

The Teaching of Reading to English Majors in China (1950-2020): Historical Development, Current Predicament and Potential Solutions

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Article Detail:	Abstract
<p>Received: 27 Jul 2024; Received in revised form: 25 Aug 2024; Accepted: 01 Sep 2024; Available online: 07 Sep 2024</p> <p>©2024 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).</p> <p>Keywords— <i>English major education in China, Intensive Reading course, Comprehensive English course.</i></p>	<p><i>This paper examines the historical development, current predicament, and potential solutions pertaining to the teaching of reading to English majors in China, with a specific focus on the course commonly known as "Intensive Reading" or "Comprehensive English". It investigates its evolution over a span of more than seventy years. It reveals that the educational objective for English majors has increasingly emphasized the development of language proficiency and humanistic literacy. The positioning of the course, however, has largely remained as a comprehensive language-skills training course, lacking clear objectives and effective operational norms. To better align with current educational goals, this paper proposes the course positioning as an enlightening and inspiring course that promotes language proficiency, enhances humanistic literacy, and establishes connections with disciplinary knowledge. It also sets the objectives as providing perspectives from literature, linguistics and related disciplines, and guidance on learning methods, aiming to guide students in exploring and studying texts to achieve a profound understanding in both language and ideas. Based on an analysis of the challenges associated with the traditional practice, content-based instruction and production-oriented approaches, this paper proposes potential solutions that involve integrating autonomous learning with in-class instruction and incorporating disciplinary knowledge into language learning.</i></p>

I. INTRODUCTION

For historical reasons, the development of foreign language teaching and research in China didn't follow its intrinsic logic (Qu 2020). Foreign language

policy shifts were to a great extent politically motivated and lacked consistency (Chang 2006).

By the time the People's Republic of China was founded in 1949, about 49 of the 205 universities in

mainland China had English departments (Fu 1986:64-65). The curriculum then was heavily influenced by Western education, particularly the British and American systems, with a strong focus on the study of English and American literature (Li et al. 1988:419). At that time, only a select few were able to gain admission to the English departments of these universities. These had already acquired a solid foundation in English in secondary school, and were able to adapt to the teaching methods used in Western universities (He 2003).

The early 1950s saw two major changes in the curriculum. First, given the low language proficiency of the freshmen (Hu 2008:18), priority was given to the development of students' practical language skills. Then the English proficiency of high school graduates could no longer compare to that of the past, as Russian had replaced English in many high schools. Even for those who studied English, their foundation was generally weak after only three years of study in high school. As a result, the priority for students entering English departments in universities was to learn and master the language (He 2003).

Second is the adoption and wide implementation of the subject-based approach to language teaching. Following the practice of the Soviet Union, language learning was divided into separate subject areas, such as grammar, vocabulary, listening, speaking, reading and writing. Each area was treated as a distinct subject, with specific courses designed accordingly. The impact was far-reaching as the general education tradition in foreign language departments is gradually disappearing, giving way to a more practical, skills-oriented approach to foreign language education (Wang 2013).

In this context, intensive reading course, intended as a course for the comprehensive training of language skills, emerged in the English major curriculum and became the major "core course" with the most credits and the longest class hours. The course has been known by various names throughout different historical periods, with the most commonly used ones being Intensive Reading and Comprehensive English. This paper explores the issues related to the course under the following headings:

1. The history of the course
2. Current Predicament

3. Potential Solutions

II. THE HISTORY OF THE COURSE

Understanding the course's development history is crucial for comprehending its influence, current challenges, and potential solutions. This section examines the course as outlined in different curricula over time. From 1950 onwards, the education of English majors in China has been guided by six national documents that outline the curriculum, teaching plans, and syllabi.

In Draft Curriculum for Higher Education Institutions: Departments of Arts, Law, Science, and Engineering (1950 Curriculum), "Basic Readings" is a mandatory foundational foreign language course. Grammar, dictation, and other related courses were to be integrated into these classes, or offered separately, depending on specific circumstances (See Li et al. 1988:421)

In Teaching Plan for English Language and Literature Majors (1961 Teaching plan), "English" course is offered as specialized course, with 1450 credit hours out of 167 weeks.

Preliminary Drafts of the Four-Year Curriculum for English Majors in the School of Foreign Languages, English Language and Literature Majors at Comprehensive Universities, and English Majors at Higher Teacher Education Institutions (1979 Curriculum) stipulates that "English Practice Course" is a compulsory course, as Intensive Reading for English departments in comprehensive universities, Essential English for schools of foreign languages, and Intensive Reading for Normal universities.

The subsequent syllabuses made clear the course objectives, principles and methods.

Syllabus for the Foundational Stage of English Major Programs in Higher Education Institutions (1986 Syllabus) stipulates Comprehensive English course as comprehensive skill training course. The objective is to impart the fundamental language knowledge (phonetics, grammar, vocabulary, discourse structure, language functions/expressions, etc.), train the basic language skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing), cultivate students' ability to communicate in English, and guide their learning

methods and logical thinking, in order to establish a solid foundation for entering higher grades. Emphasis is placed on training the ability to reuse language in both oral and written forms (See Li et al. 1988:468-470).

In Syllabus for English Major Programs in Higher Education Institutions (2000 Syllabus) (SCFLM 2000), the course is renamed as Essential English, a professional skills course. It aims to enhance students' overall English proficiency through language foundation training and textual analysis. Compared to the 1986 syllabus, it places greater emphasis on developing reading comprehension as well as oral and written expression skills.

Teaching Guidelines for Undergraduate Foreign Language and Literature Majors at Higher Education Institutions (2020 Guidelines) changes the name back into Comprehensive English as a professional course (SCFLM 2020). It aims to cultivate students' comprehensive ability to use English language knowledge and skills for communication. The guidelines build upon the 2000 syllabus by incorporating the development of critical thinking and reasoning skills through the application of learned knowledge and techniques. In the course content description, the guideline for the first time explicitly emphasizes the systematic emphasis on language knowledge and highlights the humanistic characteristics of literary and cultural knowledge.

The changes can be understood in two ways. First, as for the course itself, it began during a historical period when students had low levels of entry proficiency and were in urgent need of language skills training. The course has had multiple names: English, Intensive English, Essential English and Comprehensive English. Regardless of the name, the course's position remains unchanged, i.e. a course for the comprehensive training of language skills. Second, from the changes in the syllabus, it can be seen that the course has consistently prioritized teaching language knowledge and training language skills. The trend over the years has been to increase the requirements for not only language knowledge and skills, but also communication and thinking abilities. This is in line with the increasing entry-level of students, and at the same time highlights the English major's recent shift in focus from skills-based and composite talent development to returning to its

academic roots. This provides an important context for our discussion of the teaching of reading to English majors.

III. CURRENT PREDICAMENT

Over the course of more than 70 years, the intensive reading course has focused heavily on imparting basic language knowledge and training basic language skills. This emphasis on the fundamentals of language has weakened the course's intellectual content, causing it to gradually fall into a predicament where it is unable to reflect fundamental differences from other skill-based courses, while also failing to demonstrate its humanistic and disciplinary nature. The difficulties faced by the course are common to English majors' skill-based courses, and exploring solutions to these difficulties may provide insights for reforming other courses.

For over 70 years, changes have continued in the understanding of language learning, social needs, and students' entry-level, but the reading course has not shown significant changes in its positioning, teaching content and methods. The lack of adaptation despite the changes has emerged as a significant factor contributing to the challenges faced by the course. In the early 1990s, there was even controversy surrounding whether or not to abolish the intensive reading course (Wen 2008; Cai 2010). Two major challenges are identified as follows.

First, the course's positioning and objectives lack clarity (Hou 1994; Lu and Ding 2002; Kang 2016; Chen and Cheng 2015) and connection to other courses (Wang 1987). Apart from the language teaching objectives, the course lacks specific instructional targets for professional knowledge content, making it difficult to help students construct a comprehensive knowledge structure (Chang and Jin 2012). Even for language teaching objectives, as the course aims to develop a broad range of language skills, including listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translating, without clear and specific target levels or criteria, the result is an overwhelming and impractical set of objectives that lacks feasibility and focus.

Second, due to the lack of clear course positioning and actionable objectives, the teachers often struggle

to define a clear sense of purpose and direction for the courses, which is a common issue across language training courses (He 2003), resulting in a haphazard approach to instruction. The teaching methods lack effective, systematic operational norms (Lu and Ding 2002; Kang 2016). Teachers may either follow the traditional pedagogical methods, or rely heavily on their disciplinary background and personal interests, resulting in a significant degree of arbitrariness and making it challenging to ensure effective teaching outcomes.

Wen (2018) specifies two kinds of the text-centered and input-based instruction in mainstream education in Mainland China: bottom-up (popular from the 1950s onwards to the mid-90s and still used in some remote areas in China) and top-down (increasingly dominant since the late 1990s). The former puts much emphasis on individual language items, and the latter on the meaning of a text.

The traditional method of teaching intensive reading in the 1950s and 1960s involved first discussing the content of the entire text and then explaining the vocabulary and grammar points, and the main shortcomings of this teaching method is being too focused on teaching, giving too little guidance, and laying too much emphasis on written language (see Shu 2005). The course primarily focuses on text-based content and employs an input-based approach, with a predominant teacher-centered methodology. Its main objective is to impart knowledge, particularly regarding the English language.

It is noteworthy that the influence of traditional intensive reading practices remains significant. Over the years, foreign language teaching methods have evolved, transitioning from grammar-translation to audio-lingual, communicative, task-based, and output-oriented approaches. However, the practice of breaking down texts into isolated vocabulary and grammar components still persists in some contexts. The actual teaching practice of the course has not moved beyond the confines of traditional intensive reading courses (Wen 2008), and the methods employed do not fundamentally differ from those used in general language schools (Qu and Chen 2018).

The reason for the significant influence of this approach may be attributed to its alignment with

behaviorist and structuralist perspectives in language teaching, as well as its resonance with ancient Chinese philology (Qu 2019:73) and the emulation of Soviet teaching practices.

Adopting the intensive reading method as a teaching method has many drawbacks. Short (1984) argues that breaking down texts into individual vocabulary and grammar elements deprives students of the opportunity to guess word meanings and understand meanings through context; Fu (1986:127) points out that immersion in intensive reading can constrain students' thinking and make them accustomed to achieving understanding through analysis and translation, which is not conducive to broadening their knowledge base and training their rapid reading skills. Overemphasizing language at the expense of other skills also prevents other abilities from being systematically developed and trained (Cai 2001; Qu 2016).

IV. POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

The proposed solutions are grounded in a redefined understanding of the traditional course positioning and comprehensive objectives by aligning them with contemporary educational demands.

4.1 Course positioning and objectives

Identifying the educational goals and objectives is the first step in course design (Fink 2013:69). The positioning of a curriculum is not an isolated event, and understanding it requires a clear understanding of the nature of English as a discipline.

Looking back at the development of English education in China, we can see that it has essentially embodied and materialized the utilitarian nature of English (Dai and Zhang 2007), and foreign language majors have long been influenced by instrumentalism, which has blurred the concept of the discipline (Lan 2009).

Qu and Chen (2019) proposes that as English proficiency levels have generally improved in China, it is essential for the English major to keep up with the changing times by adjusting its disciplinary hierarchy and attributes to ensure that the training goals are in line with society's expectations for undergraduate education. Zha (2018) points out that as an undergraduate program, the English major has

both humanistic and professional components, with a focus on literature, culture, linguistics, and area studies. Jin (2008) concludes that the essence of foreign language education is humanistic education, emphasizing the value of mental training and emotional cultivation. Foreign language skills are the fundamental proficiency of this discipline, with the ultimate goal of comprehending the literature, history, society, politics, culture, and spirit conveyed by the foreign language.

In conclusion, English majors are expected to have a strong command of the language and a high level of humanistic literacy, which constitute the focal points and core of their education.

The concerns for the course reflect the dissatisfaction with the reading course being merely a language knowledge and skill training course, a course assembled from separate and disconnected components. There have been researches exploring the unique value of this course, which originated from intensive reading, beyond its function as a skills-based course. The course can be characterized by its focus on intensive reading, emphasizing a comprehensive and profound interpretation of discourse meaning from multiple perspectives (Lu 2002). It can go further as to build a strong foundation of knowledge and provide intellectual challenges for students (Han 2001).

Combining the disciplinary attributes and curriculum positioning, Han (2001) contends that English majors have the potential to break away from the long-standing instrumentalist approach and purely technical training methods, and become a true humanities discipline. In this picture, Intensive Reading can serve as a valuable course for transitioning from purely technical training to a more comprehensive understanding of the discipline, a foundational course particularly well-suited for enlightening and engaging students.

Comprehensive English course differs from specialized courses in linguistics and literature, which have their own disciplinary framework, providing systematic knowledge and research methods that fully reflect the nature of English as a discipline (He 2004). However, as a fundamental course in the early stages of English major education, Comprehensive English has its own unique mission.

While students' overall language proficiency has generally improved upon admission, English majors often lack a solid foundation in language, literature, and cultural knowledge (He 2004), and students in some institutions exhibit poor basic skills (Wen 2019). Additionally, if students fail to develop critical thinking habits and lack an understanding of language and cultural knowledge during their early years of study, they may struggle to fully engage in the advanced-level coursework (Han 2001). Therefore, there is a need for a bridging course like Comprehensive English to help students establish a strong language foundation, connect with the subject content, and bridge the gap with specialized courses.

Based on such understanding, the positioning of the comprehensive English course will no longer be limited to the traditional approach of comprehensive language skills training. Instead, it will serve as an enlightening and inspiring course that promotes language proficiency, enhances humanistic literacy, and establishes connections with disciplinary knowledge. The clarification of the disciplinary nature and positioning of the English major course is instrumental in setting effective teaching objectives.

The 2020 Guidelines provide the following description of the course objectives: This course aims to cultivate students' ability to use English language knowledge and skills for communication. Through course study, students should be able to accurately distinguish and use standard English pronunciation and intonation, adapt to major English variations; identify various word classes and their grammatical forms, proficiently grasp common word formation processes, as well as the usage of basic sentence patterns and syntactic structures; recognize different genres and styles, skillfully employ various cohesive devices, common rhetorical techniques, writing skills in different genres, as well as techniques for transforming, paraphrasing, and translating complex and difficult sentences; apply acquired knowledge and skills for critical thinking, engage in discussions on practical issues or hot topics in real-life contexts, express opinions, and develop reasoning abilities (SCFLM 2020: 15).

It is evident that the core objectives encompass the learning of language knowledge and the training of language skills, including phonetics, vocabulary, grammar, and discourse. The language skills training

covers listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translation. To a large extent, the content of the course still overlaps with other language skills courses at a similar level, lacking emphasis, and thus making it challenging to achieve significant depth in any particular aspect.

Based on the understanding of the course's positioning as mentioned above, the Comprehensive English course is not merely about delivering content and practicing language for the sake of language itself. Instead, it adopts a content-based approach. Carefully selected texts are chosen, with a focus not on traditional informational or skill-based knowledge, but rather on structural knowledge and intellectual inquiry. The course provides perspectives from literature, linguistics, and related disciplines, as well as guidance on learning methods, aiming to guide students in exploring and thoroughly studying texts to achieve a profound understanding in both language and ideas.

At the linguistic level, the course emphasizes recognizing the correlation between language forms and meanings, as well as comprehending "the complexity of language expression" (Qu 2016), leading to the development of systematic knowledge. At the conceptual level, it involves delving deeply into the thoughts and cultural implications embedded within the works, cultivating students' intellectual skills and habits of thought.

4.2 Teaching Processes

The instructional challenges faced by the Comprehensive English course, to a large extent, stem from the continued adoption of the traditional "intensive reading" approach as a fixed and unchanged teaching method, applied indiscriminately in classroom instruction.

In recent years, there has been a systematic exploration of teaching methods for skills courses. Chang and Xia (2011)'s experiment indicates that Content-based instruction brings better outcome than Skill-oriented instruction in developing language knowledge, language skills and disciplinary knowledge, achieving the general objectives of the national curriculum more effectively than the latter. Wen (2020) advocates for the promotion of the production-oriented approach, which emphasizes the integration of learning and application. Tang (2020)

demonstrates the application of this approach in the design of intensive reading courses. In her case study, Yi (2020) sets goals for three levels of cognition, language, and discipline knowledge, finding that using meaning as a guide and analyzing text logic can deepen students' understanding of the text. Furthermore, explaining complex sentence structures contributes to language learning, and incorporating theoretical perspectives from different disciplines promotes the development of critical thinking.

In fact, the emphasis on input over output is not limited to intensive reading courses. Whether in Comprehensive English class or literature and linguistics classes, if teachers view their primary task as imparting knowledge, there is a high likelihood of prioritizing input, regardless of whether it is tool-based language knowledge or humanities-based literary knowledge. Therefore, it is necessary for teachers to update their teaching philosophy. We must acknowledge that the era of solely imparting knowledge has passed. In many fields, the pace of knowledge updating surpasses the pace of acquisition. In this context, cultivating students' awareness and ability for autonomous learning becomes crucial. Students should be regarded as the active agents of learning, and effective teaching should facilitate their engagement in active learning, knowledge processing, and reorganization.

Content-based instruction and production-oriented approach disrupted the traditional focus on language knowledge input and rote language skills training. However, in the rush to escape the shortcomings of traditional teaching methods, there is often a tendency to swing to the other extreme.

In traditional intensive reading classrooms, which are teacher-centered, there is an excessive emphasis on textual explanation and language training. In contrast, contemporary classrooms are more student-centered and richer in content, but the text itself is often marginalized. It is viewed merely as a topic to initiate discussion, while the training of critical thinking skills is conducted using supplementary resources related to the topic of the text (Qu 2016:6). There is a lack of in-depth interpretation and appreciation of the text within the curriculum.

He (2004) points out that language teaching provides favorable conditions for cultivating students' abilities and qualities. Language serves as a vehicle for conveying thoughts, and the selected texts used as teaching materials not only provide students with means of expressing language, but more importantly, they offer intellectual content, convey information, stimulate students' thoughts, cultivate their thinking abilities, and subtly influence their personal growth and development. However, the significance of foreign language teaching in this regard has not been fully recognized. Even after twenty years, the value of reading the selected texts is still underestimated.

Designing diverse activities based on themes facilitates the stimulation of students' interest in learning. However, an excessive reliance on divergent activities may oversimplify complex texts and themes, akin to being enthusiastic about film and television adaptations while neglecting the original works, resulting in a lack of depth.

Additionally, activities designed for the purpose of output often face another challenge. Taking the example of designing communicative scenarios related to Chinese cuisine in the production-oriented approach (Wen 2020:107-108). The teacher proposes three scenarios in which students are required to explain how to make dumplings to foreign friends, with the intention of encouraging their desire for expression. The chosen topic may motivate students to search for appropriate expressions, but it may provide limited cognitive challenges in terms of knowledge and ideas, which may not effectively inspire students' motivation for output. Therefore, it is crucial that the learning content and output tasks go beyond language proficiency and also address students' cognitive needs in terms of knowledge and ideas.

Furthermore, since such activities often unfold spontaneously in the classroom, with group discussions and presentations occupying a considerable amount of class time, it becomes challenging for teachers to provide targeted feedback and suggestions within the limited time available.

To bridge classroom learning with autonomous learning, we can integrate certain traditional classroom activities into students' autonomous learning processes. The time in class is then used for

highlighting key aspects. Given that conventional teaching content such as vocabulary, grammar, and background information is readily accessible to students through reference books and textbook-based platforms, the focus for teachers in class is on addressing the challenges students cannot overcome through autonomous learning.

The course is divided into three stages. Before class, students embark on a self-directed learning journey that begins with watching instructional videos on effective learning strategies. This prepares them for the deeper engagement required in the subsequent stages. They then independently read the assigned article, marking noteworthy passages and identifying challenging sections. To aid their understanding and analysis, students use various resources such as dictionaries, teaching materials, courseware, and linguistic corpora to explore potential solutions. Furthermore, they link their personal reading experiences by compiling a list of works that resonate with the text, complete with brief introductions, which they share on a collaborative platform.

This preparation sets the stage for the peer evaluation and teacher feedback phase, conducted on the same platform. Here, students and the teacher exchange feedback and comments covering perspectives, content, structure, grammar, vocabulary, and other aspects of the submissions. This collaborative review enhances the learning process by incorporating diverse viewpoints.

In the autonomous learning stage, students engage in guided reading, interpreting the text based on their own understanding, which primes them for the in-depth class discussions that follow. During these discussions, they analyze the text's overall meaning, structure, and language usage, focusing on identifying underlying principles. This deep understanding serves as a foundation for further exploration of related works in both the original and target languages, applying literary, translation, and other analytical approaches.

Following the preparatory work, in-class activities are led by the teacher, encouraging students to think deeply about the text, and guiding them to consider meanings that go beyond the surface. Using instruction, questioning, and discussion, students are led through several critical analysis exercises.

Students probe into the text by identifying the central theme and primary concepts, aiming to grasp the core messages. They also recognize the organizational structure or pattern of the text, which aids in understanding how the argument or narrative is constructed. Additionally, they analyze and appreciate the language usage, examining the selection of words, exploring nuances of meaning from a semantic perspective, and considering the author's intended effect from a pragmatic perspective. This comprehensive analysis provides a robust foundation for students to explore related works that share themes across both languages, utilizing approaches from literary analysis to translation studies.

A jigsaw-like approach is employed for the teaching of disciplinary knowledge. Specific aspects of disciplines such as literature, linguistics, and translation are highlighted based on the language features of the text. Through consecutive learning, students gradually develop a comprehensive understanding. For instance, when examining shades of meaning, the focus is on semantic relations, and students learn to explore semantic, distributional, collocational, dialectal, and stylistic differences, which fall within the realm of lexicology. This inquiry prepares students for future studies in theoretical courses for English majors. Students not only acquire information through reading, but also learn to assemble and organize knowledge, seeking explanations for linguistic phenomena, and exploring the profound thoughts and cultural aspects embedded in language.

The entire process integrates autonomous learning with in-class instruction, as well as fosters in-depth thinking alongside the acquisition of language, culture, and related aspects.

V. CONCLUSION

The practice of intensive reading or comprehensive English courses originated from a historical period when students had lower language proficiency and were in urgent need of language skills training. Over the course of 70 years, there have been continuous changes in students' language proficiency upon admission, and the understanding of language instrumentality and humanity, as well as the

objectives and disciplinary attributes of English majors. In today's context, it is crucial to reconsider the course positioning, objectives, and teaching processes.

As for course positioning, it is an enlightening and inspiring course that promotes language proficiency, enhances humanistic literacy, and establishes connections with disciplinary knowledge. It adopts a content-based approach by selecting meaningful texts that provide perspectives from literature, linguistics, and related disciplines, while also offering guidance on effective learning methods. The primary objective is to foster a profound comprehension of both language and ideas through the exploration and meticulous analysis of texts.

Based on the aforementioned understanding, the teaching processes integrate autonomous learning with in-class instruction, as well as foster in-depth thinking alongside the acquisition of language, culture, and related aspects.

The challenges encountered by reading course reflect broader issues within skills-based courses for English majors. Therefore, the exploration and implementation of effective solutions for this course not only have the potential to provide valuable insights for the reform of other related courses.

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