

# Three Primary Tasks of the First College English Class in China

Yan Zhou

School of Foreign Languages, University of Jinan, Jinan, Shandong, China

Jinfeng Zhao

School of Foreign Languages, University of Jinan, Jinan, Shandong, China

**Abstract**—College English is a compulsory course for college students in China, which has a far-reaching influence on students' further study and job development. How to conduct the first class of college English well is a tough task for college English teachers. For the success of the first class of college English, teachers should stimulate students' learning motivation, introduce the characteristics and requirements of college English and raise students' awareness of learning strategy and learner autonomy.

**Index Terms**—motivation, teaching requirements, autonomous learning

## I. INTRODUCTION

Well begun is half done. College English teachers have long been thinking about the question of how to succeed in teaching the first college English class. In the first English class what to teach, and what effect it will have on freshmen in their future English learning are worthy of further research. But unfortunately, so far not much relevant research has been found on this topic.

Because of the new life and study environment, college freshmen generally will feel lost about university life and study. In this case, guidance and help from teachers are necessary. In order to meet the needs of freshmen, orientation is carried out in most western universities, similar to domestic university freshmen education, starting from the register day. Orientation is an introductory training program according to the needs of students, the purpose of which is to enable students to adapt to the new living and learning environment as soon as possible, and help students set new goals and take on the new roles of college students (Chen, 2006) The first class of College English should not be limited to self introduction of the teacher and students, and the introduction of teaching material, teaching plan and syllabus. College English teachers in the first class should answer three important questions: Why should students learn college English? What are the requirements of college English? How to learn college English well? The paper will explore the three primary tasks of the first college English class from the perspectives of background and significance.

## II. STIMULATING FRESHMEN'S ENGLISH LEARNING MOTIVATION AND HELPING THEM TO SET COLLEGE ENGLISH LEARNING OBJECTIVES

First and foremost, one of the three primary tasks of the first English class college English teachers should accomplish is to motivate freshmen to learn college English. It is widely acknowledged that motivating freshmen to learn English is of vital importance to the success of college English teaching and learning. F.A.W. Diesterweg, German educator, once wrote: The art of teaching lies not in imparting knowledge, but in motivating, awakening and inspiring students.

### A. *The Importance of Motivation*

Gardner (1985) defined motivation as "the combination of effort plus desire to achieve the goal of learning the language plus favorable attitudes toward learning the language." According to Dornyei (1994), "Motivation is responsible for why people decided to do something, how long they are willing to sustain the activity, and how hard they are going to pursue it." There are two authoritative classifications of motivation. They are integrative vs. instrumental motivation and intrinsic vs. extrinsic motivation. Learners with integrative motivation want to learn a language in order to communicate with people of the target society and culture. In contrast, learners with "instrumental motivation" want to learn a language because it will be useful for certain goals, such as passing a test, getting a job, improving status, obtaining certificates and so on. Intrinsic motivation derives from learners' interest in the learning activity itself and there is no apparent award except the learning. Extrinsic motivation, however, occurs when learners acquire a language for external reasons such as winning others' approval, obtaining scholarship, furthering career and so on.

Motivation plays an essential part in language learning. Psychological research finds that a man lack of motivation can develop 20%-30% of his potential while a highly motivated man can develop 80%-90% of his potential. Skehan

(1989) pointed out that “motivation is the second most powerful factor in forecasting language learning effects and it is only after aptitude.” Scientific research shows that the relationship between motivation and academic achievements is typically complementary. That is, high level of motivation is conducive to achieving a high academic performance, and in turn, high academic performance arouses further motivation.

### B. *College Students' Motivational Problems*

In high school a large majority of students have instrumental or extrinsic motivation to learn English well. Both teachers and students have the clear objective and most students are highly motivated to pass the College Entrance Examination with high scores so that students will have good chances to enter ideal universities. Once they enter college, this instrumental or extrinsic motivation disappear and they feel lost and are lack of motivation to learn English. There are some students at college who have integrative motivation, sometimes intrinsic motivation for English study, they enjoy learning English and long to communicate with people from English-speaking countries. But generally speaking, unmotivated students who are absent minded at English class are widespread on campus. Some students who are top students in high school even skip English class and fail English term examinations.

### C. *Stimulating Freshmen's English Learning Motivation*

One of the primary tasks of the first English class is to re-stimulate students' English learning motivation and help them set realistic objectives. Therefore the next question is how to motivate freshmen to learn college English.

#### 1. *Imbuing Freshmen with the Importance of English Study*

Most college students are clear about the importance of English in today's society such as job hunting. Kai-fu Lee (2005) maintained Chinese students learning English well is a patriotic act in his fourth letter to college students in China: *How to Spend College Life*. He believed “English is the most important tool for communication in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In the next decades, English will be used to cover the most comprehensive news, the most advanced ideas and technology as a means of communication between intellectuals all over the world....China is opening up and is in great need of advanced ideas and technology, thus a good command of English is real patriotic.”

Some people may hold that Lee's opinion is to a degree radical, but it does make sense. Freshmen should be reminded that English study in China is behind that of other developing countries. In terms of English vocabulary size of college students, college students in Japan should command 10,000 English vocabulary; in Russia the required vocabulary is 15,000; in Germany high school students have already mastered English; in China the basic required English vocabulary size is only 4,795. College students are the hope and future of China, so they bear the responsibility of introducing China to the world and introducing the world to China. English will serve as the bridge to connect China with the world and its importance could not be overemphasized.

#### 2. *Helping Freshmen to Set College English Learning Objectives*

As is known to all that learning without objectives will go now here; a man without goals cannot go far. Clear learning objectives can motivate learners to persevere and never give up easily. The learning objectives are not only the direction for college students, but also the criteria for evaluating their progress. Suitable, short-term objectives such as passing College English Test Band 4 or Band 6 will give them a sense of achievement when they fulfill them and thus will drive them towards long-term objectives such as preparing for graduate study at home or abroad.

#### 3. *Arousing Freshmen's Interest in English Study*

Since interest is the best teacher, college English teachers should come up with a variety of ways to arouse students' interest. Flexible teaching methods, various teaching activities, harmonious teacher-student relationship and highly involved class and so on are beneficial to maintaining freshmen's interest in English study.

## III. INTRODUCING THE REQUIREMENTS AND CHARACTER OF COLLEGE ENGLISH CURRICULUM

In the first college English class teachers should also let students know the concrete requirements of the college English subject. If freshmen do not understand the requirements of college English curriculum, they may limit their study to textbook learning and can not get a whole picture of the course. College students should also be informed at the beginning the characteristics of college English and make adjustments to it.

### A. *The Requirements of College English Curriculum*

In the first college English class students should be informed of College English Curriculum Requirements (Requirements hereinafter). In 2007 the Ministry of Education of the P.R. China formally issued the Requirements as the guidelines for English instruction to non-English major students at tertiary level. The Requirements stipulates the character and objectives of College English, the teaching requirements, teaching model, teaching evaluation, course design, teaching administration and other aspects. The requirements for undergraduate College English teaching are designed at three levels, i.e., basic requirements, intermediate requirements, and higher requirements. Non-English majors are required to satisfy the basic requirements after studying and practicing English at college. The basic requirements are the minimum level which all non-English majors have to fulfill before graduation. The basic requirements cover six aspects: listening, speaking, reading, writing, translation and recommended vocabulary. If the freshmen are clear about the detailed requirements, they will have specific objectives in English study and mentally

prepared to meet the requirements.

### B. *The Character of College English Curriculum*

The first character of college English curriculum is the focus on the use of English, especially listening and speaking. The Requirements states “the objective of College English is to develop students’ ability to use English in a well-rounded way, especially in listening and speaking, so that in their future studies and careers as well as social interactions they will be able to communicate effectively...” In 2011, the Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China promulgated The English Curriculum Standards of Compulsory Education (Curriculum Standards hereinafter). It should be noted that the Curriculum Standards and the Requirements are consistent concerning the English teaching objectives. The Curriculum Standards writes clearly that one objective of English of compulsory education is to enable students to master basic English language, develop basic English skills including speaking, listening, reading, writing, and the ability to communicate with others in English. But in China, both teachers and students in high school are faced with great pressure of College Entrance Examination. The teaching model in high school is test-oriented, with focus on test skills and English knowledge of vocabulary, grammar, sentence structure and so on, ignoring the students’ ability to use language. In some provinces such as Gansu, Jiangxi the English test of College Entrance Examination does not include listening comprehension. So listening is not included in high school English course. When students from such provinces go to college, they find it hard for them to understand English teachers at class, let alone English lectures. Freshmen should shift their focus of English study to language use, especially listening and speaking and adjust themselves to college English study.

The second character of college English curriculum is the low recurrence rate of glossary at English class. The vocabulary size of The Curriculum Standards in high school is 3,300, while the recommended vocabulary of the basic requirements at college is 4,795. This means in two years college English study, students are required to master 2,495 English vocabulary whereas in six years at high school, they only learn 3,300 English words. It is a big challenge for most college students. Due to the limitation of class time, college English teachers can not drill the new vocabulary at class like high school English teachers. After class college students do not have much exercises to hand in as to the use of new words. Many new words may appear only once in two years of textbook learning and classroom learning, so they can not be consolidated and stored in long-term memory. No wonder many college students complain they can not memorize any new words at college if they just attend English class and do not review them after class.

The Requirements clearly points out that the objective of college English teaching is to enable students to use English to communicate effectively in the future at work and social intercourse. But even if the students have mastered 4,795 English vocabulary, communication can go smoothly in English? In other words, college students with such a vocabulary can understand the English TV programs, read English newspapers and communicate without language obstacles with people from English-speaking countries? Unfortunately the answer is no. According to the research by *The English-Chinese Dictionary*, if people have a command of less than 6,000 English vocabulary, their English level is similar to that of a child in English speaking countries. They will have great difficulty in reading, writing and communication in English speaking countries. If people have an English vocabulary of 12,000-18,000, their English level is equal to that of an average adult with ordinary education in English speaking countries. They could basically use English in life or at work. If freshmen know such information, they will set their own goals in English study, especially for students who intend to further their study abroad. They will not limit their English study to passing College English Test or meeting the basic requirements of college English.

The third character of college English curriculum is closely related to culture. As is known to all that language is an integral part of culture and plays an important role in it. Culture Without language would not be possible. But on the other hand, language is influenced and shaped by culture; it reflects culture. Language and culture interact and the understanding of language requires understanding of its culture. Differences in culture will lead to differences in language. When college students are learning English language, they should not restrict their learning to mastering the pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary etc. They should pay attention to the culture related to English. Successful inter-cultural communication is inseparable from a better understanding of the cultures involved. So college students should strive to understand the cultural similarities and most importantly the differences between Chinese and native speakers of English culture and western culture. The English word “uncle” can refer to five different concepts in Chinese and can be translated into different names according to different contexts, including 叔叔(father’s younger brother), 伯伯(father’s elder brother), 舅舅(mother’s brother), 姑夫(father’s sister’s husband), 姨父(mother’s sister’s husband). This reflects that in Chinese culture seniority and gender differences are laid stress on; on the contrary, the English culture equality is emphasized and such rules about seniority and gender generally are not so rigid as in China in history. Meanwhile, when college students are learning English and its culture, they have no reason to neglect the study of Chinese and Chinese culture. Language is the home of the human spirit, and the mother tongue is the root of our spirit. If we do not attach importance to our mother tongue and the culture of mother tongue, we are doomed to lose our spiritual home. (Ma, 2009)

The fourth character of college English curriculum is the relatively loose relationship between teachers and students. Due to the expansion of college enrollment from 1999 to 2012 in China, the number of freshmen had been on the rise at the rate of approximately 8%. Meanwhile, the number of college teachers had not increased at such high speed. This

phenomena lead to the larger size of class at college and the lower student-faculty ratio. The ratio of college English teacher to non-English major students he/she teaches is generally in China lower than 1:150. In a big class of more than 60 students, individualized instruction is almost out of the question. It is beyond the English teacher to satisfy the need of every student in study and interaction between students and teachers at class is limited to a few questions and answers. In addition, college English teachers are faced with professional research pressure, which will result in the lack of time and energy to communicate with students after class. In senior high, teachers pay close attention to student's study and mental state because of the pressure of College Entrance Examination, which in turn will motivate students to work harder. At college, the relation between students and teachers is not that close and intimate because of lack of enough interaction and communication, which will lead to students' lack of interest and motivation in study. If the freshmen get to know the new relation with college teachers, they will adapt to college life better and sooner.

#### IV. ENHANCING FRESHMEN'S AWARENESS OF ENGLISH LEARNING STRATEGY AND LEARNER AUTONOMY

Last but not least, the third important task of English teachers at the first English class is to enhance freshmen's awareness of how to learn college English well, which involves learning strategy and learner autonomy.

##### A. *The Significance of English Learning Strategies*

As the Chinese saying goes: Give a man some fish and he eats for a day; teach him how to fish and he eats for a lifetime. Effective learning strategies are proved to enhance the effectiveness of language learning. Good language learners are observed to employ more learning strategies to better help them understand, learn or remember new information in English learning than unsuccessful learners. Stern (1975) summarized ten strategies while Skehan (1989) put forward three types of learning strategies which are related to the language learning process, communication and self-regulation. These two overlaps as regard to learner autonomy, which is of decisive importance to college English learning in China.

##### B. *Autonomous Learning and Its Impact on English Learning*

Holec (1981) defines autonomous learning as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning". So autonomous learners have the capability of "determining the objectives, defining the contents and progression, selecting methods and techniques to be used, monitoring the procedure of acquisition and evaluating what has been required." There are different degrees of learner autonomy, and students will develop this competence of autonomous learning in class or outside class. In terms of the degree of learner autonomy and self-regulation, Littlewood (1999) divided learner autonomy into two categories: proactive autonomy and reactive autonomy. He used the term "proactive autonomy" to refer to "learners' ability to manage their own learning to determine their own aim, to select proper learning methods and evaluate their learning process and results." Reactive autonomy, on the other hand, refers to such a situation in which learners can not determine their own aims, but once the aims are decided by the teachers or teaching outlines, learners will manage their learning accordingly. Recent study suggests that students in western countries are able to decide the aims and process of learning, which is an example of proactive autonomy; while Chinese learners can not decide their learning aims, which is an example of reactive autonomy.

It has long been proved that autonomous learning ability is the key to the success of students' English learning and college academic achievements as well. Benson (1997) held that "autonomous learning is more or less equivalent to effective learning." When learners begin to take control of their learning and they learn what they are ready to learn, they become more efficient. When learners are responsible for their learning, they will not limit their learning within classroom and they carry out learning outside classroom. Research has proved that the ability of autonomous learning is closely related to the success of their learning achievements.

##### C. *The Necessity of Developing Learner Autonomy*

Littlewood (1999) once wrote: "No students, anywhere, will have their teachers accompany them through their life." In senior high school, students learn subjects including English under the close supervision and rigid guidance of teachers, sometimes parents as well. It is natural that students depend on teachers as regards learning material choice, the schedule of study etc. in that they do not have enough time and freedom to make decisions by themselves. When such high school students go to college, they are at a loss how to take charge of their own study. "Based on the present situation of college English teaching in China and the conditions of Chinese college students, college students can not enjoy full autonomy. That is because college students generally do not have the autonomous learning competence, so they can not take full responsibility for their study. Their autonomous learning is ineffective, lack of planning, monitoring, evaluation, and direction. It is about time to improve their learner autonomy at tertiary level" (Wang, 2002). Against such educational background, it is high time college students developed autonomous learning.

The competence of autonomous learning is the objective of college English teaching. The Quality Project of Higher Education by the Ministry of Education in China stipulates that college English teaching is to meet the demands of the times and helps college student develop the sustainable learning ability, thus improving the comprehensive quality of college students. (Zhang, 2008) The sustainable learning ability in English study refers to learner autonomy (Ma, 2009). The Requirements (2007) also provides that "the objectives of College English is to develop students' ability to use

English in a well-rounded way... and at the same time enhance their ability to study independently...The purpose of teaching, in the long run, is to develop students' ability of independent study and students take charge of their own study".

College students have a large amount of time at hand after class, which is the necessity for the cultivation of learner autonomy. As for English study, college students should individualize their own learning according to their English level in listening, speaking, reading, writing and translation. If they are too dependent on teachers to give them individualized instruction, and can not find suitable learning strategy for themselves, they can not achieve their learning objectives (Wang, 2002)

#### D. Developing Freshmen's English Learning Strategies and Learner Autonomy

College teachers should help students to develop learning strategy and autonomous learning ability. Of course, the cultivation of learning strategies and learner autonomy can not be accomplished in one class. But if freshmen are conscious of the significance of and learner autonomy, it is the first step to the command of effective learning strategy and learner autonomy. It takes months or even years to develop learner autonomy, and during this process English teachers will provide necessary guidance and direction, and students will take charge of their own study by and by. Students will become more and more positive about their study when they have more control over it and finally will know how to develop skills and acquire knowledge on their own.

### V. CONCLUSION

The first college English class is of vital significance to college English teaching and learning, which is the prelude to the later college English teaching and plays a guiding role for the freshmen in their college English learning. In the first class, teachers and students will get to know each other, and college students will get to know the teaching material, teaching plan and the syllabus. More importantly, students should be clear about what to learn, how to learn college English and why college students still learn English. To be more specific, three primary tasks should be accomplished in the first college English class, that is, motivating freshmen to learn college English, explaining the requirements and characteristics of college English curriculum, and enhancing freshmen's awareness of English learning strategies, especially autonomous learning. An increasing number of college English teachers have now come to realize the importance of the first class and made great efforts to have a good beginning. More studies should be carried out in the hope of making full use of the first college English class in China.

### REFERENCES

- [1] Benson, P. & P. Voller. (1997). *Autonomous and Independence in Language Learning*. London: Longman.
- [2] Chen, Suyan. (2006). The Function and Importance of Orientation in the First Year at University of Nottingham, Ningbo. *Foreign Language World*, (1): 52-56.
- [3] Department of Higher Education, Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China. (2007). *College English Curriculum Requirements*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.
- [4] Dornyei, Z. (1994). Motivation and Motivating in the Foreign Language Classroom. *Modern Language Journal*, 78(3):273-284.
- [5] Gardner, R.C. (1985). *Social Psychology and Second Language Learning: The Role of Attitudes and Motivation*. London: Edward Arnold.
- [6] Holec, H. (1981). *Autonomy and Foreign Language Learning*. Oxford: Pergamon.
- [7] Lee, Kaifu. (2005). How to Spend College Life. <http://weibo.com/ttarticle/p/show?id=2309404015009008069186> (accessed 1/9/2016).
- [8] Littlewood, W. (1999). Defining and Developing Autonomy in East Asian Contexts. *Applied Linguistics*, 20(1):71-94.
- [9] Lu, Gusun et. al. (1993). *The English-Chinese Dictionary*. Shanghai: Shanghai Translation Publishing House.
- [10] Ma, Maoxiang. (2009). The Problems and Prospects of College English Teaching. *Shandong Foreign Language Teaching Journal* (6):33-37.
- [11] Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China. (2011). *The English Curriculum Standards of Compulsory Education*. Beijing: Beijing Normal University Publishing Group.
- [12] Skehan, P. (1989). *Individual Difference in Second Language Learning*. London: Edward Arnold.
- [13] Stern, H. (1975). What Can We Learn from the Good Language Learner. *Canadian Modern Language Review*, (31):304—318.
- [14] Wang, Duqin. (2002). The Cultivation of Learner Autonomy in College English Teaching. *Foreign Language World*, (5):17-23.
- [15] Zhang, Yaoyue. (2008). On the Reform of College English Test Band 4 and Band 6. *China Higher Education*, (18):26-27.

**Yan Zhou** was born in Caoxian, Shandong, China in 1970. She received her MA degree in English Language and Culture from Shandong University in 2003. She is currently an associate professor in the School of Foreign Languages, University of Jinan, Jinan, China. Her academic research mainly focuses on applied linguistics.

**Jinfeng Zhao** was born in Linyi, Shandong, China in 1979. She received her MA degree in Foreign Linguistics an Applied Linguistics from Ocean University of China in 2005. She is currently a lecturer in the School of Foreign Languages, University of Jinan, Jinan, China. Her academic research mainly focuses on applied linguistics and translation.