anonymity, the identities of all participants have been coded as T (1-19) for teachers, A (1-6) for administrators and P (1-3) for policy makers. For a detailed description of the research methodology, see *Author* (2010).

Data Analysis

Initial analysis of the interview data involved coding emergent themes and then, Maton's (2004) three concepts of '*temporality*', '*autonomy*' and '*specialisation*' were adopted to identify and interpret key relationships and interrelationships between policy and reality, teachers and the context in the social scientific analysis of textual data (Gao 2010; 2011).

The study is limited in sample size and purposeful sampling was used rather than random sampling, resulting in some constraining of the data. The reliability of self-reporting data in the context of the difficulties of researching in China must be considered as a weakness. However, despite these limitations, the data does give clear indications of the current situation in teaching English in higher education in China.

The documents were reviewed in terms of changes in (a) the purpose and function of CECR 2004, (b) the theoretical and research bases, (c) the aims and objectives and (d) the content requirements. Integrated into the analysis will be data from document analysis results and interviews with teachers, administrators and policy-makers indicating their responses to the demands of the curriculum.

Purpose and function of CECR 2004:

The national syllabus in China plays a pivotal role in either fostering or inhibiting change. With such an immense population as that of China, the processes of change are subtle. Even though the central government can mandate reform in a top-down fashion, one cannot assume that there will be immediate and substantial change, as suggested by A1, a dean from Beijing, who sees change as cyclical:

In CECR 2004, one requirement guides thousands of universities in China even though it requires universities to make their own different syllabus. Actually, when the top pays attention, some changes happen. When some changes happen, the top pays more attention. This relationship between the change and the top is subtle. (A1, Beijing)

The various versions of the national syllabus define their function differently. The 1985 version claims to guide tertiary English teaching instruction. The 1999 syllabus emphasises its influence on both 'how to teach' in terms of instruction and 'what to teach' in terms of course material design. CECR 2004 describes its function as:

providing colleges and universities with guidelines for English instruction for non-English major students (CECR 2004, p.3).

In addition to the above purpose and function of CECR 2004, the role of CECR 2004 is further described as providing minimal content and standards, decentralizing the authority for designing specific, detailed syllabi to individual universities:

Because institutions of higher learning differ from each other in terms of teaching resources, students' level of English upon entering college, and the social needs they face, colleges and universities should formulate, in accordance with the Requirements and in the light of their specific circumstances, a scientific, systematic and individualized college English syllabus to guide their own College English teaching (CECR 2004, p. 3).

Thus CECR provides the basic outline to guide tertiary English teaching. Therefore, it is general, not specific. Second, it allows for a great deal of autonomy by entitling individual universities to create their own syllabus; third, it emphasises the important role of university-based syllabi in actual classroom teaching in the individual institution. As a policy-maker, P1, a member of the designing committee for CECR 2004, emphasised the autonomy that CECR 2004 grants each university:

The CECR 2004 is a policy document for guidance, not for mandate; therefore, it is general, not specific (p. 1).

This confirms the role of CECR 2004 as providing general guidance to tertiary English teaching. While this is the case, there is little indication in CECR as to how institutions might convert the general guidelines into specific curricula. The interview data indicate that many teachers and policy-makers in practice see no particular role for CECR 2004 in their teaching. Assoc. Prof. T1, from a university in Harbin, stated:

I do not think there is any change in the new curriculum (2004). It is too far from me, I mean it has no influence on my classroom teaching. ... I do not see any relationships between the CECR 2004 and my classroom teaching. (T1, Harbin)

An English lecturer, T2, from a university in Beijing, shared a similar idea:

There is no substantial change in the new curriculum (2004) in terms of the purpose or function because it is as useless as anyone before. Theoretically, it is always mentioned whereas in practice, there is no practical meaning. ... When I prepare my lessons, I just think about what students really need, for example, the language points that might occur in the CET-4/6 exam. (T2, Beijing)

Theoretical and research base of CECR 2004:

A project as substantial as a national syllabus needs to be based on solid theory and empirical evidence. A sound theoretical framework helps teachers understand the rationale for curriculum development and policy and can serve as a form of professional development.

In the 1985 curriculum, many of the merits of communicative language teaching models by Western scholars were adopted (Han, 1985, 1999). For instance, in a significant break with more traditional models from the past, it refers to the principles of Brumfit (1984) relating to the use of communicative methodology in balancing language usage and in mediating accuracy and fluency in foreign language education. Additionally, it acknowledges van Ek (1976) as the main reference for the ‘functional and notional inventory’. Moreover, it is observed that the ‘inventory of micro-skills’ of language use is a direct copy of the ‘taxonomy of language skills’ listed in Munby (1978) (Han, 1999). Empirical data from a needs analysis survey conducted in 1983 is mentioned briefly to justify the ranking of the five language skills (Feng, 2003).

In the 1999 syllabus, Functional and Notional Usage is listed as an attachment (Feng, 2003, pp. 159-163) which, to some extent, is an indication of the theoretical approach being adopted. The 1999 syllabus also drew on an investigation of the nature and amount of vocabulary needed by students (Huang & Shao 2001).

However, in CECR 2004, there is no direct reference to any empirical research or theoretical framework. P1 one of the members of the committee for CECR 2004, frankly admitted that in the process of designing CECR, its philosophy and rationale had not been established and that it is not solidly based on research:

The former curriculum (1999) had done a lot of investigation. The new one (2004) did not do that much, but it does consider the needs of students, society, and the responses of some seminars.... There is no in-depth research in terms of how many words students should know. Normally based on the students’ language level at the entrance, we predict and estimate the general amount. ... A theoretical model for the CECR (2004) has not been formed yet. ... We did not take into account many theoretical references, but referred to some books on syllabus design. Although there was no special research for this curriculum, we looked at the research which was conducted for the previous curricula. (P1, Beijing)

Such a situation has significant implications for the 60,000 English teachers and administrators who rely on the national syllabus for direction and guidance.

As an administrator, Prof. A2, a Dean of a foreign language department at a university in Shanghai, considered that the absence of empirical research and theory in CECR 2004 represents a backward step, with arbitrary decisions plucked out of thin air:

CECR 2004 does not change. Rather, it withdraws compared to the previous curricula. ... It is arbitrary, unrealistic and bureaucratic in content. The evidence is that it is not based on any scientific theories and research. (A 2, Shanghai)

Aims and objectives of CECR 2004:

With the communicative emphasis of the 1985 and 1999 syllabi, the main focus of the objectives in CECR 2004 is to recognize the importance of speaking and listening, in a context where reading and writing still predominate:

The objectives of College English is to develop students’ ability to use English in an all-round way especially in listening and speaking, so that in their future work and social interactions they will be able to exchange information effectively through both spoken and written channels (CECR 2004, p. 5).

Such a re-focusing has implications for teachers as well as students. In responding to the change, almost all teachers interviewed believed that moving from ‘reading and writing’

to 'listening and speaking' was a big change for them, requiring a shift in their own language proficiency. T2 a lecturer from Beijing, in his interview shared the same idea, whereas he also stated that teachers' professional development should be one of the key parts in the policy:

English teachers' language proficiency, particularly listening and speaking, must be improved. In this sense, the new requirement to focus on students' listening and speaking is a challenge to teachers. Therefore, how to help teachers to improve their own proficiency should be specified in programs or procedures. (T2, Beijing)

In contrast with the teachers, almost all the administrator interviewees reflected that moving from 'reading and writing' to 'listening and speaking' did not represent much of a change in practice. In his interview, A1, a Dean at a university in Beijing, stated that:

The CECR 2004 emphasizes practical learning purposes -- a shift from reading and writing to listening and speaking, compared to the 1999 version; however, teachers just teach their textbooks as usual. (A1, Beijing)

This view is supported by A2, a Dean from a university in Shanghai

I personally believe that the new curriculum is unrealistic. The CECR made a change from stressing reading and writing to listening and speaking, which is good, but it clashes with classroom teaching. The proportion of teacher to students is around or 1 to 60; meanwhile, an amount of content of the textbook has to be finished, with a lot of exercises for CET-4/6. Could the shift from reading to speaking solve these problems? (A2, Shanghai)

All the above excerpts indicate that the change to speaking and listening is seen as mere rhetoric as the syllabus fails to acknowledge the realities of the Chinese context, both in terms of the lecturers' own language proficiency and in terms of the pressures on lecturers to teach to the textbook and the exam. Speaking and listening are not considered to be a high priority, either for academic success or for practical communicative purposes.

Content requirements of CECR 2004:

The main change in terms of content in CECR 2004 is the increase in vocabulary items to be taught – from 4,000 (1985) to 6,500 (2004). The emphasis placed on mandatory vocabulary is illustrated by the number of pages devoted to vocabulary lists in the syllabus, some 185 pages (pp. 58-243) in total. In addition to vocabulary, the skills of listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translating make up the content of the syllabus. The content is organized according to the three levels or standards: basic level, intermediate level, and higher level. (pp.5-19). As an example, listening has three levels of skills ranging from basic, to intermediate and higher level (CECR 2004):

Basic requirements:

1. Listening: Students should be able to follow classroom instructions, everyday conversations, and lectures on general topics conducted in English. ... be able to understand special English programs spoken at a speed of about 130 words per minute (wpm), grasping the main ideas and key points and employ basic listening strategies to facilitate comprehension (p. 9).

Intermediate requirements:

1. Listening: Students should be able to follow, in the main, talks and lectures by people from English-speaking countries, to understand longer English radio and TV programs produced in China on familiar topics spoken at a speed of around 150 wpm, grasping the main ideas, key points and relevant details (p. 11).

Higher requirements:

1. Listening: Students should be able to understand long dialogues and passages, and grasp the key points even when sentence structures are complicated and views are only implied. They should, by and large, be able to understand radio and TV programs produced in English-speaking countries (CECR 2004, p. 15).

From the above, it can be seen that the CECR policy expects that students will be able not only to develop listening skills and strategies, but also to apply these in a range of contexts, including English for Academic Purposes.

While these examples suggest a forward-looking approach to syllabus content, in fact they are simply mentioned in passing and contrast with the majority of the document, which stresses the content of discrete areas such as vocabulary and grammar. In the interviews, teachers and administrators responded that the content of CECR 2004 could not be considered as having changed from the 1999 version; therefore, there were no expectations on teachers to reflect this. T1, from Harbin elaborated that:

I know a bit of the CECR, such as how many words and sentence patterns are required, what levels students have to achieve etc.; meaningless. Teaching is still grammar teaching, nothing has changed. (T1, Harbin)

The response of T1 indicates that lecturers' perceptions of English teaching at university level is seen as grammar and vocabulary instruction ('how many words and sentence patterns were required') and that in reality, 'nothing has changed'.

In terms of the large vocabulary section and the isolated skills descriptions, some administrators (A2, A3, and A1) pointed out that CECR 2004 has not changed because it is still a content-oriented curriculum. A2 points out that:

What does 185 pages of vocabulary mean? What does it mean to have five isolated skills descriptions without any relationship between them? They just show one thing: the CECR 2004 is a typical content-driven curriculum. (A2, Shanghai)

In the interviews, some teachers voiced their frustration at the lack of real change in the syllabus content. T3 from Beijing, for example, expressed his disappointment that CECR is so general that it provides no more guidance than the textbook:

*The CECR 2004 for general English teaching does not make me understand more my classroom teaching...
What I can do is – just teach to the textbook ... for CET-4. (T3, Beijing)*

Of particular concern was the issue of whether to teach 'general English' as opposed to the more specialists academic and professional English required at tertiary level. T4, a lecturer from a university in Harbin, argued that:

The CECR 2004 has not made any substantial changes and differences in terms of what to teach at university level because it is the same as the general English teaching that students have received in their previous English education. ... The failure of the college English teaching is the focus on vocabulary and grammar, not language use. Students should focus on developing subject knowledge through English after they enter universities. (T4, Harbin)

As an administrator, the chancellor of a university in Harbin, A3 also pointed out that the emphasis on English for General Purposes seriously obstructs students' language learning and the learning of other subject knowledge through English:

Vocabulary and grammar teaching repeats what students have learned in their high schools. This leads to the huge consumption of their valuable time and energy. For students, English for General Purposes has already seriously disturbed students in terms of their own major learning. Students need to spend more time on the specialist English of their discipline. (A3, Harbin)

Results of the Research

The reported study was attempting to answer the two research questions :

i). What expectations were placed on university teachers of English in relation to curriculum changes with the introduction of the College English Curriculum Requirements (hereafter CECR 2004)?

ii). What were the responses to these expectations from teachers, administrators and policy-makers?

The answer to the research questions above is shown by an analysis of the key document – CECR 2004 and the data interviews as evidence regarding the demands and the responses on and from the teachers, administrators and policy makers in terms of their *temporality*, *autonomy*, and *specialising* (Maton, 2004).

I. For the first question, the main focus of the 2004 policy is to recognize the importance of speaking and listening (CECR 2004, p. 5). This in itself is a major shift in a system which has a strong tradition of teaching through intensive reading. Additionally, the content of CECR has been specified according to three levels of achievement: basic level, intermediate level, and higher level (pp. 5-19), organized in terms of listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translating. While the requirements suggest a forward-looking approach to syllabus content, in fact the innovations are simply mentioned in passing and contrast with the majority of the document, which still stresses the content of discrete areas such as vocabulary and grammar.

With regard to *autonomy*, the document analysis also provides expectations regarding the degree of *autonomy* given to teachers and administrators to implement change. The role of CECR 2004 is defined as providing minimum content and standards, while decentralizing the authority for designing specific, detailed syllabi to individual universities (CECR 2004, p. 3). It emphasises the important role of university-based syllabi in actual classroom teaching in the individual institution. CECR 2004 appears to afford teachers and universities a great deal of space for autonomy in curriculum; however, these expectations surrounding autonomy also appear to be problematic. This autonomy is not fully taken up at the level of the university; teachers have been too heavily reliant on the textbook and the College English Test – Band 4/6 has made formative assessment largely meaningless for tertiary English teaching (Author 2007). Although CECR provides a great deal of autonomy, the lack of specialist knowledge has an impact on the extent to which this autonomy can be taken up.

With regard to *specialisation*, the document analysis suggests that it is assumed that teachers and administrators/policy makers have the specialist knowledge needed to implement change. CECR 2004 has high expectations of teachers' professional expertise by requiring substantial changes in *what to teach*. It provides little insight, however, into its theoretical rationale or research base and the document itself appears somewhat eclectic in its content, with teachers questioning its credibility and relevance.

II. For the second question, with regard to orientation, there is little evidence of change based on interviews with teachers and administrators on the ground. Teachers perceived that although CECR 2004 seems to mandate a change on 'what to teach', in fact it is seen as ambiguous in terms of its theoretical rationale and the clarity of the purpose of tertiary English teaching. As a

result, teachers reported feeling lost and uncertain as to ‘what to teach’; therefore, they returned to the comfort and security of textbook teaching, relying on their own previous experience.

With regard to autonomy, while the policy seems to be allocating autonomy to universities and teachers, CECR 2004 is still retaining power by several means:

(1) By being vague about expectations, such as the deficiency of theoretical rationale, which leads teachers as well as students to maintain the status quo and not seize the opportunity for autonomy. For instance, although they are given the freedom to introduce English for Specific Purposes and Academic English, teachers tend to stick with teaching for general purposes in TET as the policy provides no detail on what is involved in ESP or EAP.

(2) Although the policy appears to confer autonomy on teachers, the system fails to provide opportunities for teachers’ systematic professional development to enable them to deploy this autonomy.

(3) A ‘hidden’ control of the system through College English Test (4/6) results in a false autonomy as teachers are coerced into the traditional test-oriented teaching.

In this sense, the space provided by CECR 2004 for teachers and universities is illusory and such autonomy seems to have not been explored and used yet. Teachers could not take autonomy into practice or they were not allowed or encouraged to do so.

Based on Maton (2004a), autonomy should be established upon well-developed economic production, political power and other fields of social practices. This is because autonomy is relative and often determined by external impacts in complicated pedagogic practices; it could be stronger or weaker in certain situations. When economic and political influence is not properly used, autonomy for teachers and universities is compromised. A2 emphasised this issue in his interview (2004):

‘Academic politics’ is popular. There would not be CET-4/6 if there were no support of the government. ... Additionally, it involves the issue of business. Roughly calculating, it is said around six million candidates each time participate in CET-4/6. If each of them has to pay ¥16, ... how much is it in total each time?

A2 analysed the impact from both economic and political aspects. First, ‘academic politics’ concerns top-down power, indicating that teachers might not have autonomy with regard to CET-4, even though the policy appears to encourage such autonomy. Second, economic power was misused to pursue money rather support teachers in using their autonomy. Such weaker autonomy in the field of TET has profound effects on the context of this teaching in China because it controls the nature of change, teachers’ perceptions of change, and the actual practice of teaching in English language classrooms.

With regard to specialised knowledge, teachers admitted that they lacked the specialist knowledge required to implement the policy. The tension between what teachers were assumed to know and what they know in reality is also a factor that drives teachers back to the comfortable and familiar. A major reason why the autonomy provided by CECR 2004 has not been taken up in the universities is the teachers’ lack of confidence in their knowledge of current curriculum development approaches.

Conclusion and Application

The conceptual framework – *Temporality, Autonomy and Specialisation*, taken in this study was not only used as a tool to analyse the data but also allowed us to make further interpretation of the relationship between the context outside of teachers and teachers, administrators and policy makers themselves in the complicated reality.

While the theoretical rationale of CECR is fairly implicit and eclectic, the syllabus gives

the impression of being forward-looking, making reference to contemporary ELT concepts and leaving a great deal of freedom for individual universities to flesh out the details and adapt the content to their own contexts. In reality, as change agents, teachers, administrators and policy makers believed that much of the change appears to be simply rhetoric and ‘tinkering at the edges’, with little guidance on how the syllabus might be implemented. Teachers felt either frustrated with the lack of real change in the syllabus, threatened by new challenges such as the emphasis on speaking and listening for which they have not been adequately prepared, or are ignoring the process as they believe that they are too far removed from the policy.

As for the achievement of English teachers’ autonomy and specialised knowledge at university level, it depends on the change of political and economical development in the external context as well as enacting a series of regulations and programs in the field of tertiary English teaching. One way ahead then, for future policy development, might be that the committee appoint a team with specialist knowledge and expertise in ELT theory and practice to develop a coherent policy statement that is grounded in research and sensitive to the Chinese context. Such a statement then could be supplemented by detailed support documents providing practical guidance on how the syllabus might be implemented at the level of the institution and the individual classroom and it could include a framework for professional development of English teachers to support the change necessary to implement CECR policy.

Notes

1. *Foreign language Journal*, *Foreign Language Teaching and Research*, *Foreign Language World*, *Modern Foreign Languages*, and *Foreign Languages* are generally accepted by tertiary English teachers as the main journals in the field of TET. This is because the articles published in these journals are regarded as meeting high scholarly standards by most universities in terms of contributors’ professional promotion.

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