

Teachers' Perspectives of College English in Institutions of Higher Learning in Central China

Yuan Lingjie¹
Gurnam Kaur Sidhu²
1Faculty of Education
SEGi University
Kota Damansara, Malaysia

Abstract

English is taught as a foreign language at all education levels ranging from the primary schools to the graduate schools in China. College English is taught to non-English majors in all institutions of higher learning (IHL) in China. Since the implementation of the 2016 College English Teaching Reform, all IHL in China have witnessed a shift from a traditional teacher-centered approach to a more learner-centered communicative approach in the teaching and learning of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). This paper presents the perspectives of 62 university EFL teachers on College English from two IHL located in Central China. Data were collected via a questionnaire and interviews. The findings revealed that teachers have moderately positive perceptions of College English in terms of its teaching objectives, language skills, teaching methods and teaching resources. The findings also recorded no significant difference in teachers' perceptions based on gender but a significant difference was observed based on age on two aspects, namely teaching objectives and language skills. Meanwhile, a significant difference was also seen based on teaching experience in terms of teaching objectives. This study has helped to provide some feedback on the implementation of the 2016 College English Teaching Reform so that necessary steps can be taken for further enhancement of its implementation in all IHL in China.

Keywords: *College English; institutions of higher learning; gender; age; teaching experience*

1. Introduction

English is fast becoming an international language. It is the passport to a better education around the world. Now China is the mainstream, pushing forward the acquisition of English into the classrooms from the primary schools to the graduate schools. College English is taught to non-English majors for the first two years as a compulsory course and an elective course for the third and fourth-year students in all institutions of higher learning (IHL, hereafter) in China. With the impact of globalization and internationalization, College English Teaching (CET, hereafter) has undergone several rounds of reforms so as to meet the nation's need to prepare qualified graduates with adequate acquisition of English so that they are capable of performing at the international level. The changes in English language teaching curricula for non-English majors witnessed a move from College English Teaching Syllabus issued in 1980 to College English Teaching Syllabus (for students with Science major) issued in 1985 and College English Teaching Syllabus (for students with Arts major) issued in 1986. Later College English Teaching Syllabus (for university students) implemented in 1999 saw a

further enhancement with College English Curriculum Requirements (for trial) issued in 2004 which was subsequently replaced with College English Curriculum Requirements issued in 2007. All these reforms played an important role in the teaching and learning of English as a Foreign Language (EFL, hereafter). Recently, in 2016, the Ministry of Education issued Guidelines on College English Teaching in all IHL in China. This witnessed a shift from a traditional teacher-centered approach to a more learner-centered communicative approach in the teaching and learning of EFL.

Since its implementation, the CET has not escaped from the criticism of ‘teaching-to-the-test’ [1], and therefore producing ‘deaf and dumb’ English learners [2]. As a national standardized test sponsored by the Ministry of Education of China and administered by the National College English Testing Committee, College English Test, comprises College English Test Band 4, College English Test Band 6, and College English-Spoken English Test. These reforms have been aiming at motivating learners to learn EFL. Instead, Chinese universities have witnessed CET moving back to the testing culture instead of fulfilling the noble aspirations set out in the curriculum. This has resulted in a negative backwash effect on College English teaching and learning practices. The situation of ‘low efficiency and effectiveness’ [3] has been a ‘thorny issue that has long been identified, yet to be solved’ [4] for CET. The current status of CET is far from being satisfactory in terms of either national or international standards. It is thus urgent to find some ways to deepen the reforms of CET in China.

Since the 2016 CET Reform, no holistic study has been carried out. It is hence pertinent that a study should be conducted to get a better perspective of the CET Reform in China. Therefore, this study explored teachers’ perspectives of College English in IHL in Central China. It is hoped that this study will provide some feedback on the implementation of the 2016 CET Reform so that necessary steps can be taken to further enhance its implementation in all IHL in China. This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the teachers’ perspectives of College English?
2. Are there any significant differences in teachers’ perceptions of College English based on gender?
3. Are there any significant differences in teachers’ perceptions of College English based on age?
4. Are there any significant differences in teachers’ perceptions of College English based on teaching experience?

2. THE COLLEGE ENGLISH TEACHING REFORM IN CHINA

The past few decades have witnessed China’s rapid economic development and explosion in international communities. China has realised the importance of English as a fast growing international language, especially for trade and commerce. Therefore, the nation has embraced the teaching and learning of EFL at various educational levels. CET, which makes up the majority of English learners in China, has undergone many changes and reforms ever since its official foundation. Guidelines on College English Teaching issued in 2016, normalizes the teaching objectives, teaching contents, teaching methods and means, teaching resources, teaching management and teacher development in macro sense, as well as gives direction to CET in Chinese universities, which has been governing a new round of reform in CET for 2 years. This study only involved the curriculum in terms of teaching objectives, language skills, teaching methods and teaching resources.

A. Teaching Objectives

The teaching objectives of College English are to cultivate students' English application ability, enhance their awareness of cross-cultural communication, improve their communication skills, develop their abilities of autonomous language learning, and enhance their cross-cultural knowledge so that they can effectively use English in studying, living, social interaction and future work, as well as meet the needs of the country, society, schools and personal development.[5]

B. Language Skills

According to the curriculum, non-English majors need to achieve the basic objective when they graduate from the universities. They should improve their language skills in terms of listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translating at the basic level.

Listening is vital in the language classroom because it provides input for the learner [6]. Without understanding the input at the right level, any learning simply cannot begin. College English helps to improve students' general listening skills in the following four aspects: understand the simple English conversation on daily topics, understand the audio and video programs, lectures on familiar topics at slow speed, understand commonly used instruction, and employ basic listening strategies to facilitate listening comprehension.

Speaking is one of the central elements of communication. [7] In EFL teaching, it is an aspect that needs special attention and instruction. College English helps to improve students' general speaking skills in the following five aspects: talk about everyday topics in brief but several turns' English conversation, give simple narration and description about the common events and objectives, give short talks on familiar topics after some preparation, make brief discussion on topics about study and future work as well as improve conversational skills.

Reading is a skill which is highly valued by students and teachers alike. [8] College English helps to improve students' general reading skills in the following aspects: read English newspaper and magazine articles or other English documents on familiar topics, medium difficulty in language, read English textbooks, texts of practical styles commonly used in future work and daily life, and simple English references in the area of specialty, as well as improve the speed and methods of reading according to the different purposes of reading and the degree of difficulty.

Writing is the most difficult skill for English learners to master. The difficulty lies not only in generating and organizing ideas, but also in translating these ideas into readable text. [8] College English helps to improve students' general writing skills in the following aspects: describe personal experiences, impressions, feelings, some events and so on in English, write common articles of practical styles, write a short composition on a general topic or an outline, make brief discussion, explanation and instruction, etc. as well as write compositions complete in language structure, clear in main idea, appropriate in diction and coherent in discourse.

Translating is playing more and more important role in the super power of China because there is a great and booming demand of translation services and the need for qualified and skilled translators has outpaced the providers. It's urgent and necessary to improve the translating skills of Chinese university students. College English helps to improve students' general translating skills in the following aspects: translate essays on familiar topics, with clear structure and low difficulty in language, and translate basically accurate, free from serious mistakes in comprehension or expression.

C. Teaching Methods

Chinese universities have seen the shift from the audio-lingual method to the audio-visual method and from the grammar-translation approach to the communicative approach. The CET further witnessed a shift from teacher-centered approach to the student-centered approach. More importantly, the CET postulates the principle of the

integrated teaching methods where EFL instructors are encouraged to use a variety of learner-centered approaches such as task-based teaching, cooperative teaching, project-based teaching, and inquiry teaching. All these are geared towards the teaching concept of “teacher-guided and student-centered” [5].

D. Teaching Resources

Availability of teaching/learning resources enhances the effectiveness of schools as these are basic things that can bring about good academic performance in the students. [9] In Chinese universities, language teaching facilities such as language labs and multimedia resources are included as necessary components in CET. Students have adequate access to English learning resources such as online learning and net-based autonomous learning centers. Moreover, network teaching platforms and software tools for networking courses are provided in most Chinese universities. Net-based teaching systems are developing better and better. What's more, campus English radio station and campus English television station are equipped in some universities. In addition, different College English textbooks are used in different universities according to individualized curriculum based on the national curriculum.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted at two randomly selected institutions of higher learning in Central China. They are located in the city of Xinxiang. This case study involved a total of 62 College English teachers from the two selected IHL. Out of these 62 teachers, 16.1% were male and 83.9% were female. The data for the study were collected via a three-pronged approach involving the use of a questionnaire, interviews and classroom observations. Nevertheless, this paper will only report the findings obtained from the questionnaire and semi-structured interviews.

A survey questionnaire was used as it is a quick and practical instrument that allows one to collect large data in a short period [10]. The survey questionnaire comprised four sections which explored teachers' perceptions on various aspects of College English such as teaching objectives, language skills, teaching methods and teaching resources. Respondents were required to respond to all items in the questionnaire based on a 5-point Likert scale where a score of 1 indicated ‘strongly disagree’ whilst a score of 5 indicated ‘strongly agree’. The survey questionnaire was prepared in English and then translated into Mandarin by an expert and then back translated into English as the best practice in translating and validating a questionnaire into the target language [11]. It was validated by a panel of three experts in the field of TESL. To investigate the reliability of the instrument, a pilot study was conducted in another institution of higher learning involving about 30 teachers. The pilot study findings revealed that the reliability of the questionnaire stood at 0.951. These procedures indicated that the questionnaire was both reliable and valid.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted with six teachers and they were referred to as Teachers (T) ranging from Respondents TA to TF. Interview data was thematically analyzed by using both deductive and inductive analysis to answer the research questions.

Data obtained from quantitative approach and qualitative approach were analyzed in order to present teachers' perspectives of College English. The quantitative data were analyzed by using both descriptive and inferential statistics with SPSS version 22. The qualitative data were categorized and analyzed to support the quantitative findings.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The following section will provide the findings of the study followed by a brief discussion of the teachers' perspectives of College English in IHL in Central China. The items, including teaching objectives (TO), language skills (LS), teaching methods (TM), teaching resources (TR) and overall perceptions (OP), were explored in the study. In addition, more indepth analysis was conducted to investigate if there were any significant differences in teachers' perceptions of College English based on gender, age and teaching experience.

A. Teachers' Perspectives of College English

The first research question in this paper investigated teachers' perspectives of College English. The findings are presented in Table I below.

TABLE I. TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF COLLEGE ENGLISH (N=62)

Items	M	SD
Teaching Objectives	4.018	0.591
Language Skills	3.934	0.460
Teaching Methods	3.787	0.478
Teaching Resources	3.581	0.565
Overall Perceptions	3.830	0.399

(Scale: 1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Neutral, 4=Agree, 5=Strongly Agree)

As can be seen in Table I, the mean rating for teachers' overall perceptions of College English was 3.830 (SD=0.399), indicating that teachers have moderately positive perceptions of College English. The mean rating for teachers' perceptions of teaching objectives was 4.018 (SD=0.591), indicating that a majority of teachers positively agreed with that College English helped to achieve teaching objectives. A similar sentiment was also expressed in terms of their views on language skills (M=3.934, SD=0.460), teaching methods (M=3.787, SD=0.478) and teaching resources (M=3.581, SD=0.565). All these positive scores are indicative of the fact that teachers viewed College English as a good move to enhance the teaching and learning of EFL in the two selected IHL in Central China. This was further elaborated by Respondent TB in the interview when he said that "The English language programme in our university is based on the national teaching requirements of College English. There are classes allocated for language skills such as reading, writing, listening and speaking. Students of some majors even have oral English classes. I think it's quite good. College English can improve students' comprehensive abilities, not only in reading and writing, but also in listening and speaking. Listening and speaking skills are important for their future."

1) Teachers' Perceptions of Teaching Objectives

Based on the items posed in this section, teachers indicated that College English helps to cultivate English application ability (M = 4.113, SD = 0.770), pass College English Test Band 4 (M = 4.194, SD = 0.807), enhance communication skills (M = 3.936, SD = 0.847), and foster interest in English language learning (M = 3.903, SD = 0.900). This was further elaborated by Respondent TF in the interview when she said that "College English generally can enhance students' English language proficiency. The degree of improvement is certainly different because the emphasis of teaching is different. Due to large class size, students' reading ability is improved most obviously and ranks first, followed by writing ability ranking second, translating ability ranking third, listening ability ranking fourth, and speaking ability ranking fifth. It is difficult to organize oral English activities in large class. College English can also foster some students' interest in English language learning, which depends on English teachers' character and teaching methods."

2) Teachers' Perceptions of Language Skills

Teachers were also in agreement that College English has helped to improve students' listening skills ($M=4.065$, $SD=0.674$), speaking skills ($M=3.758$, $SD=0.783$), reading skills ($M=4.339$, $SD=0.651$), writing skills ($M=3.903$, $SD=0.762$), and translating skills ($M=3.887$, $SD=0.770$). The interviews further highlighted that a majority of teachers place greatest emphasis on reading followed by writing and listening. All teachers agreed with that it was difficult to organize one to one oral English activities due to large size enrollments. Respondent TE said that: "I am trying to improve students' English application ability. I regard students' reading skills as important. I make great efforts to help students improve listening and speaking skills because I expect them to well understand what they are listening and freely express what they are thinking."

3) Teachers' Perceptions of Teaching Methods

Teachers' positive perceptions were also seen in terms of teaching methods. They agreed that the teacher usually does most of the talking ($M = 3.887$, $SD = 0.889$), frequent interactions are made between the teacher and students ($M = 3.742$, $SD = 0.788$), and the teacher uses task-based teaching or project-based teaching ($M = 3.710$, $SD = 0.857$). These findings were also corroborated in the open-ended section of the questionnaire where teachers ranked the following as the most frequently used teaching methods: lecture teaching, cooperative teaching, task-based teaching, inquiry teaching, project-based teaching, communicative language teaching, reflective teaching and integrated teaching. Similar sentiments were shared by teachers during interview sessions. Respondent TA further elaborated that "The teachers, just like me, try to use different teaching methods. I think different teaching methods are just used to help to develop students' actual abilities."

4) Teachers' Perceptions of Teaching Resources

Teachers' perspectives revealed that they were generally satisfied with teaching resources and they felt the IHL had good language teaching facilities such as language lab and multimedia ($M = 4.307$, $SD = 0.715$), and students have adequate access to English learning resources such as online learning ($M=3.790$, $SD=0.908$). The interviews further revealed that all six teachers spoke highly of multimedia resources, language lab, radio station, library and online learning resources. Moreover, teachers offered some suggestions such as improving the network connections in classroom, updating online teaching and learning resources, increasing the number of journals, books and database resources in library and providing better opportunities for teachers' professional development and further education opportunities in China or abroad, etc. Respondent TD further restated that "The teaching resources for me are the textbook, and the teacher's book. And from the internet, we get some coursewares. I think the resources are not enough. The classroom, computer and multimedia are ok. But I think we need some more access to the internet. The library still needs to have more books for teachers and students. I also expect to get training or further education in China or abroad."

B. Teachers' Perspectives of College English Based on Gender

Further analysis was conducted to see if there were any significant differences in teachers' perceptions of College English with regards to gender. Therefore, an independent sample t-test was conducted. The findings obtained are shown in Table II.

TABLE II. TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF COLLEGE ENGLISH BY GENDER

Items	Male (n=10)		Female (n=52)		T-value	Sig. (2-tailed)
	M	SD	M	SD		
TO	4.157	0.711	3.992	0.570	0.808	0.422
LS	4.029	0.619	3.915	0.429	0.715	0.477
TM	3.789	0.411	3.786	0.493	0.015	0.988

TR	3.500	0.764	3.596	0.527	-0.490	0.626
OP	3.869	0.515	3.822	0.379	0.335	0.739

$P < 0.05^*$

The mean rating for male teachers' overall perceptions of College English was 3.869 (SD=0.515) and the mean rating for female teachers' overall perceptions of College English was 3.822 (SD=0.379), indicating that both male and female teachers have positive perceptions of College English. The p value was $0.739 > 0.05$, which means there was no significant difference in teachers' overall perceptions of College English between males and females.

Exploring further into the four aspects that have been investigated, the findings showed no significant difference in perceptions between male and female teachers with regards to teaching objectives ($p=0.422$), language skills ($p=0.477$), teaching methods ($p=0.988$) and teaching resources ($p=0.626$).

C. Teachers' Perspectives of College English Based on Age

More indepth analysis was conducted to investigate if there were any significant differences among teachers' perspectives with regards to their age. Therefore, an independent sample t-test was conducted and the findings obtained are displayed in Table III.

TABLE III. TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF COLLEGE ENGLISH BY AGE

Items	Below 36 (n=29)		36 & above (n=33)		T-value	Sig. (2-tailed)
	M	SD	M	SD		
TO	3.852	0.414	4.165	0.685	-2.201	0.032*
LS	3.796	0.355	4.054	0.511	-2.280	0.026*
TM	3.789	0.503	3.785	0.461	0.039	0.969
TR	3.543	0.496	3.614	0.625	-0.487	0.628
OP	3.745	0.288	3.904	0.468	-1.632	0.108

$P < 0.05^*$

A look at the overall mean scores indicated that teachers who are above the age of 36 held more positive perceptions (M=3.904, SD=0.468) towards College English compared to teachers who are below 36 (M=3.745, SD=0.288). The p value was $0.108 > 0.05$, which means there was no significant difference in teachers' overall perceptions of College English based on age.

Exploring further into the four aspects that have been investigated, the findings showed no significant difference in teachers' perceptions based on age with regards to teaching methods ($p=0.969$) and teaching resources ($p=0.628$). Nevertheless, a significant difference in perceptions between the two groups was recorded for two other components, namely teaching objectives ($p=0.032$) and language skills ($p=0.026$). It may be because teachers who are below 36 and teachers who are 36 and above have different understanding of teaching objectives of College English according to textbooks, teaching contents, class size and students' language proficiency, and as a result students' language skills are improved at different levels.

D. Teachers' Perspectives of College English Based on Teaching Experience

More indepth analysis was conducted to investigate if there were any significant differences in teachers' perceptions of College English based on teaching experience. Therefore, an independent sample t-test was conducted and the findings obtained are revealed in Table IV.

TABLE IV. TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF COLLEGE ENGLISH BY TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Items	Below 10 (n=21)		10 & above (n=41)		T-value	Sig. (2-tailed)
	M	SD	M	SD		
TO	3.837	0.362	4.112	0.664	-2.107	0.039*
LS	3.806	0.359	3.999	0.496	-1.585	0.118
TM	3.751	0.548	3.805	0.444	-0.415	0.680
TR	3.583	0.496	3.579	0.603	0.027	0.979
OP	3.744	0.287	3.874	0.443	-1.213	0.230

$P < 0.05^*$

The overall mean scores indicated that more experienced teachers held more positive perceptions ($M=3.874$, $SD=0.443$) towards College English compared to their peers with below ten years of teaching experience ($M=3.744$, $SD=0.287$). The p value was $0.230 > 0.05$, which means there was no significant difference in teachers' perceptions of College English based on teaching experience.

Dwelling further into the four aspects, the findings showed no significant difference in perceptions between teachers possessing 10 and above years of teaching experience and teachers possessing below 10 years of teaching experience with regards to language skills ($p=0.118$), teaching methods ($p=0.680$) and teaching resources ($p=0.979$). Nevertheless, a significant difference in perceptions between the two groups was recorded for teaching objectives ($p=0.039$). The reason may be because teachers with different teaching experience have different understanding of CET and different requirements for students with different language proficiency.

5. CONCLUSION

This study explored 62 teachers' perspectives of College English from two selected IHL in Central China. The results indicated that teachers held moderately positive perceptions of College English from the perspectives of teaching objectives, language skills, teaching methods, and teaching resources. These findings imply that the 2016 CET Reform can be regarded as a positive move in EFL as it has stimulated more learner-centered teaching and learning. It is hoped that it will push more effective learner-centered teaching methods to be implemented in the Chinese EFL classrooms and students' language skills will be effectively improved under the CET Reform.

Furthermore, inferential statistics indicated that there was no significant difference in teachers' overall perceptions based on gender, age and teaching experience. These findings imply that the 2016 CET Reform has been received rather positively among teachers in the two selected tertiary institutions in this study. It is hoped that EFL teachers will continue to find more ways to deepen the CET Reform.

Finally, the findings of this study are not generalizable across China due to the limited sample size. It is however, hoped that this study has shed some light to the implementation of the 2016 CET Reform and necessary actions can be taken to further enhance its implementation in all IHL in China.

References

- [1] C.Tang & J. Biggs, "How Hong Kong students cope with assessment," In D. Watkins, & J. Biggs (Eds.), *The Chinese Learner: Cultural, Psychological and Contextual Influences*, pp.159-182. Hong Kong: CERC, 1996.

- [2] A.Cheng & Q.Wang, “English Language Teaching in higher education in China: a historical and social overview,” In J. Ruan, & C. B. Leung (Eds.), *Perspectives on teaching and learning English literacy in China*, pp. 19-33. Dordrecht: Springer, 2012.
- [3] W. Dai, “On further improving English language learning in China: suggestions for consideration,” *Foreign Languages and Their Education*, vol.7, pp.34-37, April 2001.
- [4] G. Hu, “English language education in China: policies, progress, and problems,” *Journal of Language Policy*, vol. 4, pp. 5-24, March 2005.
- [5] MOE, *Guidelines on College English Teaching*. Beijing: Ministry of Education, 2016.
- [6] M. Rost, *Introducing listening*. London: Penguin,1994.
- [7] S. Kang, “ Factors to consider: developing adult EFL students’ speaking abilities,” In J. Richards& W. Renandya(Eds.), *Methodology in Language Teaching-An Anthology of Current Practice*, pp.204-211. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
- [8] J. Richards& W. Renandya, *Methodology in Language Teaching-An Anthology of Current Practice*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
- [9] N.A.Maicibi, *Human Resource Management Success*. Kampala: Net Media Publication Ltd. Uganda, 2003.
- [10] J. A. Herman , G. J. Mellenbergh and D. J. Hand , *Advising on Research Methods: A Consultant’s Companion*. Huizen: Van Kessel , 2008.
- [11] S. B. Merriam, *Qualitative Research : A Guide to Design and Implementation* (2nd e.d.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2009.