

## On the Dual Nature of Foreign Language Education in China

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**Abstract:** *In the latest Guidelines on College English Teaching, instrumentality and humanity was proposed as the dual nature of college English course. This government document raised a debate on the dual nature of college English in China. Some different voice supported instrumentality as the single nature of foreign language education. From around the world, most of the government set up their own framework of foreign language education according to their social situation and economy development which mainly is a reflection of instrumentality nature of foreign language education. As advanced courses to enhance learners' language abilities, English for Special Purpose (ESP) and English for Academic Purpose (EAP) are more and more advocated by language experts. For a local Chinese university, to improve the quality of college English courses, the administrations should put enough emphasis on foreign language education and introduce additional English for Special Purpose (ESP) courses to the curricular system; teachers should focus on cultivating students' social responsibility, practical ability, and creativity through the teaching of language.*

**Keywords:** Instrumentality; humanity; foreign language education; language policy; college English

### Introduction

In China's contemporary education system, English, as an important subject, has been widely valued. Since their children's childhood, parents have spent great amount of money on their English training; in compulsory education stage, English, Chinese and mathematics together constitute the three main subjects; in college entrance examination, English is also has a high percentage of marks in the college entrance examination. At the stage of higher education, College English (foreign language) is still the largest public compulsory course in colleges and universities; Chinese college students must pass College English Test Band 4 (CET-4) before they can find a decent job after graduation.

The nature of college foreign language education has always been a heated topic in Chinese academic circles. Some people say that learning a foreign language means mastering the use of a tool; others say that learning a foreign language is to broaden learners' horizon and improve people's quality.

### *Humanity or instrumentality?*

Scholars have been debating the nature of foreign language education. At present, in China's higher education, many people call for the reform of College English curriculum. Many experts believe that college English courses focusing only on vocabulary, grammar and translation can no longer meet the needs of the new era. The instrumentality and humanity of College English should be more complicated than vocabulary and grammar teaching. Eventually, in the latest Guidelines on College English Teaching (2015), instrumentality and humanity are proposed as dual natures of college English.

This paper aims at looking for the essence of foreign language education in China and around the world, and discussing the possible curriculum reforms to realise instrumentality and humanity of English education. In the literature review, firstly the 2015 Guidelines will be summarized and some experts' comments will be collected, especially those viewpoints advocating instrumentality will be highlighted. Afterwards, a general review of Foreign Language (FL) education histories and policies around the world will be outlined and some countries' preference for instrumentality in foreign language education will be concluded, as an advocating proof for the instrumental nature in *the Guidelines*. Also, the possible ways to manifest instrumentality such as English for Special Purpose (ESP) and English for Academic Purpose (EAP) will be introduced. In the following section, there is a case analysis. The status quo of college English in a Chinese University and its possible reform implementation according to the Guidelines will be discussed. As a conclusion, the two natures of foreign language education are interdependent with each other; neglecting either one will result in an imbalance of the foreign language education.

### **Literature Review**

#### *The Guidelines on College English Teaching*

In 2013, The National Foreign Languages Teaching Advisory Board (NFLTAB) began the project of drawing up the Guidelines on College English Teaching. After two years' investigating, surveying and scientific argumentation, the Guidelines was finalized in 2015. In the Guidelines, the nature of college English in China's higher education was defined as instrumentality and humanity. Concerning the course system, the whole college English course should be divided into three categories: English for General Purposes (EGP), English for Special Purposes (ESP) and Intercultural Communication (IC) Courses. English for General Purpose (EGP) and English for special purpose (ESP) should bear the responsibility of instrumentality, while Inter-cultural communication (IC) endows college English with the nature of humanity (Wang, 2016).

After known to the public, the Guidelines became a focus among the language education experts and researchers. In 2016, two scholars (Zhou and Zhan, 2016) compared the Guidelines with The College English Curriculum Requirements published in 2007. They found that the Guidelines modified and improved the overall structure of the college English curriculum. A very big difference was that the Guidelines set some details on the modules of

different English courses and put an emphasis on the humanity nature of foreign language learning.

There are also different voices, for example Cai (2017a) clearly pointed out that for non-English majors college English was just a tool, no matter they were learning English for daily life use, academic purpose, or intercultural communication. Cai hold that humanity was a wrong direction in college English education. He believed that how to use English as a tool was a question to be answered according to the users' need, but the instrumentality was the only nature of college English. He also systematically argued (Cai, 2017b) that the dual nature of a language should be distinguished with the nature of foreign language education. A language is instrumental and humanistic, but foreign language education was only instrumental. Cai continued to point out that the humanity mentioned in the Guidelines was similar to the western concept of "liberal education", which was an intentional human activity using language and should be categorized as instrumentality. He suggested integrating humanity elements (such as intercultural communicating ability) into instrumental courses (such as English for special purpose).

#### *The Foreign Language Education Policies of Different Countries*

Hult (2018) conducted database researches for some main foreign language and education-oriented journals finding that studies on language policies were not plentiful. I tried to collect articles concerning foreign language policies from different countries covering Asian, Europe, North and South American attempting to get a rough view of global foreign language education policies and preferences on instrumentality and humanity.

Before World War II, the main purpose for foreign language education in Japan was modernization of the country, and the focus was on translation of reading material. In the postwar period, there was a policy shift from translation-oriented to communication-oriented (Kieko and Tanaka, 1995). In the study of the uniqueness of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teacher in Japan, Lee (2012) found that the Japanese government required university students to learn English in order to communicate effectively with foreigners for work purpose after graduation. He also concluded that there were four dimensions for Japanese EFL teacher to be unique, one of them being the content of teaching (language skills and intercultural communicating skills). And for high school EFL education, although the government set policies for promoting communicating skills in English, there was a conflict between authorities and realities due to the strong influence of university entrance examination preparation (Gorsuch, 2000).

Singapore is a different story. As a multiethnic, multilingual speech community, this Asian country has four official languages: Chinese, English, Tamil, and Malay, English being the lingua franca between different ethnic groups and serves to unify the nation. The government supports and promotes the using of all four official languages. As a result, it is quite common for Singaporeans to be fluent in at least two languages. Bilingualism or multilingualism presents a linguistic characteristic of Singapore (Wharton, 2000). Hence, the need for instrumentality of foreign language in Singapore is not as acute as China or Japan.

English is the most widely used foreign language in Argentina, despite the fact that Spanish is the official language. In the 1993 Federal Law of Education, English was regulated as a compulsory course in order to prepare students for globalization and the world market. The new policy also encouraged a shift of pedagogy from grammar-oriented to content-based to realize communicative goals. Due to political and financial reasons, this law met with great resistance from teachers and society and was proved to be unsuccessful (Zappa-Hollman, 2011).

For the European countries, the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment, or CEFR (1997) was quite influential. CEFR has nine chapters, covering its aim, theory, language ability assessment, pedagogy. The core theory of CEFR was communicating language framework evolved from Chomsky's transformational-generative grammar (Zou, Zhang and Kong, 2015). There is a general consensus among EU countries that improving FL education is vital for economic development, employment increase and social unity (Niu, 2015). Although there is a common framework to guide all the European countries, it is equally advantageous to survey the policy of some representative countries.

In a study of Polish English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teacher's career, Johnson (1997) regarded the fall of communism as a watershed for the nation's FL education, before which Russian was the dominating foreign language; after, English was booming. Along with great social and economic changes after 1989, 70 language teacher training colleges were created to meet the demand for foreign language teachers in public schools. Johnson also commented: "whatever can be said about teachers in Polish EFL does seem to have considerable potential relevance for the situation of teachers in many other countries of central and Eastern Europe (p.688)".

In Germany and Austria, the government strongly advocated the foreign language education of the citizens from a very early age. They suggested students choose immigrant languages or neighbouring country languages as their foreign language. The second foreign language was also encouraged. The aim of those policies is to help their people adapt to the nation's economy development and intercultural communication (Zhang, 2016).

Under the attitude towards English as a global language, the government of United Kingdom didn't attach enough importance to FL education until the new century (Li, 2017). In 2002, the publication of The National Language Strategy was a landmark of the revitalization of foreign language education in UK. The government became to realize foreign language education was indispensable for the economic development, world trade and global citizenship. In 2013 the British Council published a report on the basis of four economic assessing indexes to identify the ten most important foreign languages. Thus the foreign language education in UK was on the high way.

There are two documents in the US guiding the foreign language education, each trying to define the goals of FL education in the new century. The Standards for Foreign Language Learning (2006) proposed the famous five 5Cs goals (Communications, Cultures,

Connections, Comparisons and Communities), and the MLA Report (2007) put emphasis on “trans-lingual and trans-cultural competence” and “operating between languages”. Although the two documents are influential, some expert (Kramersch, 2014) argued that the instrumental and humanistic goals mentioned in the documents were in conflict with each other and should be further discussed.

Due to the extinction of hundreds of Native American Languages and the appeal of a unification of the nation’s language, Rivers and Brecht (2018) used the quotation *the graveyard of languages* to describe the twentieth century in the United States. They also admitted in the new century, there was tremendous increase in supporting foreign language education. The two scholars believed in “languages for all” and thought one of the goals of foreign language education in US is that 50 percent of the people could have some opportunities to use foreign language to communicate interculturality in their life. For foreign language in higher education research, another scholar (Paesani, 2017) recommended building transferable skills (analytical thinking, ethical decision-making, teamwork, leadership) and cross-disciplinary collaborations as two of the six future research areas towards literacies and textual thinking orientation for unifying collegiate foreign language programs.

Above all, I collected the studies and articles of foreign language education policies in eight countries covering four continents. Reviewing those literatures, I found communication ability was emphasized by all the authorities and one common rationale was that each country set up their own framework of foreign language education according to their social situation and economy development, which I think is a reflection of instrumentality. The United States has established a complicated and comprehensive goal-oriented system of policies for foreign language education (Communications, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons and Communities). As the most advanced nation of the world, US moved a step forward in foreign language education, making it not just instrumental, humanistic, but also touristic and artistic.

*Instrumentality Trend: English for Special Purpose (ESP) and English for Academic Purpose (EAP)*

As mentioned in the above paragraphs, all the countries and experts have no denial towards instrumentality of foreign language education. Some deliberate on whether to separate humanity from instrumentality. China’s 2015 Guidelines clearly defined English for Special Purpose (ESP) as advanced courses of college English with instrumentality nature, while English for General Purpose (EGP) being the basic courses. To take a glimpse at the studies on English for special purpose (ESP) and English for academic purpose (*EAP*), is beneficial to perceiving the nature of foreign language education.

With English becoming the dominant communicating language in international science, technology and trade, the study of English for special purpose (ESP) and its curriculum has become a focus in FL education. Based on the three needs for English (internal communication, international communication and transmission of science and technology)

mentioned in Mackay and Mountford's book (1978), some experts (Johns and Dudley-Evans, 1991) believed that the most interesting factor promoting English for special purpose (ESP) was the explosion of scientific and technical English in professional publications and graduate schools. They also assume that the educational role of English for special purpose (ESP) in the future will change into a consultant one in the various academic and professional contexts.

Steven (1988) claimed that English for special purpose (ESP) should be *focused on the learner's need, relevant to the learner, successful in imparting learning and more cost-effective than General English. Learner-focused* is a major concern of English for special purpose (ESP). Just as Abrar-Ul-Hassan (2014) has found out, most of the English for special purpose (ESP) learners had both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations but the degree was medium level. Steven (1988) listed four absolute and two variable characteristics which were widely accepted and worth mentioning here (p1-2):

*Table 1: Characteristics of English for special purpose (Steven, 1988)*

<b>Absolute characteristics:</b> English for special purpose (ESP) consists of English language teaching which is:	-designed to meet specified needs of the learner
	-related in content to particular disciplines, occupations and activities
	-centered on the language appropriate to those activities in syntax, lexis, discourse, semantics, etc., and analysis of this discourse
	-in contrast with "General English"
<b>Variable characteristics:</b> English for special purpose (ESP) may be, but is not necessarily:	-restricted as to the language skills to be learned
	-not taught according to any pre-ordained methodology

Some observer (Basturkmen, 2012) found that research into work related Language for Special Purpose (LSP) was limited. In another study on the needs assessment, instructional method and instructor expertise of English for special purpose (ESP), Belcher (2006) pointed out that to some extent there were not enough empirical work on the teaching and learning of World Englishes with non-native speakers (such as Chinese learners). He believed probing into the varieties of English can help educators redefine English for Special Purpose (ESP) as an international term.

As one dominating category of English for Special Purpose (ESP), English for academic purpose (EAP) focuses on helping learners of non-English major to use English as a tool for their professional and academic development such as comprehending lectures, giving speeches, attending discussions and writing academic articles (Dudley-Evens and St. John, 1998). There were numerous studies on English for academic purpose (EAP) such as its learning transfer (James, 2006), discipline-related knowledge (Uso-Juan, 2006), pedagogy (Tanaka and Gilliland, 2017) and learners' performance (Graham, 1987).

Cai is an advocator of English for Special Purpose (ESP) in China's FL education. He (2012) reviewed the studies of English for special purpose (ESP), its definition and its categories. He strongly believed the only possible way out for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) at tertiary level education in China is to carry out English for academic purpose (*EAP*) courses. Recently, Cai (2018a) even went a step further to promote a change in the orientation of foreign language education from English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP) to English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP). He believed the current college English for general purposes was incompatible with the increasing demand for learning English as a tool for professional development and research. Cai regarded EGSP as English used across disciplines. In his opinion (Cai, 2018b), disciplinary practices differ not only in content but also in the way the content (e.g. disciplinary theories and knowledge) is constructed and disseminated. ESAP or disciplinary literacy is involved with genre knowledge, rhetorical knowledge, meta-discourse knowledge and linguistic knowledge underlying each respective competence. Qualified undergraduates must possess such academic competencies if they want to become qualified members of their disciplinary community. Thus, he proposed contextualization and specialization as sensible approaches in FL education in China.

### **A Case Analysis**

After synthesizing the related materials on the nature of foreign language education, I would like to share my experience about the history and status quo of college English course in Yangtze University (my workplace) and its possible reform implementation according to the Guidelines.

Yangtze University, located in Jingzhou, is a comprehensive institution of higher learning with the strong supports from both China Central Government and Hubei Provincial Government. Yangtze University has 2 post-doctor stations, 15 PhD programs, 128 masters' programs and 94 undergraduate programs covering 11 disciplines including economics, law, education, literature, history, science, engineering, agriculture, medicine, management and art. Each year, over 7000 freshman from around the country is admitted to Yangtze University and the campus has the largest population of undergraduate in Hubei province.

In 2006, in order to exploit the limited resources economically, under the strong support from the university president -- Zhang, the Freshman Education Department (FED) was founded. All the first-year undergraduates were appointed to one isolated campus in west suburbs of Jingzhou City. Along with them were about 70 selected English teachers, 40 math teachers and 30 student advisors. I was one of the 70 English teachers. The purpose of establishing FED was to enhance students' fundamental courses performance at the first year of university, college English being the major concern. For the first years, the freshmen of Yangtze University had to attend in four periods of compulsory college English course per week and two hours of evening autonomous study per day. With the cooperation of English teachers and students advisors, and also due to the test-oriented teaching, the pass rate of College English Test Band 4 (CET4) each year was above 80%, a percentage much higher than the other universities of the same level in Hubei. As a result, when the students entered

their subsequent years in the university, most of them could focus on their professional courses without worrying about the graduation requirements for CET4.

The FED of Yangtze University was a successful higher education reforming attempt at least in that it substantially raised the pass rate of CET4 which was a definite widely-accepted quantitative index of universities' English teaching quality in China. Although the score of CET4 along is not an adequate proof of a learner's English proficiency, to some extent it reflects high standards in English for General Purpose (EGP) education. One disadvantage of FED model was that students only had a limited number of professional courses due to the high pressure of CET4 at the end of the first year. And accordingly, they might face great pressure of finishing four years' professional courses in the next three years. All in all, the FED model of Yangtze University displayed soundly the nature of instrumentality in foreign language education, but only in a primitive level with English for general purposes.

In 2016, after the retirement of Zhang, the newly appointed president Xie dismissed FED and all the 70 college English teachers returned to their original School of Foreign Studies as well as all the freshmen to their respective schools or departments. From that time on, there were no more pressure of passing CET4 in the first year, and the pass rate dropped to 65% or so. The foreign language education of Yangtze University stepped into a post-FED period at which time English for General Purpose (EGP) were still the single focus but the high pass rate had gone. The trough has been reached and reform is in great need. As a witness of the rise and fall of the FED, and with some thoughts from the literature I reviewed, I am considering the possible reform suggestions in FL education of Yangtze University.

Firstly, concerning the nature of instrumentality, Yangtze University is still staying in a relatively low level and only putting an emphasis on CET4 pass rate. Test-oriented education can activate very direct and extrinsic motivation from the learners and improve their basic language skills such as reading, writing and listening. But according to a research (Zhang, Guo, Wu and Zhang, 2017) on the status quo of English education in China, postgraduates need to improve their academic communicating abilities for their academic developments and undergraduates needs to improve their oral English to survive the competitive job market. For this reason, English for Special Purpose (ESP) should be introduced to the higher-graders as optional courses for those who want to continue on their academic path. And speaking skills should be more emphasized in the compulsory English for General Purpose (EGP) courses for the first-graders. Disciplinary-based English courses which is vacant but of highly value should also be introduce to masters' and PhD programs.

With regard to the humanity nature, Inter-cultural communication (IC) courses should be set as public optional courses available to all the undergraduates. The teaching contents, objectives and pedagogies should be closely considered according to the needs of the particularly student groups. At the same time, rather than a test-orientation, all the FL related courses, English for General Purpose (EGP) or English for special purpose (ESP), should focus on cultivating students' social responsibility, practical ability, and creativity through the teaching of language.



Another reflection, after reviewing the language policies around the world, I would like to share, is that policy-maker matters. Behind all the flourishing and withering of the FL education in each country, was the establishment, correction or abolishment of a certain policy, and so as the education institutions. The establishment of FED was strongly supported by the former president of Yangtze University, causing a high rise of the CET4 pass rate. After his retirement, the pass rate dropped with the break-up of FED. Yangtze University was a local university. It cannot be compared with 985 or 211 universities for student recourses and government supports. Just as Lv (2014) put local universities can't copy the model of key universities. The administrations should put enough emphasis on foreign language education and plan it according to the real situation.

### Discussion and Conclusion

My literature review began with the most recent government document on foreign language education in China, namely, the Guidelines on College English Teaching. Interestingly, the Guidelines was not yet published, the reason of which is beyond the topic of this paper. But the debate on instrumentality and humanity as contested knowledge arising out of this document is worth discussing. Instrumentality is well accepted as one nature of foreign language education. All the countries I mentioned put emphasis on foreign language education through their policies because the trend of globalization in the new century demands global talents with fluent foreign language abilities to support their economic development. It is a rational situation as *economy decides everything*. The United States government has a more insightful understanding and its *five C goals* represents a fairly systematic framework of foreign language education. At this point, China's Guidelines also has the parallel foresight to put forward humanity as well as instrumentality. As a leading supporter for instrumentality, Cai was frequently mentioned in the paper. He holds a negative view towards humanity in foreign language education. But he agreed that *liberal education* should be included in foreign language education.

Instrumentality and humanity are related not independent to each other, the curriculum trend is English for special purpose (ESP) and English for academic purpose (EAP). They are all learner-oriented, which I think is a characteristic showing humanity. Foreign language education in China should also bear the responsibility of humanity as college English (foreign language) is one significant part of general education in universities. But we can realize humanity in the form of implementing English for special purpose (ESP) and English for academic purpose (EAP) courses.

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