

# The Concept of “English Learning Power” and its Implication for the Design of English Curricula for Primary and Middle Schools in China

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## Abstract

In the research on *New Characteristics of Future Basic Education in China*, Dina Pei formulates a “three-powered” model to theorize about the characteristics of future basic education in China. The three powers refer to the “Policy-making Power” of the local educational administration, the “Leading Power” of the school leadership, and the “Learning Power” of the students. The concept of “English learning power” derives from the concept of the learning power in the model. English learning power consists in a “three-level” and “six-element” integrity or wholeness. The three levels from which it is perceived are the elementary level (including knowledge and experience, reflection and strategies, and perseverance and enterprise), the approach level (covering communication and cooperation, and practice and activity), and the target level (critical thinking and creativity). English learning power is developed and manifests itself in English learning activities. Historically, the functions of instruction and education are discrete in the English curricula for primary and middle schools in China, where they are couched as the instrumental function and humanistic function respectively. The concept of English learning power focuses on the learner’s quality of English learning rather than the discrete quality of English knowledge and skills. Under this concept, the learner’s English knowledge, English skills and all other related elements are integrated into the learner’s English learning power.

**Keywords:** English learning power, English curriculum, primary school, middle school, China

## 1. Introduction

In the research on *New Characteristics of Future Basic Education in China*, a research project supported by the Key Program of National Social Science Foundation of China, Dina Pei, professor at Beijing Normal University and Zhejiang Normal University, formulated a “three-powered” model to theorize about the new characteristics of future basic education in China. Everything develops propelled by both internal and external forces, and so does the basic education in China. The development of basic education is powered by integral forces of relevant internal and external elements in basic education in China.

“Three Powers” refer to the “Policy-making Power” of the local educational administration, the “Leading Power” of the school leadership, and the “Learning Power” of the students. The interaction of the Three Powers and influences from the external political and social-cultural environment will ultimately generate new characteristics of future basic education in China.

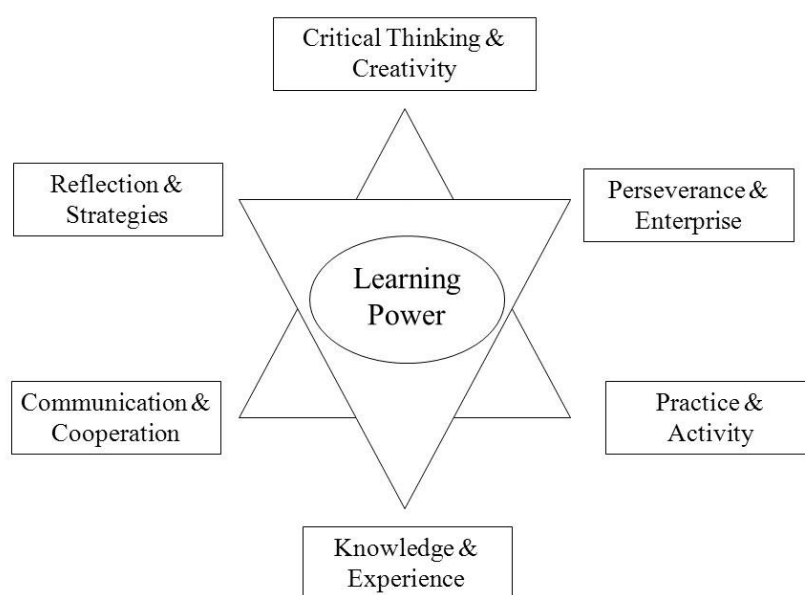
Research on curriculum design and development of such a subject as English taught in primary and middle schools should also be future-oriented. Many problems exist in the theory concerning the design and development of English curriculum, and one major problem is lack of an integrated theory to accommodate the instructional function and educational function of the English subject in schools. The function of instruction and that of education are discrete in the English curriculum for primary and middle schools in China, where they are couched respectively as instrumental and humanistic. The aim of this paper is to materialize the concept of learning power in the English subject curriculum. From the concept of learning power, another concept, English learning power, is derived. This concept focuses not only on the learner’s English knowledge and skills, but the development of the English learning abilities and all relevant mental and psychological qualities and environment that contributes to the cultivation of the abilities and qualities. The discrete functions of the English subject in the former syllabi and curriculum standards in China can be adequately integrated into a whole under the concept of English learning power.

## 2. Learning Power

Learning power is one of the three powers in the generation of the new characteristics of future basic education

in China. Although the concept was brought forth within the domain of a particular research project, the concept of learning power itself has long been around in social sciences and educational research. J. W. Forrester (1965), a systems scientist and professor at MIT, put forward the concept of learning power in an article, discussing the sustaining of the competitive power of companies by organizational learning. Later the concept was introduced into the field of education. Claxton (2002) perceives learning power as students' learning capacities and dispositions, and the general habits of mind that underpin confident, curious, creative learning. The purpose of the teacher is to help the students to build their learning power. Crick (2006) puts the theory into more empirical research. He defines learning power as a form of consciousness characterized by particular dispositions, values and attitudes, expressed through the story of our lives and through the relationships and connections we make with other people and our world.

Having reviewed the research by Claxton, Crick and others, Dina Pei and her colleagues incorporate the notions and understandings of those researchers into their own concept of learning power, which becomes one of the three powers in the three-powered model. This model is called the "three-level" and "six-element" model and can be clearly understood in the following diagram.



Composition of Learning Power: Three Levels and Six Elements (Slightly Revised from Dina Pei, 2013)

Learning power is perceived from three levels. The first level is the elementary level, including knowledge and experience, reflection and strategies, and perseverance and enterprise. The second level, the approach level, covers communication and cooperation, and practice and activity. And the third level is the target level. Students develop their elementary qualities (in the first level) through communicative, cooperative practice and activities (in the second level) and finally reach this third level of "critical thinking and creativity."

The first level refers to students' personal qualities. Knowledge and experience serves as a vehicle through which students develop their reflective abilities and learning strategies, and their qualities of perseverance and enterprise. The increase of knowledge and experience is invariably accompanied with the development of the students' reflective abilities and learning strategies, and the qualities of perseverance and enterprise. The developed abilities, strategies, and qualities will in turn enable students to obtain more knowledge and experience. The interaction of the elements or components in learning power in the progress of students learning process will repeat themselves in endless cycles. The second level functions as the manner or fashion of the increase of knowledge and experience and the development of other qualities. Students learn by doing things, and they do things together in a communicative and interactive way. Learning through communicative and cooperative practice and activities will definitely strengthen their communicative and cooperative abilities. The third facet, the abilities of critical thinking and creativity, can show itself automatically and naturally only if students' tasks and activities are deliberately designed by the teacher to specifically nurture them as well as other qualities.

### 3. English Learning Power

The concept of learning power stated above is a relatively abstract concept as the discussion is concerned about activities and tasks in general. The discussion of class activity invariably suggests the class activity of a certain subject, English for instance. The curriculum of a certain subject in school is actualized in the shape of courses, which indicates the process of learning and teaching activities or tasks in class. Hence the concept of learning power becomes one relating to a certain subject. This paper is mainly concerned about the subject of English in primary and middle schools in China. Therefore, the abstract concept of learning power is brought to a concrete end of the concept of English learning power. The three-level and six-element learning power becomes the three-level and six-element English learning power. Henceforth, whenever learning power is mentioned, it refers to English learning power in the rest of the article, and whenever curriculum is mentioned, it refers to the English curriculum, which is materialized into English courses at various levels.

English learning power refers to the power of the students in their English learning. It is generated and manifests itself in the activities of English learning and teaching. Students' knowledge is English knowledge, and their experience is that of English learning. They obtain their English knowledge and English learning experience through communication, interaction and cooperation in English, and simultaneously develop their English learning strategies and ability to reflect on the English language and English learning process and exercise their perseverance and enterprise in English learning. Their English learning activities or tasks are designed and carried out in such a way that they finally come to the stage of critical thinking and creativity in their English learning.

### 4. The Implication of English Learning Power for the Designing of English Curricula

Any subject in school has two identified distinct functions. One function is to impart knowledge to students; the other is to provide experience that enables students to become morally and ideologically sound citizens for a certain society. When he discusses the process of foreign language teaching, Belyayev (1963: 2-3) considers it necessary to distinguish in theory between two concepts: education and instruction. Although in practice one cannot exist without the other, it is possible and necessary to perceive them as separate items in theory. Education is perceived as promoting students' development, and instruction as enriching their knowledge and practical skills and abilities.

Historically, there have been two functions that can be clearly identified in the English curriculum standards in China, formerly known as English syllabi --- the instrumental or instructional function that aims to teach students the English language and how to use the language, and the humanistic or educational function that is intended to educate students so as to make them morally and socially accepted citizens. In the last century, foreign language teaching and learning research was academically classified as part of "applied linguistics". Even in the present time, foreign language research is put under this academic category. Dai (2005) points out that research on child language development and second language acquisition, upon which foreign language teaching and learning research is based, has been increasingly done in psychology, and the underlying principles in foreign language instruction and education belongs in the academic area of education. Only the subject matter of the foreign language teaching and learning belongs in the study of language. Only in this sense, language teaching relies on the scientific results of linguistics. Nevertheless, the designing of a curriculum and the courses of foreign language teaching should follow not only the theories in linguistics, but also theories in psychology and education. The issue concerning the domain in which foreign language teaching and learning research belongs is one of research paradigm. With the advancement of the reform in foreign language curriculum in basic education and college foreign language reform in higher education, foreign language curriculum design has been shifting from focusing on language knowledge and skills to the concern about quality-oriented education. The paradigm of foreign language teaching research within linguistics has already restrained further research in the area.

A review of the development of English curricula in basic education in China since the 1970s has made it evident that, in the English curricula issued by the Ministry of Education, the educational function of the course and the instructional function are discrete. No possibility of integrating the two functions can be envisaged from guidelines in the curricula. Also, only the objectives of instruction and education are separately listed out and described, and there are no systematic theories for the attainment of the objectives or aims.

It was not until the turn of the century that the concept of English curriculum got popular in China. English Teaching Syllabus had formerly been the title of the official document issued by the Ministry of Education. The

major requirements in the syllabi involve phonetics, vocabulary, grammar, and the skills of listening, reading, speaking, writing and translating. These objectives of instruction are discrete from those of education. For instance, in the *Junior Middle School English Syllabus of Nine-Year Compulsory Education* issued by the Ministry of Education in April 1992, the requirements for instruction are: mastery of the elementary knowledge of English and preliminary skills of using English. The requirements for education are: to stimulate students' interest in learning English, to develop good habits of English learning, to ensure that students receive education of ideology, morality, patriotism and socialism, and to develop students' thinking ability and self-learning ability. In the *Senior Middle School English Syllabus (Preliminary Draft)* issued in 1993, the instruction requirements are: to further consolidate and expand students' basic knowledge, to further develop the basic skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing, to enable students to preliminarily communicate in oral and written English, with an emphasis on the development of the reading skill. The educational requirements are: to ensure that students develop self-learning ability so as to lay a solid foundation for further English learning and using the language, to ensure that students get education of ideology, morality, patriotism and socialism, to enable them to understand the English speaking countries, to develop students' abilities of thinking, observation, attention, memory, imagination and mental association.

With the new curriculum reform movement in the new century, the former *English Syllabus* was replaced by *Curriculum Standards*. In the *Senior Middle School English Curriculum Standards of Compulsory Education (Trial Draft)* issued in 2001, "English education" is conceptualized as a superordinate concept of "English instruction" under the notion of new curriculum reform. The *Curriculum Standards* regards English education as an important part of the education for development of good citizens.

The reason for the reform of the English curriculum is, according to the *Curriculum Standards*, that the current English education cannot meet the needs of the cotemporary economic and social development in China in the new era. The current round of reform is to end the practice of over-emphasizing the transmission and explanation of knowledge about English grammar and vocabulary and neglecting the development of students' ability to use English for real communication. The new curriculum aims to develop students' comprehensive language competence, motivate students through activities that relate to their life experience and cognitive level, and promote task-based English teaching that involves students in experiential, practical, participatory and cooperative learning. Teaching English as such aims to develop, through the language learning process, students' positive disposition and attitudes, active thinking and practice, cross-cultural awareness and autonomy. Two processes, the process of instruction and the process of education, are distinctly described. English learning is regarded both as a process through which students increase their English knowledge, develop their English skills and improve their ability to use English for real communication, and as a process through which students develop in an all-rounded way as they are provided with opportunities to shape their will and personality, to broaden their horizon and enrich their life, and to develop their thinking abilities.

The *English Curriculum Standards* issued in 2011 places the English subject in the international setting where China becomes a major country of peaceful development, and associates English learning with the historic mission and international responsibilities and obligations that China should take in the world. English courses offered in compulsory education contribute to the improvement of the overall national quality, to the education of innovative and cross-cultural personnel, to the international competitiveness of the nation, and to the international communication of the citizens. The English courses in compulsory education are of great importance to the development of adolescents. English learning enables students to better understand the world, to obtain advanced scientific knowledge, to spread Chinese culture, to promote understanding and communication with young people in other countries. English provides them with more opportunities to further education and better profession. English learning helps to make students become people with open and tolerant character, to develop cross-cultural awareness and competence, to promote their thought, and to shape their correct value, belief and humanistic quality. English learning enables students to adapt to the changing world, the globalization and information age.

In the discussion of the nature of the English curriculum, the new *Curriculum* clearly states that English courses serve a dual purpose: instrumental and humanistic. As an instrumental course, English is to enable students to master basic English knowledge and to develop their skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing, and primary ability to think in English and communicate with people in English so that they will be in a better position to continue their English learning later and use English to study other subjects. As a humanistic course, the English subject assumes the responsibility of raising students' overall humanistic qualities, i.e. broadening their horizon, enriching their life, developing their cross-cultural awareness, and enabling them to become increasingly patriotic and creative, and shaping their correct value and attitude towards life.

From the above description of the guidelines stated in the English teaching syllabi and the English curriculum standards, it can be clearly seen that there is a shift of functions from the instructional function to educational function. In the syllabi, the objectives of English teaching and learning are relatively discrete, but in the two versions of English curriculum standards, the separate objectives are braided into two functions: the instrumental function and the humanistic function. In the 2011 *English Curriculum Standards*, it is made more evident that the humanistic function is integrated into the instrumental function.

Nevertheless, although efforts are made to avoid abstract educational concepts in the English curricula, it is still not clearly stated how the growth and development is built up in the English learning process. It won't do only to put everything under the concept of the comprehensive ability to use English. A concept is needed to reveal the process of English learning and the process of students' growth and development as English learners and as citizens in the making. The concept of English learning power is such a concept as to focus on the shaping and growth of learning power rather than merely listing out and stating the final objectives of knowledge and skills developed or the aims for the development of humanistic qualities. The focus on the development of the English learning power makes teachers and researchers alike to focus on the nature of the English learning experience and the learning activity, and the matching, the interactive co-growth of the learning activities and learning experience with the development of the components of the English learning power.

The discussion in the English syllabi and curricula concerning students' will, emotion, observation, memory, thinking, imagination, creativity, etc. is also a common concern in the syllabi and curricula of other subjects. Those aspects developed or trained in one subject course will definitely enter into the nature of the personality of the students, and influence their learning in other subjects. The personality traits developed through experience form a continuity and organic whole. Every subject, no matter what subject it is, has the function of developing students' general intellectual abilities through the subject content and learning activities. General abilities are not developed out of thin air, but through the exercises of the abilities in real concrete practical activities. They are developed in the process of solving problems in the activities. Cognitive activities entail cognitive intellect, and language communication entails communicative competence of the language being learned and used. Some of the intellect and communicative competence can be developed spontaneously and naturally through activities, but full development entails the teacher's conscious and purposeful designing of the activities. Therefore, research on the courses of a subject needs to focus on the nature of the activities and the nature of students' experience. Not all the activities can generate expected abilities. The nature of the activities determines the nature of abilities to be developed. Researchers should study the nature of the teaching activities and psychological and mental mechanisms of students' experience.

The concept of "English learning power" focuses on the condition, situation, and quality of students' learning, not merely the learning content and objectives. The assessment and evaluation of English course based on the concept of English learning power does not only observe and examine students' English achievement and English proficiency, but also their learning process, the environment and conditions of learning, and more importantly the qualities needed for further learning of the language and for the making of citizens. A person who demonstrates a high level of English proficiency is not necessarily one who has high English learning power. This is partly because foreign language learning relies, to some extent, on innate biological and physiological qualities, and partly because the learning environment contributes a lot to the language proficiency. Some people are endowed with innate competence of language learning (e.g. the innate memory and imitation of sound), or live in a favorable learning environment. English learning power concerns itself about the individuals' differential development with a view to the power of English learning and relevant qualities necessary to it after the attainment of the intended content and skills.

## 5. Conclusion

The concept of English learning power derived from the concept of learning power is a new idea in the research on English curricula. If a new concept has a new significance and can provide a new perspective for the solution to the existing problems, then it is constructive to the development of a discipline. Researchers in China have developed a habitual thought from the "syllabi" and "curriculum standards" so that they tend to focus on the attainment of the objectives in terms of language knowledge and skills. But they are prone to disregard the development and shaping of students' English learning power in the process of the attainment of the objectives. The quality of English knowledge and skills and that of English learning power are two different concepts. The quality of students' English learning power refers to the elementary abilities and qualities needed in process of learning English successfully while the quality of English knowledge and skills refers to the proficiency or level

of the knowledge of the English language and abilities to use English. Students' English learning power develops on a biological and physiological basis and through the English learning experience. Teachers have to design special activities to foster the growth of English learning power of the students.

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