

Less Classroom Hours of EFL Instruction to Non-English Majors in Chinese Universities

Is It a Reason-Based Policy that Provokes No Response?

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the phenomenon that reducing hours of EFL instruction to non-English majors in Chinese universities gets no response. It first depicts the phenomenon, pointing out that this phenomenon differs greatly from people's response to similar events that happened in the past. It then analyzes the complicated underlying factors from perspectives of main stakeholders including university authorities, school deans and teachers, and those from the perspective of students, revealing their diversified thoughts and feelings towards the reduction of EFL instruction hours. Based on the analysis, this paper thinks that it's not a thoroughly rational policy. In hope of minimizing the possible negative impact of the widely implemented policy, this paper proposes three suggestions for EFL instruction practice: Stratified instruction based on university-designed proficiency tests, communication oriented small-class instruction and teacher-guided autonomous learning.

Keywords: classroom teaching, EFL instruction, factor

1. Introduction

Ever since the initiation of the Reform and Opening-up Policy in 1978, EFL instruction (Instruction in English as a foreign language) has become the dominant foreign language education in China (Bolton & Graddol, 2012). The entire society attaches such great importance to it (Zhao, 2016) that any rumor about or comment on it would lead to heated debates.

Two recent examples are as follows. In 2013, the rumor that the English test would be removed from college entrance examination, or that 50 points would be cut from the English test and added to the Chinese test, raised nationwide concerns and attracted much attention abroad (The Guardian, 2013; The Wall Street Journal, 2013; Zheng, 2014; Zhao, 2016). In 2018, in purpose of ensuring same level difficulty for various examinations, East China's Zhejiang province made a decision to do weighted scoring on an English test of college entrance examination, that is, the scores in two parts of the test are multiplied with a number larger than one. It aroused fierce discontent from students, parents and teachers, leading to a provincial investigation on the rationality of such a practice, after which two officials were fired (China Daily, 2018). Together with other events, these incidents show that Chinese people have tense nerves on words and changes related to EFL (Gao, 2015).

In stark contrast to these incidents, the recent policy to reduce classroom hours of EFL instruction to non-English majors in most universities provoked no response. That is, very few people discussed about its rationality. This unexpected silence contradicts how Chinese citizens normally react to English education reform in the past, thus deserving an in-depth analysis. This paper first describes the phenomenon, and then analyzes the perspectives of different stakeholders, and students. Based on the factors from different perspectives, the author proposes suggestions for EFL instruction in Chinese universities.

2. Phenomenon Description

In 1985, China State Education Commission (the predecessor of China Ministry of Education) issued the College English Teaching Syllabus for undergraduates of science majors. One year later, the commission renewed the syllabus to make it suitable for undergraduates of both liberal arts and science majors. These two documents set EFL instruction for non-English majors as compulsory. They also required non-English majors to participate in

College English Test-Band Four and Band Six (known as CET 4 and CET 6) from 1987. As a result, each year witnesses millions of CET 4 and CET 6 takers. Many universities set passing CET 4 or even CET 6 as a precondition for graduation.

In hope of helping students to pass CET4 and CET 6, almost all universities in China started to emphasize EFL instruction to non-English majors, resulting in the gradual increase of classroom hours of EFL instruction. From the 1990s to the 2000s, students had to receive about 300 classroom hours of EFL instruction during the first two years in university (Rao & Lei, 2014). This has been stated in the College English Curriculum Requirements issued by China Ministry of Education in 2007. In that document, students were required to obtain about 16 credits in English, which is about 256-288 classroom hours of EFL instruction.

Nevertheless, the trend started to change since the 2010s. Most universities require less credits in English, i.e. less classroom hours of EFL instruction. To take Zhejiang Agriculture and Forest University, a provincial key university in east China as an example, it reduced credits in English from 16 to 12 since 2012, classroom hours of EFL instruction changing from 256 to 192 (Hangzhou Net, 2013). For some key universities in China, such as Zhejiang University and Shanghai Jiaotong University, students only need to obtain 6+1 and 6+3 credits in English. Six credits are obtained through 96 classroom hours of EFL instruction, while the other 1-3 credits are gained by passing tests designed by the university. The reduction of EFL instruction hours has become a frequently mentioned phenomenon by teachers participating in conferences on EFL instruction. The tendency to reduce credits in English is also shown in the Guidelines on College English Teaching issued by China Foreign Language Teaching and Research Association in 2016. It proposed 64-192 classroom hours of EFL instruction to students of different English proficiency.

China has a large amount of non-English majors, accounting for more than 90% of Chinese university students (Jin & Cortazzi, 2006; Rao & Lei, 2014). Therefore, the dramatic change might have great impact on EFL instruction in China, and thus would have triggered responses from people involved in this reform. What is surprising is that such a widely enacted action received little attention. This seems to imply that this policy is a reason-based one that is recognized and accepted by all stakeholders and students. But is it truly reasonable and appropriate for EFL instruction in present China? In order to answer the question, this paper analyzes the possible thoughts and feelings behind this silence from the perspectives of different stakeholders and students.

3. Perspectives of Different Stakeholders and Students

Main stakeholders of EFL instruction to non-English majors are university authorities, school deans, and teachers. Their perspectives would help explain the phenomenon, so would the perspective of students, the receptive end of EFL instruction.

3.1 University authorities

University authorities are the major advocates and initiators of classroom hour cut on EFL instruction. Their decision is made on the belief that university students nowadays are proficient enough in English. This belief is grounded on several facts.

One fact is that students start EFL learning from primary school. In 2001, China Ministry of Education proposed the 6th educational reform. The most important proposal of that reform is calling students to learn English from primary school, starting from grade one for students in developed urban areas, and from grade three for those in underdeveloped rural areas. Thus, for students entering universities after the 2010s, they've studied English for 10-13 years. Most university authorities believe that longer time of EFL instruction before entering universities should have helped students develop their English proficiency. Therefore, it is not necessary for students to have so many English classes in university.

Another fact is that the number of students who get good grades on the English test in college entrance examination and who pass CET 4 is increasing. To take the provincial university in which the author works as an example, this university ranks about 500 among all Chinese universities. It enrolled about 2400 students each year in the past three years. The average score on the English test in college entrance examination was more than 120 (the total score was 150) for three years in succession. Also in this university, people can frequently see news reporting higher rates of students passing CET 4 on university websites, the rates in the past three years were higher than 80%. While the good grades satisfied the university authorities, they also led the authorities to the decision of reducing classroom hours of EFL instruction in university.

A third fact is that some students demonstrate their English proficiency in various well-known English contests. For instance, there are many English speech contests, including the FLTRP cup, the China daily cup and the 21st century cup English speech contests. Thousands of university students from all over the country participate in the

contests. A lot of participants demonstrate their proficiency in English and achieve outstanding performance during those competitions, making the university authorities believe that students nowadays do not need as many classroom hours of EFL instruction as they used to.

Some other facts, such as students' good performance in volunteer work at important sports, business, financial or cultural meetings and conferences in which English is used as the working language, also contribute to university authorities' decision to reduce classroom hours of EFL instruction.

To sum up, from the perspective of university authorities, reducing classroom hours of EFL instruction is a reasonable policy. That's why they initiate and implement the policy.

3.2 School Deans

School deans are the executors of the policy initiated by university authorities. This throws them into a dilemma. On one hand, as subordinates in the Chinese context, they have to carry out the policy proposed by university authorities, no matter it is fully reason-based or not. On the other hand, they have better knowledge of the status quo of students' English proficiency. They know non-English majors' English proficiency is not as good as university authorities think, so they worry about reducing hours of EFL instruction for the following reasons.

It is true most students can pass CET 4, but a deeper analysis shows those who can get high scores are limited. According to the data of one university, more than 90% of its non-English majors can pass CET4 within the first two years in university, but only less than 10% can gain 550 points (77.46% of the total 710 points). Besides, students' good grades in college entrance examination do not persist in examination designed by the university, which reveals weaknesses of students' English proficiency. They get good grades in college entrance examination because it's not so difficult and most questions in it are objective items. The grades can only partially show the overall picture of students' English proficiency.

It is also true some students show good English proficiency in speech contests, but most of them are specially trained in small groups for the contests. The special training lasts for 1~3 years before the students present on public stages. But the special training is not accessible to the majority of students. As a result, the contestants' performance is not a true reflection of non-English majors' English proficiency. What's more, the rapid spread of related messages and the frequent use of online polling contribute to the popularity of the contests, misleading the audience, including university authorities and people outside the educational field.

Though students had longer time of EFL instruction in primary and secondary schools, they learned more for college entrance examination than for English application. They are good at taking examinations. They are good at answering objective questions. But when it comes to oral production and written English, they are fairly weak. A native speaker who teaches English to non-English majors in China says, each year students come up to him admitting that the first month they understood next to none of what he was saying. Many students admit they are not so good at expressing their deep thoughts in oral English. There are a lot of grammatical, structural and textual problems in students' compositions, not to mention the lack of creative and critical thinking.

In conclusion, students are still in need of EFL instruction in university, but university authorities want to reduce classroom hours of EFL instruction. Different school deans react differently to the dilemma. Some directly execute what university authorities say. Some others do their utmost to ask for one to three more credits in English. The credits are not gained through in-class EFL instruction, but gained by passing proficiency tests designed by the university. In this way, the deans don't strive for more classroom hours of EFL instruction, but turn to using proficiency tests to promote students' EFL learning within limited classroom time and their autonomous learning after class. In fact, the proficiency tests designed by some universities, such as that in Zhejiang University and Shanghai Jiaotong University are well designed, greatly facilitating students' EFL learning.

Thus, for school deans, their reasons to execute the reduction of classroom hours of EFL instruction are twofold. One is to show their support for university authorities; the other is to explore innovative ways to minimize the possible negative impact.

3.3 Teachers

EFL teachers have complex feelings about the reduction of classroom hours of EFL instruction.

On one hand, they embrace the policy for three reasons. Firstly, EFL teachers for non-English majors are faced with a heavy workload because non-English majors take up a big portion of university students (Borg & Liu, 2013). That means, they usually give more lessons than those who teach English majors and teachers of other majors. Therefore, they take the new policy as a chance to relieve the work stress.

Secondly, the appraisal system for Chinese university teachers is research-oriented (Gu et al., 2014). That is, research is much more valued than teaching in teacher assessment. Those who can publish are usually rewarded with a higher end-of-year bonus and stand a better chance to get promoted than those who are only good at teaching. As teachers have limited time and energy, reduction of classroom hours of EFL instruction gives teachers more space to do research, which is good for teachers' personal development.

Thirdly, students are not cooperative. Many teachers complain that students nowadays are not as obedient as those in the past. Some students are reluctant to follow teachers' instructions and they don't participate in group activities. People can frequently hear about complaints as follows. As English is not their major, students are not willing to spend time on previewing or reviewing English. They come to English class just for credits, not attaching any importance to the course. They have no life schedule, so college is just a place for life enjoyment, the existence of English and many other courses is not a necessity for them.

Taking these points into consideration, EFL teachers embrace the policy to reduce classroom hours of EFL instruction. But on the other hand, this policy also brings challenges that may worry EFL teachers.

Firstly, EFL teachers are potentially at risk of not meeting the demand of required workload since most universities set a minimum for hours of classroom instruction every year, as a part of teacher assessment. For EFL teachers to non-English majors, this workload is not easy to finish if English classes are reduced under the new policy. As a result, they have to rely on research-related work as a way out. However, most of this group of teachers do not have doctoral degrees, which means many of them are not trained to do research. Their past experience to focus on EFL instruction also deprives them of the time and opportunities to conduct self-directed research. In the end, some teachers are unable to finish the set workload and fail the assessment. They become the "neglected" group in the university.

Secondly, EFL teachers unfairly bear the bulk of criticism if students underperformed in important occasions that need English. Many people see students' good English performance, but there are a lot of cases in which students' performance is unsatisfactory. At these moments, EFL teachers to non-English majors would be criticized for "ineffective EFL instruction". For example, when students participate in an international conference that uses English as the work language and do not perform well, people would intuitively think EFL teachers are to blame.

Thirdly, EFL teachers in China are very responsible, which is a culture transmitted from ancient China (Wu & Wang, 2005). When students have good performance, they feel extremely excited. When students don't do well, they could feel uneasy and guilty. Such kind of responsibility leads them to be willing to give more EFL lectures even though they are under heavy pressure. Then they would turn to retain the original long classroom hours of EFL instruction.

Taken together, EFL teachers have mixed feelings toward the policy of reducing classroom hours of EFL instruction to non-English majors.

3.4 Students

Students are not willing to take many English classes, which is why they support the policy. Before the policy was implemented, many university students complained that there were too many English classes. They hope for less hours to be spent on English classes. Why are students not willing to take many English classes? Their reasons are fourfold.

Firstly, most students study too hard in high school, resulting in their EFL learning burnout in university. Since college entrance examination plays such an important role in China, a majority of high school students study extremely hard, overusing their passion for study. However, college education is less examination-oriented and many students adopt a "laid-back" attitude towards their study. Such a contrast is described as "wan ming de zhong xue, kuai le de da xue" (Guangming Daily, 2018), which refers to the status that students are under unbearable heavy pressure from college entrance examination in high school but they are under little pressure in university. As a consequence of the drastic change, students do not want to have many classes in university, not only English classes, but also other classes beyond their major. As many students answered in an interview asking about why they are not active in English class, "I lost my interest in study after the college entrance examination".

Secondly, many students do not take English seriously because they think English is useless in their future career. For a large amount of non-English majors, they believe that the professional knowledge that they learned from the curriculum of their major will pay off after graduation but English will barely play a role. On Zhihu, a well-known online platform where people discuss different topics, someone asked the question why many people

think that English classes are useless in university in 2013 (Zhihu, 2013). It has been browsed for 120 789 times, and many people are still making comments on it in 2018. There are different voices on the topic. Some people believe in the value of English classes in college. But more are pessimistic about its usefulness. Their main reason is that English will not be frequently used for most jobs in the future. If they do need help in English, many English majors are available. After all, about 900 universities in China are cultivating at least 400 000 English major talents each year (Hu, 2008). A student answered in an interview asking about her inactive performance in English class, “The knowledge learned in English classes cannot be transmitted into something applicable to my future life”.

Thirdly, many students are examination-oriented, so they study English before examinations and give up English study after examinations. A large amount of students form an examination orientation in more than ten years’ study to prepare for college entrance examination. When they get into university, they unconsciously set other examinations as their goals in English, such as passing English courses, passing CET 4 and getting good grades in postgraduate entrance examination. They do exercises that might appear in the examinations when the exams are approaching. The permissive mode of administration and assessment in Chinese universities makes it easy to pass English courses. Long years’ study pre-university makes it possible to pass CET 4. Some students start to prepare for postgraduate entrance examination from grade three, but English courses are taken in grades one and two. These realities make students think it unnecessary to take many EFL lessons.

Fourthly, EFL instruction in university focuses on vocabulary, grammar, text-based oral, translational and writing exercises, mainly through the English Intensive Reading Course (Rao & Lei, 2014), thus unable to arouse students’ interest or to satisfy their needs. Such kind of teaching is similar to EFL instruction in high school in terms of content and method. Freshmen in university would get the message from their academic brothers and sisters, thus starting to resist EFL instruction before they get into classrooms. The EFL instruction also couldn’t satisfy students’ verified needs. Most students would expect English to be integrated with their major. Some who prepare to further their study after graduation would like to have English classes in the third year. The few who plan to take examinations like IELTS, TOFEL and BEC would expect special training. Some have other needs. When they think their needs couldn’t be satisfied, they turn to autonomous learning, which is in fact examination preparation.

To sum up, for students, their past learning experience, weaknesses of the present EFL instruction and their judgement on its influence on their future all make it acceptable to reduce classroom hours of EFL instruction.

4. Implications

The above analysis shows that it is not a thoroughly reason-based policy to reduce classroom hours of EFL instruction to non-English majors in Chinese universities. However, it is a widely implemented policy. Then what can be done to minimize its negative impact? This paper believes making full use of the limited time in class and facilitating students’ autonomous learning after class will be beneficial. Here are three specific suggestions.

Firstly, stratified instruction based on university-designed proficiency tests is necessary. Since students are greatly different in terms of English proficiency, and they have diversified needs of EFL instruction, it is necessary for universities to differentiate various groups of students based on university-designed proficiency tests and then to conduct stratified instruction. Some important principles for such an instruction are as follows. In the first place, the proficiency test needs to be university designed. As students come from different provinces and their grades in college entrance examination are not normalized, it is advisable that universities design proficiency tests that could divide their students into groups of low, intermediate and advanced levels. In the second place, students of different English proficiency focus on different courses. The low level group go on to take skill courses, so as to improve their English proficiency. The intermediate level group can turn to content-based English, which combines English with the core courses of their majors. The advanced level group can focus on academic English and courses that help cultivate advanced thinking ability. Under this customized curriculum/course design, students’ needs will be better served. In the third place, English courses have to be scientifically designed. Based on the features of different courses, school deans may re-divide teachers into several course teams. Each team spends time in polishing one course, so as to make it theory-based and engaging. Well-designed courses can improve the quality of EFL instruction in class.

Secondly, communication oriented small-class instruction would be helpful. Now that numerous students are not satisfied with teaching methods in EFL instruction, it’s necessary to analyze the reasons and then propose a solution. This paper thinks that the large class size (having 40 to 80 students) is partly to blame. With so many students in class, teachers feel difficult to conduct communicative activities. As a result, teachers’ lectures

dominate the classroom, leaving students little time to communicate with one another or work together to explore projects. Students' expectations to have English lessons different from high school could not be served. Communication oriented small-class instruction is a way out for two reasons. One is that students have more chances to participate without adding classroom hours of EFL instruction. The other is that teachers can give EFL instruction to more small classes, and they don't have to worry about the workload. Students' chances to participate and teachers with no worry in teaching will help improve the quality of EFL instruction.

Thirdly, teacher-guided autonomous learning should be encouraged. Receiving knowledge in class is important, but knowing how to learn is more important. However, the status quo is that many students' out-of-class autonomous learning is examination-oriented. It's urgent to conduct teacher-guided autonomous learning. There are at least two things that can be done. In the first place, English teachers can share with students the English learning strategies from their personal experiences. Generally speaking, EFL teachers have studied English for many years and they have accumulated many valuable strategies for effective English learning. Thus, it might be helpful if several lessons are set to be strategy sharing time. In the second place, teachers can provide students with more guidance after class. Nowadays, EFL teachers are not giving much guidance to non-English major students after class because they are not required to do so. But students' autonomous learning ability is limited, they need teacher guidance to improve the quality of their study after class. Considering this, it might be helpful if each English teacher has office hours for non-English majors each week.

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