

A Comparative Study of English General Education Curriculum System in Chinese and Japanese Universities

-- Take Peking University and the University of Tokyo as Examples

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Abstract: China and Japan are both East Asian countries with similar historical backgrounds and cultural origins, and they hold identical attitudes towards English language education in colleges and universities, i.e., improving the English language proficiency of the nationals has excellent advantages for individuals and the country, and the English language education in colleges and universities of the two countries is comparable in many aspects and can be borrowed from each other. This paper focuses on the curriculum system of liberal education in Chinese and Japanese universities and takes Peking University and the University of Tokyo as the objects of study. It compares and analyzes the similarities and differences between the liberal English education programs of the two universities regarding curriculum overview, curriculum objectives, curriculum structure, and curriculum evaluation methods. It analyzes and summarizes the characteristics of the two sides to enhance the strengths and avoid the shortcomings, to make up for the drawbacks of English liberal education in Chinese universities, and to harvest the usable experience.

Keywords: China; Japan; English Education; Curriculum Comparison; Liberal Education.

1. Introduction

Liberal education originated from the idea of liberal education by the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle. Compared with the depth of education of subject-specific knowledge provided by specialized education, liberal education provides the breadth education of basic knowledge. Liberal education is also a part of higher education, the core spirit of which is to cultivate students' appropriate cultural literacy, scientific knowledge, macroscopic vision, life wisdom, analytical and discursive ability, expressive and communicative skills, and the motivation for lifelong learning and growth. As a more basic general education course in higher education, English courses in colleges and universities improve students' English communication skills, expand their international vision, meet their development needs, and improve their comprehensive quality.

Cai Jigang states that the ultimate goal of English teaching in colleges and universities is to enable students to learn and communicate professional information in English to better engage in professional learning and research[1]. In China, although the English education curriculum in colleges and universities has been reformed and optimized many times under the development and innovation of quality education, the English curriculum in colleges and universities has long been based on a variety of English-level exams as the main content of teaching, and the means of teaching, curriculum, and assessment methods are all limited by the test-oriented teaching concept, so that the English education curriculum is unable to meet the needs of the students' development, and is even more detrimental to the enhancement of the core qualities of language talents. On the other hand, Saito Yoshifumi in *The Japanese and English Language* emphasizes that students learned in school will not come to

handy[2]. Wakabayashi Shigeru also believes that Japanese people learn English in school for examination[3]. Therefore, Japanese colleges and universities' English general education programs are constantly reforming and developing innovatively.

This paper takes Peking University and the University of Tokyo as examples. Considering that Peking University and the University of Tokyo are comprehensive research universities with a full range of disciplines, and both are public or national critical universities in their own countries, the teaching of general English programs in the two universities is comparable. This paper studies and analyzes the similarities and differences between the two universities in terms of curriculum overview, curriculum objectives, curriculum structure, and curriculum evaluation methods, summarizes the characteristics of the two sides, and improves the strengths and avoids the weaknesses to provide practical suggestions and ideas for the development of English general education in Chinese universities.

2. Comparison of Curriculum Overview

Peking University has deepened the development of English general education curriculum reform in the context of the comprehensive implementation of the new round of English teaching reform in colleges and universities. It has cut the complete courses at the foundation stage and replaced them with more personalized thematic studies. All new students (except English majors and international students) are required to take an English placement test after admission and are grouped into A, B, C, and C+ grades according to their test scores so that different teaching objectives are set for students with different English admission levels, and further

personalized teaching is carried out[4]. Peking University's English general education, in which public introductory courses and available elective courses run in parallel and are repeated each semester, reflects the student's leading position in learning and enables students to choose elective courses they are accustomed to according to their interests and goals, thus promoting the improvement of students' comprehensive cultural quality.

The University of Tokyo has established the Faculty of Corrections on the Komaba Campus, primarily used to manage general education for undergraduate students. The first two years after entering the University of Tokyo, all students, regardless of their academic majors, are taught in the Faculty of Corrections, where they learn the educational ideology of the University of Tokyo and the kernel of corrections[5]. And English is ranked first among the basic subjects (succeeding foreign languages) for new students at the University of Tokyo[6]. In the higher grades, the University of Tokyo has set up English language and culture courses for specialized purposes, such as Academic English and Vocational English, which are taught in small classes. In addition, the University of Tokyo has established a university English program that is unique to the University of Tokyo, taking into account the actual needs of Japan's socioeconomic development and the differences in the levels of students within the University. In addition, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology of Japan has formulated a series of university English programs to promote the development of university English programs in Japan, such as the "Global 30 Program", the "Japan Re-emergence Strategy," and the "Toward a Global Japan Program,". The University of Tokyo actively participates in these programs.

Peking University and the University of Tokyo have similar general English programs. Both universities are guided by government agencies and play a leading role internally. In addition, the available English programs of both universities have adopted a step-by-step approach: an integrated teaching method is adopted when students first enter the University, and after completing the fundamental part of the program, selective class characteristics are adopted according to the students' differences. At the same time, the differences between the general English programs of the two universities are also pronounced. Peking University emphasizes primary and comprehensive English teaching more than the University of Tokyo, which offers specialized English courses to senior students. And this is also the commonality of the construction of general English education in China's colleges and universities, that is, over-emphasis on basic English and comprehensive English teaching, and relative lack of professional English education [7].

3. Comparison of Curriculum Objectives

The Teaching Requirements for College English Courses of the Ministry of Education of China states: "College English teaching is an integral part of higher education, and college English course is a compulsory basic course for college students. The teaching goal of college English is to cultivate students' comprehensive application ability of English, especially listening and speaking ability, so that they can effectively communicate in English in their future study, work, and social communication, and at the same time to enhance their ability of independent learning and improve

their comprehensive cultural literacy, to adapt to the needs of China's social development and international exchanges." Liberal education aims to cultivate a well-rounded person, which is the core concept of the Liberal Studies Program[8]. From the general English program focusing on British and American culture and literature to the English available education program that promotes moral, humanistic, and scientific education, develops professional public education, and cultivates critical thinking skills.

Peking University's talent cultivation aims to cultivate high-quality human resources with international perspectives, leading roles in all walks of life, and innovative and practical abilities for the country and the nation, to cultivate "those who will lead the future." The purpose of the English for Liberal Studies program is to facilitate students' language skills of listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translating, and at the same time to teach them English vocabulary, grammar, chapter, and pragmatic knowledge to increase students' basic understanding of society, culture, history, and science, to broaden students' international outlook, and to enhance students' comprehensive cultural literacy. The global perspective makes it necessary to offer general English courses, which focus on strengthening students' basic knowledge of the language and their ability to apply it. On this basis, Peking University University English also emphasizes cultivating students' critical thinking through advanced language practice activities, which further enhances their ability to communicate in academic or vocational English and cross-cultural communication skills.

The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology of Japan has published the Report on the Strategic Concept of Cultivating "English-speaking Japanese," which puts forward a new goal for university English teaching: cultivating English-speaking Japanese. Beginning English language learners are expected to emphasize the development of the ability to use listening, speaking, reading, and writing comprehensively and communicate in English to share straightforward information. Besides the above essential qualities, university graduates should have specific foreign language qualifications, such as TOEFL, IELTS, etc.[9]. This goal is still one of the main objectives of English general education programs at various universities in Japan. In addition, in 2012, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) issued the "University Reform Implementation Plan", which proposes that universities should take the initiative to implement reforms that meet the expectations of the public and society and that they should appropriately strengthen their governance with the pillars of reforms such as "Reconstruction of University Functions in the Rapidly Changing Society" and "Strengthening the Governance of Universities for University Function Reconstruction." The reform pillars are "Reconstruction of University Functions in a Rapidly Changing Society" and "Enrichment and Strengthening of University Governance for the Reconstruction of University Functions," with appropriate adjustments to the contents of majors and curricula to create a new type of University that is connected to society[10].

The University of Tokyo aims to become "a world-class platform for research and education that contributes to human knowledge through collaboration with leading global universities." To this end, the University of Tokyo has been actively innovating its teaching and curriculum system, emphasizing the English general language curriculum and

promoting the concept of a global campus model. Specific numbers have been set for each year's development in terms of target setting. For example, from 1,270 subjects taught in foreign languages in 2016, quantitative targets have been selected to reach 1,710 issues in 2019 and 2,450 topics in 2023. Therefore, the general English program at Tokyo University is essential as an introductory course[11].

The two universities, Peking University and the University of Tokyo, refine their curricular objectives under the overall cultivation goals of each country, and both focus on teaching English as an applied language. The two universities have remarkable similarities in their program objectives. However, the University of Tokyo focuses more on building the University to become a world-class university. In contrast, Peking University focuses more on enhancing students' abilities. However, what the two universities have in common, as well as what the universities in both countries have in

common, is that the state has given strong support to the development and innovation of the English general education programme, which is essential for the development of general English in universities [12].

4. Comparison of Course Structures

Peking University divides students into different levels according to their English proficiency when they enter the University and divides students into other course structures and different general English courses according to their stories. The General English Program adopts a flexible credit system, requiring students to take various credit courses according to their other starting points. Students who are graded A in the Entrance Examination will take eight credits, B will take six credits, C will take four credits, and C+ will take two credits. (Two credits per course)

Table 1. Structure of English Courses at Peking University

AG	Phonics & Listening Vocabulary	English Reading	Intonation & Listening Grammar
	English Listening	Basic English Writing	
BG	Advanced English Listening	Practical English Vocabulary	Advanced English Reading
	Selected British and American Newspaper Readings	Boya English Reading	Chinese-English Translation Theory and Practice
	Advanced English Writing	Journalism English Audiovisual and Speaking	Advanced English Speaking
CG	Academic English Listening and Speaking	Computer-Assisted Translation and Writing	Academic English Reading
	Analytical Writing	English Public Speaking	
CG+	Critical Thinking and Academic English Writing		

Level Code: A- Basic Targeted Program; B- Enhanced Targeted Program; C- Developmental Targeted Program; C+- Perfected Targeted Program

Category Code: G- General English Program

The University of Tokyo has structured its courses to allow for different teaching methods at different stages. In English, I, a self-developed textbook, is used as the standard textbook, and every effort is made to meet the reading and listening

skills required for comprehension of textual material according to the level of the arts and sciences students. In English II, students will spend one semester developing a full range of English skills (Reading, Presentation, Comprehension). Students must take two credits of English I, three credits of English II, and three credits of the integrated curriculum [13].

Table 2. Structure of the University English Program at the University of Tokyo

English I Semester 1-2	English for Arts and Sciences	Use self-compiled textbooks to teach listening and reading	
English II Semester 3	Fluency-Oriented Workshop	Academic Discussion	R (Reading Comprehension) P (Presentation: essay writing, oral presentations, and debates) C (Comprehension: workshops using reading and listening)
English II Semester 4		Academic Writing	Humanities and Social Sciences—ALESA (Active Learning of English for Students of Arts) Natural Sciences—ALESS (Active Learning of English for Sciences Students)
Comprehensive Courses		Specific courses selected based on student interest and language level	

Peking University and the University of Tokyo have very different course structures, with Peking University having additional course requirements for students with other English fundamentals and the University of Tokyo adopting a segmented program that changes according to the period. Compared to the University of Tokyo, Peking University's English for General Studies program is structured in an individualized way and more relevant to student development.

5. Implications for the Construction of English Liberal Studies Curriculum System in China's Colleges and Universities

As representative universities of China and Japan, Peking University and the University of Tokyo have a certain degree

of advancement and rationality in their English general education curriculum system. The two universities can learn from each other's advantages through comparison and summarize and try out these advantages into a successful experience for Chinese and Japanese universities.

First of all, regarding course objectives, Peking University and the University of Tokyo have clearly defined enhancing students' English proficiency as a course objective. In addition, it is more important for universities to mention teaching English as an applied language rather than a subject, which is also the goal of the English general education program.

Secondly, in terms of course structure, both Peking University and the University of Tokyo have adopted individualized teaching, but Peking University focuses more on basic English, and the University of Tokyo focuses more on applying vocational English. Universities can learn from the experience of the University of Tokyo and deepen the general English curriculum to the professional level instead of just floating on the surface of literary features.

Then, in terms of the course evaluation system, universities need to clarify that the evaluation is not only for the students but also for the course. Teaching and learning should focus on improving students' abilities and the continuous optimization of teachers' abilities and curriculum. In addition, we should not only participate in the universal student ability test but also focus on each University's internal English test to accurately diagnose students' abilities.

Finally, it must be clear that the general English program is an essential course in each University, and its status should not be devalued. Continuously improving the English available education system in each school and enhancing the quality of teaching programs are the ultimate goals of English construction in colleges and universities in both countries.

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