

Opportunities and Challenges of English Language Learning in Chinese High School Entrance Examinations (Chsee) Under the New Curriculum Reform

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Abstract. The introduction of the English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education (2022 Edition) marks the beginning of a new era in the evolution of compulsory education. Under the changed circumstances, the question of how to improve the quality of teaching and learning in the classroom and improve students' application skills while meeting the key criteria of basic education cannot be neglected. This paper reviews the opportunities and challenges under the reform, which are closely linked to the student's English learning and even their future career plans, as well as their impact on society in the future. The correct understanding of the curricular standards depends to large extent on the correct comprehension of the nature and philosophy of the curriculum as outlined in the standards. Therefore, the English learning objectives and strategies for the Chinese High School Entrance Examinations (CHSEE) under the new curriculum reform should be formulated after studying and analyzing the reform policies. The new curriculum standard has required the students to have vocabulary, comprehension standards and writing skills, and also required the instructors and teachers to get a higher level of proficiency and competence to provide the interactive pedagogy and teach in a more practical and applicable way.

Keywords: Chinese High School Entrance Examinations, Curriculum reform, Junior high school students, Opportunities and challenges, English learning.

1. Introduction

The High School Entrance Examination curriculum reform in China has been promoted from particular experimental areas and cities to the whole country and the form of the exams may be slightly different in each city, but the trend and direction are generally in line with the reform of the new curriculum. Furthermore, the Chinese High School Entrance Examinations (CHSEE) have become one of the most important and necessary exams in the life of a Chinese person because CHSEE is not only proof of the end of compulsory education, but also a selection test for high school if students wish to continue their education. English study is one of the three main modules after Chinese and Mathematics in compulsory education and according to the English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education, English is a key tool for international contact and cooperation in a time of globalization, as well as a vehicle for disseminating the fruits of human civilization. The English curriculum in compulsory education is fundamental, practical, and thorough. Learning and using English enables pupils to comprehend diverse cultures, compare cultural similarities and differences, absorb cultural essence, and gradually evolve. They can also improve cultural awareness and communication skills, and learn to look at the world objectively and rationally, and with an international perspective. It may be true that most Chinese people do not need to learn English, but if English is compulsory in the CHSEE, there is a high probability of getting the key talents that will enable the country to win the international competition. These talents are like keys, maybe one is enough, but without one you cannot open the door. It has illustrated why students have to study English and how they should approach the subject in the compulsory education level [1]. Therefore, how should students consider this and what can the learners do to prepare for the CHSEE are vital to discuss through analyzing the opportunities and challenges under the curriculum reform for English learning.

2. Changes in English under the new curriculum reform

2.1 English Teaching Goals under the New Curriculum Reform

From the 'Double Reduction' to the new standard, English teaching and learning in China is undergoing a great change. The examination of English will change from a purely knowledge-based approach to an examination of ability. For middle school students and high school students in the future, the original method of studying for marks and tests will no longer be able to meet the requirements of the new standards and exams. This means that children will need to devote more time to reading in the original version outside the classroom and practice critical thinking mindset. The emphasis on original audio-visuals and original reading, so that children can actually use the language and the practical use is precisely the core of language learning.

2.2 Changes in General Teaching Arrangement of English Subjects.

English subject has been one of the three main subjects after Chinese and Mathematics in China and the importance of this subject is significant in the Chinese exam systems. However, the new English curriculum has a classroom teaching time accounting for 6-8% in compulsory education, much lower than the 22% for Chinese and 15% for mathematics [1]. In the new English exam, the difficulty and requirements of the examinations have increased. This means that it is becoming increasingly difficult to meet the requirements of the new curriculum after the reform with limited class time and materials in school. Students need to make more use of their time outside the school to make up for the time spent in class, bridge the gap and adapt to the requirements of the new curriculum in the reformed curriculum.

In the curriculum which was published in 2013, there are five levels of compulsory education in English learning. In the new 2022 curriculum, English at the compulsory level is now divided into four levels. At the same time, there is a "+" level for "I, II and III", which provides more options for students who have the extra ability to learn. In April 2022, the General Office of the Ministry of Education issued a notice on the design of the 2022 Chinese High School Entrance Examinations, which stated that "exam papers cannot be too easy to distinguish the student's level". This means that there is no longer a clear limit on the grade level of English and that the state encourages students who have the extra ability to learn to do some upgrading to meet the competency needs of the "+" section, based on a solid study of the textbook content [1]. The full score for English CHSEE is 120, and students who have achieved close to full marks in English CHSEE will probably be able to score around 5.0 and even higher in the IELTS exam, which can use English partially and in most cases can cope with the full range of meaning, although many mistakes may be made, and should be able to communicate at a basic level in the daily life.

2.3 The Assessment Standard of English Learning has been Raised.

2.3.1. Vocabulary Standard

Whereas the vocabulary required in the old standard was 1,600 words and 200-300 phrases for students taking the Chinese language examinations, in the new standard the standard for Level 3 '+' becomes 1,800 words, with access to and learning of 200 words in the relevant thematic range, as well as idioms and fixed collocations, as appropriate. The new standard, therefore, requires a vocabulary of 2,000 words, a 25% increase on the original, and a live learning requirement. Furthermore, there are two aspects that are worth noticing. Firstly, as with the old version, the vocabulary lists given are only for English spellings, with no word properties or Chinese interpretations. In other words, the students cannot learn a word by memorizing only one meaning and one usage, and the test will not test only one aspect of the word. Therefore, students should try to master all the meanings and usages of the word. Secondly, the 2022 edition of the new curriculum clearly states that any word in the vocabulary is related to other words through certain syntactic and semantic relationships, and conveys information in context. This means that the new curriculum pays more attention to the understanding and expression of words in different contexts and moods, in this

regard, the students should not only strengthen their vocabulary accumulation but also expand on their meaning and usage in the English learning process.

2.3.2. Comprehension Standard

What's more, the requirements for reading comprehension are as high as they have ever been. The old curriculum had 7 requirements for the reading section, while the new curriculum provides a total of 13+3 requirements for the reading section. It also requires 150,000 words of reading outside of the middle school class. In the old curriculum, students were only required to 'understand the logical relationships between sentences in a passage, but in the new curriculum they are required to 'understand explicit or implicit logical relationships in a discourse', and to 'understand the meaning conveyed by non-modal textual resources in a multi-modal discourse' [2]. This is why the high school curriculum emphasizes the parallelism of the five skills of 'listening, watching, pronouncing, reading and writing. The new curriculum even requires analysis of the author's point of view and understanding of the author's attitude, to understand the structure of the whole discourse and to improve the overall logic of the text. It is clear that the new curriculum requires more words and more difficulty in reading, highlighting the need for children to have a deeper understanding of English texts.

2.3.3. Writing Standard

In the old curriculum, the requirement for writing was 5 factors, whereas, in the new curriculum, the requirement for writing is 11 factors (with a focus on critical thinking). In the writing section, the new standard also requires a significant increase in the overall application of English language skills for students at the compulsory level compared to the previous standard [3]. The new standard for English writing no longer requires only patterned writing, but must express one's own opinions and be "well-spoken, well-reasoned and well-structured". For example, students are required to "describe and present anything around them in written form, expressing emotions, attitudes and opinions", which were previously corresponding to the high school curriculum standards. Students are also required to be able to self-correct and use appropriate language in their oral and written expressions. In the '+' part, requires students to 'appropriately challenge the content and ideas in a text, and explain what does not make sense. Students are required to practice thinking critically, which is a new area of core literacy that has never been taught before in primary education and is most often overlooked by middle and high school students.

3. Opportunities under the new curriculum reform for students preparing for english chsee

3.1 Advantages and Potentials of the Reform

Firstly, the CHSEE English assessment technique is optimized and enhanced to encourage the development of English learning in an equitable manner. Educational equity is the foundation for the harmonious and stable development of society as a whole, and it is a crucial aspect of promoting social equity. Due to factors such as geographic location and teacher quality, China's allocation of educational resources lacks a certain degree of balance and reason, resulting in uneven regional educational progress, which impacts educational equity as a whole. In secondary English as basic foreign language education, the challenge of resource allocation is very apparent. The reduction in the proportion of English examinations and numerous examinations has led to a fairer growth of English learning in the context of CHSEE reform. Socialized assessments, such as many exams per year, have led to more equitable outcomes [4]. China's English language entrance examination system has long been based on a "one-size-fits-all" assessment strategy, which has led to an increase in the unpredictability caused by uncertainties such as exam pressure and physiological characteristics. As a result, some students may be overly anxious and underperform. The new curriculum, on the other hand, has been able to give flexibility to the learning of English by adopting a multiple-assessment

style with the maximum score, so that students can study and take the exam in a relatively relaxed environment and thereby perform at their highest level. Second, the diminution of English's weight promotes urban and rural equality in English language acquisition [5]. Due to financial investment, welfare treatment, and development prospects, English teachers in rural areas are significantly weaker in terms of resources and overall quality than their urban counterparts. This has resulted in a significant gap in English learning between urban and rural high school students, which has a significant impact on their overall CHSEE scores [6]. Adjusting the quantity of English on the new high school entrance exam can effectively mitigate the disparity in English education between urban and rural areas, so fostering a fairer approach to studying English in the regions.

3.2 Improvement of Students' English language Proficiency and Learning Efficiency.

As one of the internationally-recognized popular languages, English continues to be highly influential and helpful and is a vital component of secondary education. In China's basic education system, English education consumes a large portion of students' time, energy, and resources; however, the learning outcomes are poor, with students only able to answer exam questions in English and lacking significantly in practical language use and daily interaction with the outside world. The aforementioned problem has been criticized by society and the education sector and has become the subject of academic and popular debate, reflecting the insufficiency of English learning under the conventional CHSEE system. In the revised version of the new curriculum for senior secondary English, the primary purpose of basic English education is to "improve students' ability to utilize language in an integrated manner," hence establishing new standards for the English education of senior secondary students. The primary purpose is to modify the objectives of English language education, to shift students' English learning from utilitarian to quality, to increase the utilization of English teaching resources, and enhance the quality and effectiveness of students' English learning [7]. The new CHSEE reform, with its revised weighting of English and multiple examinations in one year, does not essentially ignore the significance of English learning, but rather shifts the focus of English learning by adjusting the content of the examinations and, through a counterbalancing mechanism, makes students pay more attention to language learning itself and the use of communication functions, thereby effectively enhancing the fundamental efficacy of English learning.

3.3 Improvement of Students' Self-learning Ability.

By improving students' understanding of the CHSEE reform, they are encouraged to create an interest in English learning, which in turn boosts their subjective motivation and provides a source of motivation to enhance their English learning capacity. First, the new strategy for CHSEE is completely explained so that students are aware of the fundamental values of English study. The primary goal is to drive a transformation in English education by reforming evaluation methodologies so that English learning can be transformed from utilitarian to autonomous, from passive acceptance to active learning, and to fundamentally improve high school students English proficiency. The middle schools should provide an in-depth explanation of the new high school entrance examination policy to avoid the phenomenon of focusing on the transformation of the assessment form the neglecting the core intentions of the CHSEE reform so that students can comprehend the purpose of the reform and develop an independent sense of English learning. Secondly, it is also important to enhance the cultivation of English-related interests and promote the subjective motivation of students [8]. English learning is becoming more independent in light of the new CHSEE, and middle schools should pay more attention to cultivating students' interest in English learning, mobilizing them through campus activities such as language demonstration competitions, English corners, and English singing competitions, and stimulating their subjective initiative to improve their English learning ability.

4. Challenges for students when they prepare for the english chsee

4.1 Disadvantages and Limitations of the Reform.

English language education has been transformed into a quality education in the context of the new high school entrance examination reform, with the primary objective being to improve the quality and efficiency of English language learning for high school students through a greater emphasis on the use of language and the improvement of practical and collaborative skills. Contrary to the intention of investing more resources in basic English education, China's basic education system has long suffered from low quality and efficiency in English language learning, with the Chinese ranking second-lowest among Asian countries in English proficiency according to the international survey document English Proficiency Indicators. This is caused by China's traditional high school entrance examination system's excessive emphasis on score indicators. This has led to a unified view of English education among high schools, instructors, and parents, where test scores serve as the primary metric for assessing the value of English learning and classroom instruction focuses on the transmission of knowledge rather than the increase of ability. This has led to the development of undesirable behaviors such as studying for tests. Although the English language examinations have been significantly reformed in the context of the reform, the results are still presented in the form of marks, which can also be influenced by utilitarian thinking, thus affecting the original intent of the curriculum reform. Due to the traditional CHSEE 's emphasis on grades in society, schools, and even the teaching profession, high school students have a tendency to learn English in a utilitarian manner, which hinders the improvement of English learning skills on the examination [9].

In this setting, parents are concerned about their children's English proficiency and want them to stand out in society's tough competition. However, due to a lack of systematic knowledge and educational support, some parents lack a proper grasp of their children's education and English learning, and they pursue grades blindly and eagerly seek improvement. The growth of students' individualized English learning is hindered. In the context of the CHSEE reform, the decline in English language scores has led some parents to believe that English is less important. As a result, they have an extremely ambivalent attitude toward their children's English language learning, believing that their children only need to master certain English language skills. Nonetheless, the primary objective of the English reform under the new high school entrance examination is to improve the efficacy and quality of English learning and to promote students' ability to use English in an integrated manner, requiring students to develop their English learning in a personalized and interested manner and enhancing their English learning ability. For parents, this means a shift in how they think about education and how they approach their children's language learning in particular.

4.2 Increased Study Pressure.

The new curriculum is more integrated and the lines between each subject are broken down, the number of connections between subjects is increased, and information from various fields is no longer isolated, but rather systematic, comprehensive, and interconnected. In the meanwhile, deeper subject knowledge requires the students to achieve a higher standard of vocabulary level, reading ability, writing skills, and so on [10]. The processing and internalization of such challenging information need additional time for the students and it is not only a problem with the study of English, in fact, it is also a problem with every other subject as well. In contrast, the secondary school exams are the first time in the students' lives that they are required to take tests at many levels. This is due to the fact that, according to the most recent policy, only half of the students can attend high school, while the rest either drop out or attend vocational schools [1]. As a result, their chances of going to college become even less likely, so the students must take their exams under greater psychological pressure because the exams have a significant impact on their future and life. As a result of the new curriculum, which emphasizes deeper knowledge and a more severe system of assessments and advancement, this examination is made more difficult for students and puts them under pressure from a variety of angles.

In this regard, it is inevitable for the students who are aiming for higher academic results to find it more challenging and stressful under the reform.

4.3 Need for Better Learning Resources

In the context of the reform of CHSEE, the middle schools should take the initiative to change the style of English classroom teaching and provide a better learning environment for students, so as to consolidate the space for the enhancement of English learning skills. On the one hand, it is essential to improve the linguistic interaction between teachers and students and to revise classroom English instruction. As the beneficiaries of knowledge, students are the primary subjects of classroom instruction and should be involved in all areas of the lesson to deepen their understanding through conversation and engagement with the teacher. In light of the new exam curriculum, the requirement for practical application abilities in English language learning has increased, necessitating a shift in the way high schools teach in the classroom. On the other hand, classroom instruction should be modified to increase the quality of English learning among pupils. Due to the objective of utilizing English learning outcomes, traditional English classroom teaching is primarily focused on exam-related content, such as grammar, reading, and vocabulary explanations, and is inadequate in terms of language communication and practical application, which is not conducive to improving the quality of English learning for students [11]. To provide students with a comprehensive developmental space for English learning, high schools must reorganize the content of English classes, add interactive teaching methods to the English communication between teachers and students, and embed the grammar and other basic content in the communication of everyday language [8]. In this regard, it appears that the supply of educational resources cannot keep up with the demand due to the high cost and lengthy training required to train teachers at the level of proficiency required in a short period of time, and the requirements for instructors and interactive pedagogy are rising in accordance with the new direction of development of the new curriculum reform.

5. Conclusion

The new English curriculum for compulsory education embodies both literary and practical skills. The increased density and depth of knowledge have been broadened, with a large amount of high school and even university knowledge devolved from the subject's middle school knowledge base. At the same time, this has promoted students' inquiry into the nature of the subject, as well as creatively stimulated their interest in learning and their desire to explore. In terms of the national education system as a whole, this has resulted in an increased desire to explore. As a result of these developments, the various phases of education have become more intertwined with one another, which will ultimately benefit the nation by assisting it in the cultivation of high-level and highly innovative talent. Furthermore, students are encouraged to think independently and to study in a more open-minded manner by virtue of the fact that knowledge points are not standardized and are not mechanical in nature. Students who study and use English are better able to comprehend other cultures, boost their cultural confidence, improve their intercultural communication skills, develop an international perspective, develop an accurate perspective on the three dimensions, and become lifelong learners who can adapt to social development. These innovations have made it feasible for the national education system as a whole to become increasingly linked, ultimately benefiting the country in the training of high-level and highly innovative human resources for the workforce.

However, it takes time and all kinds of resources reform such as teaching training and financial support for the CHSEE, the new curriculum and teaching method under the current policy of "double reduction", the reduction in students' workload is not proportional to the reduction in requirements for learning English; rather, a greater focus is placed on the application of English language abilities. Hence, there is a contradiction between the policy to reduce student pressure and the pressure imposed by the new curriculum requirements under the education reform. In the future, there are expected to be more comparatively feasible policies from the students' perspective and focus more on practical

front-line teaching situations and students' mental status. In the mean time, teachers with competence and proficiency are supposed to be encouraged to join the English teaching for primary and junior high school education.

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