

Research of English Teachers' Teaching Strategies under a Key Competencies' Context in China

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Abstract. Since the OECD proposed introducing the concept of "key competencies," the term has been much debated by educational researchers and widely utilised in education worldwide. The researcher aspires to identify the teaching strategies of English teachers in China under a 'key competencies' context. This article first introduces the formation of the "core literacy" system and the process of its chinitisation (practising a global concept to Chinese policy). Then it analyses the problems that exist in English language teaching methods in China. Subsequently, it explores the guiding role of 'key competencies' for modern English teaching from the shallow to the deep. After reviewing, the researcher finds that students' lack of motivation to study and the deficiency of teaching methods are key problems to apply key competencies in English teaching, school managers' lack of attention for schools and teachers to the application of key competencies is also remarkable. Based on the problems existing, the researcher proposes to contextualize the course content to develop students' language skills, enhance thinking orientation and lead students' quality of thinking and strengthen interaction and communications to activate cultural awareness.

Keywords: Key competencies, English subject, English teaching, Teaching strategies.

1. Introduction

In contemporary times, 'key competencies' are passionately discussed in the Chinese education area and have become an essential factor in China's drive for educational reform. Many researchers have discussed vital competencies and their influence on Chinese educational development and curriculum reformation. Foreign language is an essential part of the 'key competencies' system in the EU's proposal about key competencies. In China's context, the development of students' key competencies is achieved chiefly through education in all subjects at the basic education level [1]. English, as a compulsory subject in China from primary to secondary and even higher education, is naturally one of the main focuses of the study of subject key competencies. In order to develop key competencies in English language learning, teachers need to integrate the concept of key competencies into their teaching strategies and link it closely with the curriculum. In this way, the key competencies concept can be embedded in the competency structure of students. This article endeavours to review the 'key competencies' concept and try to explore how it applies to English teaching strategies in China.

First, this article will illustrate the definition and points of view of '*key competencies*' and demonstrate the development path of 'key competencies' in past years. After that, this article will raise some current problems in the analysis of teaching strategies and the application of key competencies. Then, this article aims to show the strategies of English teaching by using a mindset of key competencies to find solutions to problems in teaching English at present. This research can be a reference for educators to clarify educational goals, improve the level of teaching and enlarge teaching strategies.

2. Literature Review of Key Competencies

The term 'key competencies' is not originally from China. It is imported from 'Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)'. OECD launched 'Definition and Selection of Competencies: Theoretical and Conceptual Foundations' in 1997. However, the term "key

competencies" is not being used directly in the title of the project at this time. The first time that OECD used this term was in 2003 when the organisation published the final research report titled 'Competencies for a Successful Life and a Well-Functioning Society'. After that, in order to promote the concept of 'key competencies' into educational practice, OECD published 'The Definition and Selection of Key Competencies: Executive Summary' subsequently to enhance the operability of applying key competencies to educational practice [2].

Then, in 2006, European Parliament and European Council adopted a proposal on key competencies, recommending to member states eight 'key competencies' systems: respectively mother language, foreign languages, mathematics and science and technology competencies, information competencies, learning competencies, civic and social competencies, entrepreneurship and artistic competencies, each described in terms of three dimensions: knowledge, skills and attitudes. At that time, the term "key competencies" was used to refer to the collection of knowledge, abilities, and values required in a knowledge-based society for everyone to be able to grow independently, fit into society, and be employable [3]. This definition also fits neatly with Chu's perspective, which is key competencies should reflect not only 'individual requirements' but also social needs. Chu considers that the survival and development of the individual cannot be separated from the particular social context. In order to adapt to the opportunities and challenges of the new era, individuals should develop their key competencies to meet the changing times and social progress. It could also see that from the definition of 'key competencies' proposed by the European Parliament and European Council, it is obvious that the EU believes that the key competencies concept respects integration and interdisciplinarity and emphasises the development of integrated competencies without denying the importance of basic skills. The definition also builds a bridge to clarify the relationship between fundamental knowledge and key competencies [3].

To compare 'key competencies' with 'basic skills', first, 'competence' is a more superordinate and inclusive concept than 'skills', involving both intrinsic qualities and external behaviour. To comprehend the concept, the relationship between 'competencies' and 'skills' can be seen as inclusive. Competence is a combination of skill, knowledge and attitude. Second, skills can be seen as external, observable behaviour, but competencies can be non-external, so competencies are not limited to external behaviours and outcomes. Third, 'basic skills' and 'key competencies' have different descriptions and modifiers. The word 'Basic' seems to be more fundamental for the requirements of daily life. To avoid miscomprehension, 'basic' is replaced by 'key' to show that it is oriented towards personal and social development [4].

In China, the concept of key competencies began to receive attention from the Ministry of Education in 2013, the year when it began to formally study the key competencies for student development in China and published its findings three years later in 2016. The development of a 'key competencies' system in China must take into account the actual situation of Chinese education, absorb the essence of good Chinese tradition and culture, and critically draw on the reasonable elements of international research [5]. The three-in-one framework for the development of core literacies for Chinese students can be roughly expressed as follows (See Table 1) [5].

Table 1. Framework and content of key competencies for student development in China

A well-rounded person	Individual Development - Learn to learn and live a healthy life
	Social Participation – Be responsible to society and innovate through practice
	Cultural Foundations - Humanistic heritage and scientific spirit

The framework of the Chinese key competencies system is the development of a 'well-rounded person' through three perspectives - personal, social and cultural. [6]

3. Problems of Teachers to Fostering Key Competencies in English Teaching

Although the concept of key competencies has been proposed in China for many years, there is still a dilemma on how to apply the core literacy system to English language teaching so as to enhance the development of students' key competencies.

Here are the existing problems that are waiting to be solved.

3.1. Students' Lack of Learning Approaches and Motivation

Students are the subjects of learning. If teachers are to develop core literacies, then students must be actively involved in teaching and learning activities [7]. However, due to their poor self-directed learning abilities and lack of enthusiasm for their assignments, students often struggle to comprehend the background of English language information. It is also difficult to motivate students' interest in English learning because of the difficulty of English as a subject or the tediousness of word memorisation. Students' unfamiliarity with new forms of language expression also makes them fearful of learning English, thus dampening their confidence and motivation to learn English [7].

3.2. The Outdated Mindset and Teaching Methods of English Teachers

The conventional strategy of emphasising achievement at the cost of students' general application of English seems outdated at a time when education is concentrated on developing students' key competencies. Some teachers and parents focus all their attention on their children's academic performance while neglecting the development of their students' overall language skills [8]. Except for the mindsets of teachers or parents, the teaching methods are also outdated. The classroom is the primary place where English is taught and learned, and students rely heavily on classroom content to acquire knowledge of English. However, Chinese English language teachers are relatively backward in their teaching methods, have a single format and do not have a deep enough understanding of the material being taught. This results in English teachers being able to give only text-based explanations in the classroom, but it is difficult to thoroughly introduce the logical relationships of the content [7].

3.3. The Deficiency of Attention for Schools and Teachers to the Application of Key Competencies

Although 'key competencies' has been included as an essential idea in the curriculum objectives by the Chinese Ministry of Education, it is still not highly valued by school administrators and teachers. The conventional strategy of emphasising achievement at the cost of students' general application of English seems outdated at a time when education is concentrated on developing students' key competencies.

4. Teaching Strategies of English under a Key Competencies' Context

To explore teaching strategies in English, it is necessary to explain the essence of key competencies in English first. Different English teaching and learning researchers have different understandings and definitions of what key competencies mean in the English subject. In the Chinese context, the subject of English may seem far removed from the term 'competencies' compared to the explicitly nurturing values that subjects such as Chinese and the arts bring to the table. However, seeing English as a language or a subject is a one-sided view of teaching [1]. In order to fully reflect the nurturing value of the English subject, the Chinese Ministry of Education, taking into account the actual situation of English education in China and summarising the views of English education researchers, revised the English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education in which the key competencies of the English subject are categorised into four areas: language ability, cultural awareness, quality of thinking and learning ability. The four dimensions of key competencies interpenetrate, integrate and interact with each other and develop synergistically. These four areas are very closely linked. Language skills are the foundation of learning; the quality of thinking facilitates learning; it can further broaden the learner's horizons; and cultural awareness contributes to

breakthroughs in learning and the development of international awareness. At the same time, learning skills are integrated throughout the learning process (See Figure 1) [9].

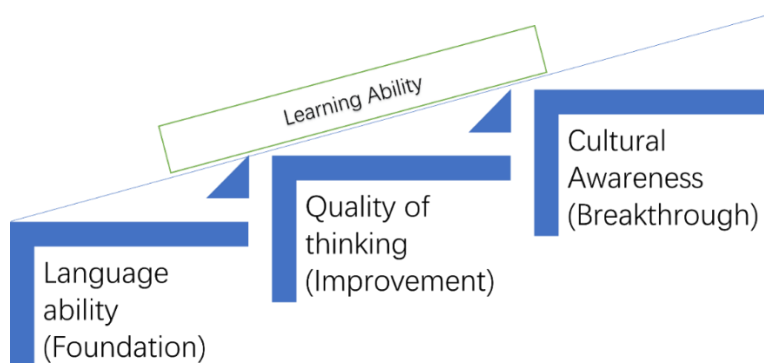


Fig 1. The interrelationship between aspects of English subject key competencies [9]

In order to develop students' core key competencies, the following teaching strategies can be applied to the teaching of English:

4.1. Contextualizing Course Content to Develop Students' Language Skills

Creating situations is a great way to integrate students into the classroom and into the language environment. Teachers must create a context for teaching English by combining the content with real-life and social situations. In this context, students can practise their language comprehension, train their language skills and improve their language expression [9]. It is the lack of a language environment that causes many students in China to lose interest in learning a language or to find it challenging to improve their language skills. Educators need to create a good teaching context for them, to build students' confidence in their language learning abilities and to stimulate their motivation and initiative in learning English [7]. In addition, with the continuous development of multimedia technology, teachers can appropriately use multimedia to create a vivid, realistic English learning environment, cultivate students' interest in the subject and deepen their understanding and perception of English knowledge. Teaching English in specific contexts can also be immensely helpful to students' ability to use language [8].

4.2. Enhancing Thinking Orientation and Leading Students' Quality of Thinking

In the process of teaching English, it is imperative for teachers to lead students' thinking. By leading students' thinking, they can develop the quality of their thinking. Specifically, teachers can train students' independent thinking skills by asking well-designed questions and using questions as guides [9]. When posing challenging questions, instructors should concentrate on the thinking process and encourage students to consider the questions in order to find the solutions rather than immediately providing the answers [10]. In this way, students can gradually develop a way of thinking that will enhance the quality of their thinking. Ultimately, students will be able to develop a deeper understanding of English learning.

4.3. Strengthening Teacher-student (T-S), Student-student (S-S) Interactions and Communications and Developing Students' Cultural Awareness

For classroom teaching, the interaction between teachers and students and between students is significant for the quality of teaching and learning in the classroom. The inclusion of interactive elements, with the assistance of teaching materials, allows students to generate a meeting of minds, which is beneficial for interpreting the English reading materials [7]. Through T-S interaction and S-S interaction, students will also be able to develop their learning and thinking skills. Students can also feel the pleasure of learning English. Teachers could also instruct students to obtain knowledge about a country's culture through phrases and words and discuss and understand cultural diversity and differences. Through careful reading and speculation of the reading material, students can also receive

the ideas and educational implications that the author seeks to convey for the purpose of teaching English [11]. Besides in-class interactions, teachers could also encourage students to strengthen their connection with the internet to learn more about and get in touch with information about English-speaking countries [10].

5. Conclusion

'Key competencies' is an important concept that has very far-reaching implications for educators and educational researchers. Just as the ancient Greek philosopher Socrates said, 'Virtue is knowledge'. Promoting education reform and development with key competencies is a major hot topic in the world today. In this paper, the history of the development of the concept of 'key competencies' is examined. After that, in light of the current English teaching situation in China, this article analyzes the problems in implementing the concept of "core literacy" in English teaching in China from different aspects – students, parents, teachers and managers of schools. By exploring the ways in which the concept of "core literacy" has been applied to the teaching of English in China, this article concludes that there are three teaching strategies of English under a key competencies context. The approaches as mentioned earlier can be used to develop students' language skills, quality of thinking and cultural awareness, as well as to improve their own learning skills and ultimately to achieve key competencies of key competencies.

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