



## COLLEGE ENGLISH TEACHERS IN CHINA: DEVELOPMENTS, CRISIS AND SOLUTIONS

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### ABSTRACT

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This research investigates whether the employment of College English teachers (CETs) is threatened in China. In order to explore this issue, the study traced the evolution of College English (CE) and the past and present status of CETs, analyzing various causes for change in the status of CETs that also lead to the issue of surplus CETs. The threats to CETs identified include the changing patterns in English learning and teaching, amendment in the language policy and the absence of a justification of CE as a course at tertiary level. The study proposed a few possible solutions to tackle the issue of surplus CETs. It concluded that a successful transfer of 'surplus labors' in CET not only depends on the implementation of top-down scheme scientifically designed for teacher training, but also relies on the CETs' professional commitment to seizing every opportunity of upgrading their personal, technical and pedagogical competencies. Although the potential problems and challenges facing CETs are discussed in Chinese contexts, they may have implications for other similar educational contexts where English is taught as a foreign language.

**Contribution/Originality:** This paper is one of the pioneering studies to examine the evolution of College English and the status of College English Teachers in China. It is also among the first studies to investigate and suggest possible solutions for the latent threats posed to the employment of College English Teachers in post-College English era.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The Chinese government recently announced its plan to lessen the weight of English in National Matriculation Test (NMT or *gaokao*) in major cities (Zheng, 2014; Zhao, 2016). The tendency of de-emphasizing English in Chinese school triggered off the emotion that English will no longer be as important as before. Such an emotion, according to Zhao (2016) 'would devalue the importance of English learning and consequently English teachers may be faced with the risk of losing their jobs'. This has led college English teachers (CETs), who deliver the course of College English (CE) to non-English majors feel most threatened.

It has been estimated that there are approximately 60,000 CETs (Zhang, 2010) teaching CE to 27,000,000 students (Xinhua, 2011) in 2,148 universities in mainland China (Gaolu, 2017). These CETs have been occupied with a heavy teaching load due to a gradual growth in college student enrolment in past decades (Borg and Liu, 2013). The CE departments in Chinese universities, similar to university language centers in many parts of the world, are typically viewed as service units rather than as academic departments. The CETs are thus thought of as instructors rather than academics (Xu, 2004; Borg and Liu, 2013).

Chevallier (2000) notes:

[T]he existence of a growing number of academic staff who do not take part in research has become a general trend. Often, these people have a heavier teaching load and do not participate in departmental decisions on academic affairs. They are usually assigned to subjects considered as secondary in the curriculum, like languages, especially in programs with a strong disciplinary content.

It is undeniable that CETs do not have a high academic status in the tertiary sector. Unfortunately, their teaching positions are jeopardized due to the nationwide reduction of credits for CE which leads to the questions in this study: Is College English Teaching (CET) going to lose its limelight? Is CETs' employment threatened in China? In the following section, the evolution of CE is traced in relation to the status of CETs, the causes are analyzed to understand the changing status of CETs, and discuss the possible transfer or relocation of the surplus CETs as a solution to this problem.

## 2. CET IN CHINA: A BRIEF REVIEW

CET in China has experienced fluctuation due to the rise and fall of political movements and changes in social and economic policies since the foundation of the People's Republic of China in 1949. The history of CET can be roughly divided into four stages: (1) the budding stage (1949-1977), (2) the starting stage (1978-1985), (3) the developing stage (1986-2000), and (4) the post-CE stage (2001-). Each period has exerted an influence on the situation of CETs.

### 2.1. *The Budding Stage (1949-1977)*

The political movements from the building of new China (1949) to the end of the Cultural Revolution (a political and ideological turmoil lasting from 1966 to 1977) have had a great impact on CE development. The situation of CE seriously deteriorated when China developed a tie of brotherhood with the Soviet Union during the 1950s, as CE tended to be replaced exclusively by College Russian (Dzau, 1990). Due to the lack of Russian teachers, a number of English teachers were required to shift to the teaching of Russian. These 'Russian teachers' were not much better than their students in Russian proficiency because they came to know this language either through short-term training or were self-taught through a 'teaching-while-learning' mode (Li, 2008).

With the breakup of Sino-Soviet solidarity in the late 1950s, English became a recognized subject and given top priority in recognition of its increasing popularity around the world. Many universities and colleges started to restore or establish English programs for freshmen who had learned Russian in high schools. Consequently, these students had to start afresh upon entering higher institutions (Sun, 1996). Unfortunately, CE lost its status very soon during Cultural Revolution when English courses were removed from the school curriculum. Even worse, intellectuals, especially those who had mastered the English language, or had received education from Western countries, were falsely accused of being spies and worshippers of Western countries, and thus persecuted (Rao, 2013). In a word, this was the very early period of CE development when CETs were generally ignored and devalued.

### 2.2. *The Starting Stage (1978- 1985)*

In 1978, the Chinese Government initiated reforms and adopted the open-door policy to pursue economic development and modernizations of the nation (Sun, 1996). It was believed by the Chinese government that the key element to drive the nation to modernization was 'to have a significant number of competent users of English in a whole range of professions, businesses, workplaces and enterprises' (Wang, 1999). Accordingly, the CE programs were viewed as an important part both in the higher educational system and in the development of the nation (Han, 2008). Under such circumstances, CE became an independent subject in the early 1980s and started being taught as a Common Core Foreign Language (CCFL) to all non-English major students. The afore-mentioned 'Russian

teachers', then switched back to teaching of English. As a result, there were more employment options in foreign enterprises and joint ventures. There were greater educational opportunities overseas to meet the enormous demands for CETs. However, in meeting the demands of shortage of numbers, the other problems of teachers' preparation remained unresolved, that is, "low educational levels and a lack of training opportunities" (Xu and Fan, 2017).

### 2.3. The Developing Stage (1986-2000)

An explosive growth of CET in China was observed since the implementation of the *CET Syllabus for Arts and Sciences Undergraduates* in 1986. The number of new students enrolled in Chinese higher educational institutions increased from 1.02 million in 1979 to 1.88 million in 1986, the overwhelming majority of whom took English as a foreign language (Cheng, 1988). CE now constituted a compulsory course unit in the first two years of university study and accounted for more than 10% of the total credit points required for a bachelor degree. The popularity of English was reflected not only in the ever-increasing number of English learners, but also in the rigid requirements of higher institutions and employers. Since 1987, students across China, after completing CE course, had to take the unified College English Test Band 4 (CET-4), a failure in which might lead to disqualification from a baccalaureate upon graduation. English proficiency was also required for employment in academic and research institutions, government offices, business companies and other work areas. Learning English thus became an obsession for college and university students (Wang, 1999; Han, 2008). With university student enrollments going up at an increasing rate each year, there was a huge demand created for CETs, but the supply of qualified EFL teachers had never been enough. As a result, many postgraduate students from the English department (usually majoring in linguistics, literature or translation) were recruited with a negligibly small amount of training. Since these graduates belonged to conventional universities rather than teachers' colleges, they did not have any formal education or training in pedagogy and teaching methodologies (Wang, 1999).

The situation became aggravated when some graduates and active-service CETs switched over to more lucrative employment in commerce, banking, tourism, foreign-owned companies and joint ventures where their English skills were highly valued (Wang, 1999). There was also a severe shortage of teachers that made the CETs overburdened with teaching and were unable to afford any more energy and effort to refresh courses. The scenario of CET practice was summarized by Wu (2004) as large class sizes (over 40–80 students), heavy teaching workload (16–20 class periods per week), low academic qualifications (72% of teachers holding bachelor's degree), teachers' low language proficiency and lack of in-service training. Moreover, CETs were considered of lesser importance than teachers of English majors, as the workload of the former cannot be equivalent to that of the latter. Last, but not the least, CETs were paid less for each academic hour than other academic staff.

### 2.4. The Post-CE Stage (2001)

The past decade and a half witnessed a nationwide reduction of credits for CE as a result of incessant outcry against CET practices from academic circles and the public. College students devoted a significant amount of their time and energy to learn CE and prepared its related nationwide tests (CET-4 and CET-6), yet a report released in 2014 by Education First (EF, an international education company) revealed that scores (50.15) obtained by adult test-takers in mainland China were ranked among the 'low efficiency countries', falling behind other Asian countries and regions such as Korea (53.62), Japan (52.88), Hong Kong (52.50), Taiwan (52.56) and even Vietnamese (51.57). CET was accused of being 'time-consuming and inefficient'. Since 2000, CET-4 results were no longer connected with graduates' qualification for BA or BSc degrees, which diminished the importance of CET in universities. The work of CETs was then imbued with tensions: CE was increasingly devalued in university curriculum system, hence CETs were marginalized in higher education. A recently released Guidelines on College English Teaching (GCET) by Ministry of Education (MOE) states that a CET is expected not only to meet the needs of students'

professional learning, international exchange, further study and employment, but also help students develop a world vision, international awareness and improve their humanistic quality. These tensions foreshadow an unprecedentedly fundamental reform of CET, ushering in a new era of post-CE.

### 3. CETs FACING POTENTIAL CRISIS OF EMPLOYMENT

If the tendency of cutting credits for CE persisted, as Feng (2010) cautioned, CE as a course in higher institutions may come to an end in near future and CETs would soon become ‘surplus labors’ with no courses to teach. The tendency can be validated by the rampant reduction of academic hours for CE in recent years. On policy level, the national requirement for academic hours in 2007 was 280, and the number was reduced to 144-216 in 2017 (see Table 1). In practice, according to a survey of 100 universities, the average academic hours for CE shrank to 180 with the extreme case of Tsinghua University (China’s top university) being 72 (Cai, 2017). This imminent crisis is connected with a number of external and internal factors jeopardizing CETs such as the changing way of English learning and teaching, changes in students and language policy as well as the lack of justification of CE as a course at tertiary level.

Table-1. Changes of academic hours in CET curricula.

CET curricula (short name)	Academic hours
1962 syllabus	240
1980 syllabus	240
1985/1986/1999 syllabus	240-280
2004/2007 requirements	280
2015 guidelines (draft)	not specified
2017 guidelines	144-216

With advances in science and information technology, the way each student generation acquires knowledge, including that of the English language, differs greatly from their counterparts (Xu and Fan, 2017). The new generation of students growing up with the Internet has easy access to learning resources, which has drastically changed their learning methods and their preferred learning style. Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has caused revolution in English learning and teaching, a revealing example of which is the increasing use of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) and Mobile English Learning Platform. The former offers online courses with unlimited participation and open access via the Web with no boundaries of learning institutions while the latter enables learners to use mobile devices such as mobile phones and tablets, MP3 players and handheld computers for instructional purposes in the form of distance education. Research has indicated that students receiving mobile phone-facilitated instruction have a better performance than those participating in conventional lessons which proves the use of mobile phone in learning as a valuable teaching method (Thornton, 2005). Facetalk, which claims to be China’s first mobile English learning platform, provides students with instant access to fluent English speakers through one on one video chat. Such mobile learning (commonly known as M-learning) opportunities undoubtedly reduce the necessity of face-to-face instruction and decrease reliance on CETs. Additionally, significant investments have been made in recent years to construct infrastructure, content and resources relating to the integration of mobile devices into English learning environment at tertiary level. It is self-evident that digital technologies offer great potential for autonomous learning as they have liberated learning from constraints of time and location. This would have a far-reaching influence on CETs which is usually the biggest group in each university and threaten their employment.

What makes CETs’ employment more endangered is the fact that students’ English proficiency, prompted by policy efforts and social changes, has greatly improved (Xu and Fan, 2017). English was made a subject of study from grade three at primary schools and ICT-informed instruction approach together with tremendous private investment by parents has made available to students more learning resources and opportunities of exposure to

English. In addition, the *New English Curriculum Standard* (NECS) for senior secondary school issued in 2003 stipulated that senior high school students should have command of 3500 words upon graduation, which is approximate to the vocabulary requirement of CET-4, the national standard test for college students to examine whether they have met the basic requirements (Huang, 2009). Moreover, NECS was found to be not significantly different from *College English Curriculum Requirements* (CECR) released in 2007 in terms of description of requirements on four skills (Cai, 2012). This argument was supported by the observation that an increasing number of freshmen in major universities had reached the level of CET-4 (Cai, 2013). Since the teaching task of CE was accomplished in major senior high schools, the realistic necessity of CET would no longer be justified. If the demand for the services of CETs continues to shrink, the CETs will surely become redundant.

The diminishing importance of English as a course in universities may also pose a threat to the job stability of CETs. For instance, the stipulation that 'CE is a compulsory course for college students' in CECR was removed in GCET promulgated in 2017. This subtle change suggests that not all students are required to learn English in college, i.e., some are allowed to earn credit for CE by demonstrating English mastery instead of only being allowed to earn credit through seat time. Some students can also choose not to learn English, but opt to learn other foreign languages such as Japanese, German, French and Russian (Wang, 2016). Such policy has been implemented in many a university including the one where the author conducted her post-doctoral research. Besides, the predominance of English in Chinese foreign language landscape may be reshaped in some multinational border provinces such as Yunnan, Xinjiang and Tibet Autonomous Region as Chinese president Xi Jinping proposed the Belt and Road Initiative<sup>1</sup> in 2013. For instance, one such region can be the Yunnan Province in southwest China which is adjacent to several Southeast Asian countries such as Thailand, Vietnam, Myanmar and Laos. The Department of Education of Yunnan Province has also issued an official document aiming to enhance the education of the languages of these Southeast Asian countries. If this scheme is put into practice, it would be likely that CE will fall out of favor and CETs have to reassess their careers in such regions (Zhao, 2016).

A final potential problem that makes CETs a vulnerable group as university faculty is the lack of a disciplinary status of CETs. Unlike mathematics or history, language teaching, including English language teaching, 'has not had a consistent disciplinary home in which to anchor its content or theories of learning, teaching, and knowing, or mastery' (Larsen-Freeman and Freeman, 2008). Although linguistics offers an important disciplinary base, and applied linguistics has had an impact on the teaching and learning of English, they do not dictate the content of English instruction (Larsen-Freeman and Freeman, 2008). That is to say, two basic ingredients for a discipline are lacking in CE, one, the unique object of research; second, a comprehensive system of theory or knowledge (Cai, 2013). Indeed, CET is language-centered and targeted at accumulation of language phenomena and teaching four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing, which is non-academic and non-disciplinary in nature (Xu, 2004). CE was thus taken as a typical 'hollow course' (Feng, 2006) and 'service course' (Larsen-Freeman and Freeman, 2008) for being deficient in disciplinary or intellectual content. Therefore, it is not surprising that CE is considered as secondary in the curriculum and most likely to be outsourced to MOOC which is generally designed with fewer teaching weeks and hours (Zhang and Zhang, 2017). With the increasing popularity of MOOC in higher education reform especially in CET, it is inevitable that CETs will be in surplus in years to come.

#### 4. RELOCATION OF SURPLUS CETs

Realizing the crisis that CETs are confronted with in the era of post-CE, some researchers have been searching for the countermeasures to deal with the situation (Feng, 2010; Ding, 2013). On the basis of the findings in previous

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<sup>1</sup>China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Belt and Road) is an ambitious programme to connect Asia with Africa and Europe via land and maritime networks along six corridors with the aim of improving regional integration, increasing trade and stimulating economic growth.

studies and our years of experience in CET practice and management, three directions may be offered in order to help CETs reconsider their career orientation or administrators to relocate CETs.

The most applicable way to relieve the surplus of CETs is perhaps to encourage them to set up specific courses. These may include courses initially designed for English majors such as *A Guide To English-Speaking Countries*, *English Newspaper and Magazine Reading* and *English Movie Appreciation* to cater for those college students who are interested in English culture. The selective courses may also include *Legal English*, *English for Management* and *English for Academic Reading*, which are typical English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses. Other specific courses may be the examination-oriented English training programs for helping students prepare for their TOEFL or IELTS. Although these selective courses have been initiated in some key universities in China (see Table 2 for a case in Southwest University). However, there are constraints in implementation of these three categories of courses because CETs intending to start the first two categories of courses would be competing for the lecturing qualification with teachers from English department and those from specialized schools (such as Law school and School of Management). Moreover, the third type of TOEFL or IELTS courses would only cater for a small number of students and thus cannot offer sufficient teaching posts; even worse, CETs will have to compete with private test-prep schools for getting students. Lastly, if the selective courses are discontinued for not being chosen by a sufficient number of students, CETs would again be in surplus. Even if the CETs survive the competition for courses, they are further weakened in status as they are reduced from lecturing secondary compulsory courses to marginalized selective ones (Feng, 2010).

Table-2. Categories of selective CE courses in Southwest University.

Course categories	Specific courses
Basic English	Omitted
English language	Omitted
Language skills	Omitted
Language and culture	A Guide To English-Speaking Countries; English Newspaper and Magazine Reading; English Movie Appreciation; Cross-cultural Communication
Language use	Legal English; English for Management; Business English; English for Academic Reading
Language enhancement	TOEFL training; IELTS training

Source: Yu (2019).

The second direction for CETs' relocation is to engage them in research and teaching in non-linguistics/literature/translation disciplines of humanistic and social sciences. CETs may be encouraged to seek cross-disciplinary development in their effort to further their education. For example, some CETs in Southwest University of Political Science and Law (where the author is employed) choose to pursue their PhD study in International Law, Western Legal history and other foreign law-related fields. This choice is believed to be conducive to CETs' sustainable professional development as well as academic advancement of higher education. In this way, CETs' high level of English proficiency can be fully capitalized on as a working language to facilitate their future specialty teaching and research (Feng, 2010). This disciplinary reorientation would also dovetail with MOE's policy of promoting English as a medium of instruction for undergraduate courses in tertiary institutions. The reoriented CETs can be ideal instructors and may enjoy higher income and prestige for inter-disciplinary advantage.

The final way-out for CETs in surplus would be to start their own entrepreneurial venture taking advantage of their 'linguistic capital' (Bourdieu, 1991) which can be converted into 'economic capital' (Pan and Block, 2011). A few colleagues of the author have already been engaged in the operation of a profit-making library of English picture books for children. Apart from daily management of the library, they are also devoted to offering English classes for kids which is an important part of business earnings. These CETs are usually females in their mid-

thirties, having Master's degree and unable to pursue PhD study due to various reasons. For young university teachers, not holding a doctorate usually means a dim prospect for being promoted to senior positions, if not impossible. Having a strong sense of crisis, these CETs are fully aware that they have to be prepared in advance to combat any potential for unemployment.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The development of CET has been inextricably related to the changing world, the social and economic context of Chinese society and the changes in Chinese college students in the past decades (Xu and Fan, 2017). The nationwide reduction of credits for CE, together with the introduction of MOOC in CET which features an online curriculum development mode, indicates the advent of the era of post-CE. This paper has examined the latent threats posed to the employment of CETs in the new era and proposed solutions to the impending surplus of CETs. Successful relocation of 'surplus labors' in CET depends on the implementation of top-down scheme scientifically designed for teacher training. It also relies on the CETs' professional commitment to seizing every opportunity of upgrading their personal, technical and pedagogical competencies. More importantly, CETs should be fully prepared for restructuring of their work, meaning, regulating their professional structure of knowledge, competence and ideology in order to reposition their ecological niche. In short, it requires CETs to be able to and willing to embark on a lifelong process of learning in the framework of a seamless system spanning the career of teachers (CEART, 2000).

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