

# The Challenges for the Implementation of Content-based English Instruction in the Chinese Secondary Education

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## Abstract

With the trend of globalization, English has been increasingly emphasized in the secondary education system of China. Specifically, it accounts for a significant proportion in the marks of College entrance examination. So it is clear that the development of English competence serves as a crucial target for the learning of middle school students. However, the long exposure of traditional English language teaching (ELT) mode has been recently proved to insufficient for learners to gain the ability to use English in various communicating contexts. At the same time, Content-based English instruction (CBEI), being interpreted as “bilingual education” by Chinese foreign language educators, has been found effective in language learning, as it enables learners to access to classes of other subjects taught by English. It supposes that students can naturally acquire English in their process of learning other subjects. Despite the benefits, such a teaching method also impose challenges to students, teachers as well as the whole society, which would be illustrated in this paper.

## Keywords

Content-based English Instruction; Secondary Education; English Teaching.

## 1. Introduction

In the last several decades, English has been attached with great significance in the secondary Education of China, which can be explicitly illustrated in its educational policies. Dating back to the period after the Cultural Revolution of China, which can be considered as a new beginning of Chinese civilization, the normalization of English is set as the first target in school education, as it was believed by the policy-maker that the personnel proficiency of English was crucial to the modernization of China (Adamson & Morris, 1997). However, along with the trend of globalization and English has been figured out as the passport of the international communication, the traditional ELT pattern has been regarded outdated and a new instructional policy, which pays more attention to the communicative competence of the students, has been implemented in some provinces of China. Content-based English instruction (CBEI), being interpreted as “bilingual education” by Chinese foreign language educators, requires English as an additional language in the class for other subjects in the school curriculum, such as physics, art and biology, and students could acquire English through implicit instructions and the tasks in class. In this paper, I am trying to identify the challenges in its implementation for teachers, students and our society in secondary school settings.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. English Education in China

After the establishment of the People's Republic of China, there was a long period when the relationship between China and the former Soviet Union was closed, which was partly because that the development of China in economy and technology significantly relied on the support of

the former Soviet Union, As a result, Russian became a most indispensable part in the foreign language education of China and was given great priority in the language education policy (Adamson, 2004). Since 1952, there has been seven Russian learning schools established in different part of China, along with 17 comprehensive universities as well as 19 normal universities set up by the department of Russian; at the same time, Russian was involved in the syllabus of non-language major university students (T. Zhang & Ding, 2002). In 1954, the foreign language curriculum of junior middle school was terminated by the Ministry of Education and Russian was determined as the first option in the senior middle school education (He, cited in Xu, 2002). On the other hand, the antagonism in the relationship between China and Western world was ever-increasing. English, thereby, was recognized as “the language of the enemy, the USA” (Gil & Adamson, 2001), and at the edge of being totally squeezed out of the language education (Chang, 2006). Actually, there were only eight English programs offered nationwide (T. Zhang & Ding, 2002). Also, the overwhelmingly superior status of Russian to that of English could also be reflected in the institutions where English programs were still provided. For example, even though English was a major aspect in the foreign language department of Peking University, in that period, English was just taught to meet the domestic requirements for the translation of the English documentaries in science and technology.

The potential contribution of English in the development of China has not been fully recognized until 1956, when the government began to realize that English could make the scientific knowledge and technology from the western countries accessible (Adamson, 2004). At the same time, the expansion of Russian education was under control, as the Russian majors were excessive (T. Zhang & Ding, 2002). Therefore, in 1959, a policy was imposed to reduce the proportion of Russian education as well as increase that of English in secondary education, with the announcement that about one third of the secondary syllabus should involve Russian while two thirds of the schools should teach English as well as other foreign languages (The Ministry of Education, 1960).

The Cultural Revolution happened in the next decade from May 1966 to October 1976, which is a political movement started by the president Mao Zedong. In this period, any foreign ideas, including foreign languages, were considered as against the leadership of the president and English was severely “politically sensitive”, as it was regarded as a symbol of capitalism and imperialism (Adamson, 2004). Consequently, foreign language programs were abandoned and stopped enrolling students (W. Hu, cited in Xu, 2002). It was not until the early 1970s did the foreign language begin to recover. After the Cultural Revolution coming to an end, the new Chinese decision-maker Deng Xiaoping focused on the modernization process of China, and English was identified prominently in the development process of China. In 1977, the system of Gaokao, which is a nationwide university entrance exam, was reused, and English was one of the major subjects. This, on one hand, has significantly promote the normalization of English and it inextricably became a compulsory subject in secondary education. On the other hand, however, due to the lack of teaching resource in many provinces, the English levels of students were uneven. Also, as the limitations on the materials, there was no speaking or listening test in English in Gaokao. Therefore, the pedagogic activities were just confined to grammatical knowledge and teachers just followed the textbooks disseminate theories. It was acknowledged that the effort in English education did not get the expected outcome in the quality of ELT in 1982 at the first National Conference on Secondary Foreign Language Education (Hu, 2002). During the 20th century, China had experienced phenomenal economic growth as well as unprecedented challenges. There were three main factors being the driven force for the innovation of ELT. First, China was ready to join the World Trade Organization. Second, it was highly possible that Beijing would win the bid of the 2008 Olympic Games. Third, the fail in ELT in the last decades urged an effective revolution (Hu, 2004). All of the three events entailed a number of participants with English proficiency, most importantly, with English

communicative competence. Therefore, dramatic reforms in English education were applied to many provinces in China, among which Shanghai could be most noticeable. To construct “bilingual education”, Content-based English instruction (CBEI) was introduced in English curriculum. It is undeniable that the quality of ELT was enhanced considerably. As the result of the great continuous effort, some observers of China unsurprisingly found that the bilingual progress of China grows much faster than other countries in that region.

## 2.2. Content-based English Learning

Content-based was created in an immersion program as well as a teaching experiment of Montreal, Canada in 1960s. Its syllabuses could be defined as any curriculum and learning materials for English for specific purposes and the contents are based on the topics from other areas. Specifically, Content-based curriculum could be the foreign language immersion programs where students could assess to multiple subjects through the target language, and under these circumstances, language is used as a vehicle to communicate according to other topics (Nunan, 1989). That is to say, compared with English which was just assumed as a method, the content itself was attached with greater significance. Also, it was described as the disseminating the knowledge via the language with implicit effort on language itself (Krahnke, cited in Lou & Xu, 2016). While it commonly exists in the ESL programs in the places taking English as a native language, CBEL nowadays begins to serve as a supplement or an alternative to traditional language pedagogy. This pedagogic approach is highly recommended by many educators as an effective and pragmatic teaching mode for the integration of learning language and subject spontaneously. At the same time, CBEI could be utilized in a wide range of ways depending on the target skills and contains not just traditional teaching methods including vocabulary expansion and grammar instruction but also up-to-date methods, including communicative language teaching. The three main theories supporting CBEI are “language is text and discourse-based,” “language use draws on integrated skills,” and “language is purposeful”.

CBEI can be adopted as an approach to broaden students’ knowledge and cognitive ability, as well as promote language skills (Mohan & Beckett, 2003). Students could naturally access to the language input as well as produce output in such a language-speaking environment through the interaction with teachers and their peers. At the same time, they can acquire the knowledge of other subjects, which could be efficient. In the field of foreign language teaching, it had many successful examples (Beckett, 2002). One excellent example of CBEI could be found in the research of Messerklinger (2003). In this research, a course named English and the Internet has been developed which aimed at instructing word process and research through the language of English. And the results are significant. In the first stage students naturally acquire the usage of some common expressions related to computer, such as “click,” “drag,” “file,” “folder,” “homepage,” “URL,” “address,” etc. Students gradually become comfortable with the English instructions from teachers. At the end of the study, both students’ learning achievements and their attitudes are investigated, and as the results illustrate, on one hand, students are able to generate researched paragraphs in English by means of a computer. Also, on the other hand, they respond in the interview that they indeed appreciate the benefits of this course and now they are comfortable to engage in English-speaking environment without and panic.

Therefore, it is clear that CBEI is of great value to students’ learning. Thus it unsurprisingly attracts the interest and attention of the Chinese scholars and its implementation is considered necessary in China.

## 3. Challenges for the Implementation of CBEI

Although CBEI has been attached great attention and was considered efficient both in ELT and in the education of other subjects, there are still a wide range of challenges in its

implementation. In this paper, three main challenges, including the issues of teachers, students and social context will be discussed.

If the goals of CBEI are expected to be achieved to any substantial extent, appropriately trained educators are crucial. Since CBEI requires English as the mediate language, teachers are supposed to be proficient in both English and another subject, which is very demanding. Although the percentages of teachers being professionally qualified for their positions have witnessed a dramatic upward trend, ELT is still low in the quality of teaching force and its demands in the reform started recently could not be fully satisfied. Professional qualifications of teachers involved in CBEI could be defined in two dimensions, which are their expertise in English as well as the content of the curriculum, and their perspectives about CBEI. However, in the context of China, these professional requirements can be very demanding for the local teachers. It has been found that the English education in China has long been weak in the training of English-speaking skills. Even the English majors may find difficulties in communicating in English, owing to the fact that the English-speaking environment in China is limited. In another word, learners would rarely find any occasions to use in English outside the classrooms. Therefore, even the highly-motivated learners may not be able to be sophisticated in expressing themselves in English, let alone teachers of various subjects. According to the research of Beckett (2002), a student who has experienced CEI complained that the pronunciation of the English of their professors is broken, and it is hard for them to understand what they say. Thus, it could be challenging for a large number of teachers to simultaneously master both English and another profession.

At the same time, the recent policy for the promotion of CBEI has triggered an acute shortage of teaching force. It is estimated that they are actually 200,000 English teachers in China, while the successful operation of CBEI necessitates over 300,000 teachers. In addition to the rapid growing ELT teacher education programs in public schools and tertiary teacher training institutions, the immediate policy initiation and the shortage in the support of the qualified teachers push the Ministry of Education (MOE) to issue a makeshift staffing approach, which attempts to mitigate the problem by training the teachers of other aspects in their English proficiency and getting them into the CBEI programs. In addition, MOE pay effort to recruiting non-education majors with English competent to the programs (MOE, 2001). It could be reflected from the measures that the policy-makers lack adequate recognition in the importance of the teachers' professional ability, and emergent shortage of teacher resource. However, effective previous exposure to specialized foreign language instruction is crucial to well-trained teachers and effective teaching activities. Without professional teaching force, a gap between the ideal outcome and classroom reality will always exists. Therefore, the lack of qualified teaching force could be a nonnegligible obstacle in practicing CBEI in China.

Also, the difficulty in the development of a well-rounded recognition in CBEI in teachers' group is unavoidable. Even though there are still numerous teachers whose expertise enable them to mandate a CBEI class, they may still fail in designing rewarding pedagogic activities in CBEI due to the insufficient realization of it. In fact, with a few exceptions, the outdated theories and teaching methods are still adopted by many teacher education programs (Hu, 2005), and they themselves was indeed taught by the traditional syllabus in their student period. Therefore, they may struggle in the CBEI practice, which is still in the experimental stage but being forced to promoted nationwide. The circumstances of in-service teachers are also not optimistic. On one hand, they have already taught in the traditional pattern for a long time and may feel difficult to adapt to the new curricular patterns. On the other hand, the instructions for them to teach in CBEI are limit. Most in-service teacher training programs could only help teachers access to the paper qualifications. There are limit materials for preservice programs which are available to them. At the same time, the instructional and evaluation practices they could pursue are strongly shaped by a transmissive orientation without a clear and successive

framework for them to develop their cognition of the up-to-date concepts and teaching approaches continuously (Hu, 2005). Therefore, under the current situation of China, even teachers going through specific training programs lack adequate training (CHP). Consequently, it is unsurprising that many teachers in the CBEI classes could not give effective instructions in both the English language and the target content. According to the observation data of Yan (2012), even though some teachers joined in the programs with positive attitudes to the reform in ELT, their bilingual teaching practice still based on Chinese explanation, whilst English was adopted occasionally, teachers would use Chinese equivalents to explain again to ensure their correct understanding towards the content, which was low in efficiency (Yan, 2012). Also, their lectures were characterized by fixed types of interaction modes with minimal group work and discussion (Yan, 2012). Additionally, in the survey of Beckett (2002) as to students' opinions, admittedly it is a tool of killing two birds with one stone, still the shallowness of CBEI is still many students' significant concern. As the design of the syllabus involves not just the course itself, but also the language teaching, teachers usually need to simplify the course itself. Also, in regard to the students, they need to handle both subjects at the same time, which may enable them to only digest a shallow layer of content of the class, as one of the students in the research claim that English course should be taught separately from other subjects while those other courses should be taught in students' native language. He said that only in this way could professors go into the depth of knowledge. So, it could be another obstacle for teachers to overcome in order to deliver an effective CBEI lecture.

At the same time, the implementation of CBEI also demand the support of language environment in the wilder social settings. Clearly, CBEI was highly valued in the field of ELT as it could provide the learners with intensive exposure to English, so that their language proficiency, especially their communicative competence could be enhanced. However, this artificially created language environment at school requires enormous investment and will possibly end up in failure (Hu, 2002). Obviously, it is hardly possible to educate everyone of the society to learn and use English in the daily life or confine students in a certain area where the language people use is strictly controlled. So a well-developed English-speaking environment necessitates a wide range of factors. Hongkong could serve as a successful example in CBEI. English has been utilized widely in Hongkong's educational system, since many schools there adopt English as their teaching language. As a result, the average English ability of Hongkong citizens is higher than that of the mainland of China. Nevertheless, great effort had been paid to the construction of a bilingual society in Hongkong, along with its history under British control for 150 years. Also, as a port city and financial center, Hongkong has a broad and tight contact with countries around the world. Therefore, English was widely adopted in public (Hu, 2002; Gu, 2004). So evidently, the success of CBEI in Hongkong could be attributed to a variety of factors, including the historical issues and the governmental efforts. Still, a great number of native-English-speaking teachers are supposed to be recruited for English-medium syllabus in order to prove the quality of the programs. In the regard of conditions for English-medium instruction as well as the maximum exposure to English, most regions in Chinese mainland cannot hold a candle to Hongkong (Hu, 2005). In the mainland of China, even though in some super metropolis students can assess to elicit CBEI syllabus, the hours they spent in class are still limited, and if their language learning could not join hands with supportive English-speaking environment after class, the pedagogic potential of CBEI may not be effectively reached. Actually, even Hongkong could provide much more optimal English-speaking conditions in all aspects, the government and business in Hongkong still consider the English competence of the students graduating from secondary and tertiary school dissatisfactory (Nunan, 2003). Referring to the experience of Hongkong, the successful promotion of CBEI in the mainland of China may encounter with great challenge under such a commonly monolingual social context.

Also, the English level of students and their motivation to join in CBEI have important role to play. Since English is the mediate in various subjects, a wide range of topics as well as terminologies could be covered. So, students should not only entail a threshold competence of competence in English listening and speaking, but also a certain volume of vocabulary. Otherwise, it is almost impossible for a student to comfortably engaged in the class as well as develop their various skills. What could be more terrible is that students might fail to learn both English and the other subject they are supposed to learn. However, in the current English class in China, listening and speaking are largely omitted. According to the classroom observation in the previous research (Yan, 2012), within a 40-minute section, listening and speaking were mentioned briefly in short time, or just directly omitted in some classes. Listening activity was just in the form of a test, while speaking is processed as the monologue of teachers. Consequently, the English communicative competence of students is generally insufficient to support them going through CBEI. In addition, students in secondary schools may lack the motivation in such a curriculum. Firstly, most secondary students study in a test-oriented mode (Tian & Li, 2015), where tests are the only “visible landmarks” (Tian & Li, 2015). Since all levels of examinations are arranged throughout the whole learning journey and some of them are crucial to the prospect of the students’ future. Those test-devoted learners are even keen on finding the regularity in examination so that they could rearrange their leaning and match the regularity for a better achievement in the oncoming examination (Tian & Li, 2015). Since there are currently no specific tests focusing on CBEI, students might be reluctant to be fully engaged into this program, because in China, the biggest mission for secondary students is to get a high score in “Gaokao”, also known as Chinese university entrance test. Clearly, the competitive job markets have posed significant pressure to the participants of education system, including not just students but also the teachers as well as policy-makers in the education-related departments. They would rather pay more attention to the visible improvement of their testing results compared with the long-term gaining from CBEI.

#### 4. Conclusion

Although the government of China has invested immense enthusiasm and effort in constructing bilingual society and utilizing CBEI in school curriculum, there are still a variety of obstacles impeding its progress. To meet the three main challenges discussed in the paper, some specific measures could be considered by the related department of China. First, more research should be conducted on CBEI combined with the situations of China, and those contents should be included in the teacher training programs. Teachers are supposed to develop clear recognition as to CBEI, and meanwhile be aware of the key points in conducting CBEI in their teaching practice. In addition, the public utilization of English should be encouraged and promoted. Schools and related governmental departments are supposed to pay efforts in publicizing the benefits of CBEI and redesign the curriculum to support teachers’ classroom practice. Moreover, the preparation programs should also be introduced to enhance students’ language proficiency, and some examinations on CBEI should be implemented accordingly to inspire students’ learning motivation.

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