

Primary English Curriculum Reform in Beijing

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Abstract

This paper presents an overview of the Beijing government's policy and implementation on primary English curriculum reform. TEYL in Beijing is undergoing an important phase of innovation along with challenges featured by differences in quality of teaching and learning between urban and rural areas due to shortage of qualified teachers and high quality materials and technology. Teachers' professional development is obviously the key for the success of TEYL (Teaching English to Young Learners). The strategies adopted by the government have effectively helped the implementation although there are still tasks to be fulfilled.

Index Terms: primary English curriculum reform, implementation, changes

1. Introduction

The development of English language teaching (ELT) in China can be divided into four major phases. Between 1978-1985, English was formally restored to the school curriculum after the cultural revolution. In 1978, a new national syllabus and a series of textbooks were produced based on audio-lingualism and grammar translation method by the People's Education Press, the only recognized publisher for school textbooks in China. Between 1986-1992, China saw the rapid development of ELT. The syllabus and the textbooks were revised in the 1980s but they could no longer address the needs and changes entering the 1990s. Therefore, in 1993, a new syllabus was designed together with a few different sets of textbooks by different publishers. This started the third phase of reform in ELT which was between 1993-2000. Because of the rapid global expansion of programmes in Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL)^[1] since the 1990s, the Chinese government initiated a nation-wide curriculum innovation in 2001 to promote English as a foreign language in primary schools starting from grade 3 (age 8-9) with a time allocation of 80 minutes a week. According to the national policy on primary English^[2], the overall goals aim to "develop students' comprehensive language competence by making learning a process during which students develop language proficiency, form positive attitudes, improve thinking skills, increase cross-cultural awareness and learn to use learning strategies so as to gradually become independent learners" (ibid: 1). The major change is the shift from grammar and vocabulary focused teaching to the development of overall language competence. The emphases lie on activating students' interests in learning, relating the course content to the students' life experiences, promoting cooperation among students and advocating learning by doing (ibid). The framework of strands in the English curriculum for the primary phase is designed with specific can-do statements given for each strand^[3]. The performance descriptors indicate a change in methodology which encourages an activity-based

approach to involve children in the learning and make the learning a joyful experience.

Ma's^[4] research about the implementation of the new curriculum reveals that although the innovation gains support from many teachers, it is experiencing some difficulties, such as the differences between urban and rural areas, lack of resources and in-depth research, and change of teacher belief. The primary English curriculum reform in Beijing shares similar gains and problems.

This paper attempts to present an overall picture of primary curriculum reform in Beijing from policy to implementation. There are four parts in the rest of the paper: The first part introduces the present situation of primary English in Beijing. The second part presents the implementation strategies adopted by Beijing Municipal Education Commission. The third part focuses on two innovative projects conducted in rural and urban areas aiming at solving different problems. The last part discusses about the changes the reform brings to teachers and learners.

2. Current situation

English was offered at the primary level from the early 1990s at grade 4 or 5 (age 9-11). However, before 2001, English was not listed in the curriculum in Beijing, so there was no syllabus, no course books and no clearly stated requirement regarding this subject. Schools chose to offer English to children if they had teachers and if they felt necessary. Along with the national policy, the Beijing government started its reform in 11 districts in September, 2001. By September, 2004, all 19 districts in Beijing had joined in the reform. English is now provided starting from grade 1 (age 6-7). The new curriculum insists that at least 2 periods (1 period=40 minutes) should be provided for English in grade 1-2 and at least 3 periods should be provided for English in grade 3-6. Most of the schools in Beijing are able to meet this requirement. Section 2.1 and 2.2 introduce issues related to course books and teachers.

2.1. Course books

There are four kinds of course books used in Beijing published by Beijing Normal University Press, People's Education Press and Beijing Publishing Group. After several years' experiment, the overall evaluation of these course books from teachers, children and parents has been very positive. The course books were designed based on the teaching approaches recommended by the new National Curriculum, which effectively pushed the reform of classroom teaching methods and promoted the overall development of children's language proficiency. However, a small number of schools, especially some in the rural area, feel that the course books are too heavy and find it hard to achieve the goal within the existing teaching hours. The development of course books and the

curriculum reform are closely related, therefore, the amendment of the course books has to be informed by the classroom teaching so that they can be improved to meet teachers' as well as the new curriculum's needs. The biggest challenge for teachers is how to understand the rationale and intention of the writers behind the course books and make the best use of them to try new ideas and methods in the classroom teaching so that children can benefit from using the new course books.

2.2. Teachers and teaching and research fellows

There are 1,202 primary schools in Beijing with 49,000 teachers among whom there are 4,221 primary English teachers. Among these English teachers, 3,890 of them are female and 331 are male. 29 of them hold an MA degree, 2,886 of them have a BA degree, 1,240 of them graduated from colleges where they studied for 3 years, and the rest 66 teachers are senior high graduates. These teachers play an irreplaceable role in the implementation of the reform. Apart from them, a group of special teachers called the teaching and research fellows are also the key people for the success of the reform. They have three roles to play: teachers, researchers and administrators. They are referred to as Jiaoyanyuan in this paper because they are called this in Chinese. There is no such job in any other countries, so there is no equivalent translation for it.

In order to assure the quality of primary English course, Beijing Municipal Education Commission has issued a series of documents, which emphasize the requirements and offer clear instructions on the selection of course books, teaching methods, aims and objectives, assessment, teacher development as well as the aim and methods of teacher research.

3. Strategies adopted

The Beijing Municipal Education Commission has taken a number of strategies to guarantee the successful implementation of the new national curriculum.

1. Increase the number of teachers and improve their teaching abilities to meet the needs of teaching.

More and more college and university graduates have become primary English teachers, which has upgraded the level of teaching in primary. These young people bring fresh ideas and strong energy into classroom teaching and facilitate learning in an active way. Meanwhile, the in-service training is provided to those early graduates so that they can catch up with the latest teaching methods or theories. Many teachers have benefited greatly from attending training courses either in the local areas or in the universities home or abroad.

2. Strengthen the training on the use of the course books to guarantee the effect of the experiment.

The publishing houses have been invited to offer high quality training for teachers before they start using the course books. The purpose is to inform teachers about the design principles and provide suggestions for teaching so that they have a clear idea of how to use and adapt the teaching materials in their own classrooms. The training usually includes the introduction of the course books and suggested teaching methods, lectures by experts in ELT, case analysis, sharing of experience and participatory workshops. Such training has been running twice a year since 2001 organized by Beijing Municipal Education Commission. Each time, about 300 teachers stay together for

three days to attend such training. This has strongly pushed teachers to change their teaching beliefs and behaviours.

3. Adopt innovative teaching and research approaches to promote more creative ideas.

Teachers are encouraged to communicate with each other and think critically about their teaching through participatory and experiential workshops so that dialogues between teachers and trainers can be successfully conducted. In these workshops, teachers are led to discuss about cases, teaching designs and research related to some special problems they come across. In this way, teachers are able to learn from each other and form their own special teaching styles to teach creatively.

4. Set up special programmes to support primary English reform in rural area.

The practice of the new curriculum in rural area has an important role to play as it determines whether the reform can be successful. It is worrying that the percentage of teachers who are non-English major graduates is too high. They find it difficult to cope with the teaching in English not to mention the new teaching theories related to teaching English to children. Due to the inconvenience of transportation, many teachers in rural area hardly had any chances to be trained. The Beijing government therefore sets up three special programmes to help those areas: the "Green Cultivation" plan, the "Hand in Hand" project, and the monitor system. The "Green Cultivation" plan aims to provide professional training to over 1000 teachers in rural area. International training teams are invited and English-only training is adopted and the teachers are able to get internationally recognized T E Y L Certificate, which strongly activates teachers' motivation. The "Hand in Hand" project intends to link a school in the city with a school in the rural area so that direct and timely support and help can be provided. Teachers and students in the rural school have the opportunity to visit the urban school and teachers and leaders in the urban school often visit the rural school to discuss issues related to teaching design and management with their counterparts. What's more, the urban school also opens their online resources to the rural school so that the teachers in the rural area have more resources to use when preparing lessons or doing research. The monitor system means the Jiaoyanyuan from the Research Center of Fundamental Education & Teaching visit schools in rural area for one week twice a year. They observe lessons, organize discussions and analysis of public lessons, and conduct lectures. Detailed analysis and discussion and problem-solving approach is efficient and effective in helping teachers understand the requirement of the new curriculum and improve their ability in teaching.

5. Make use of information technology to accelerate the reform.

The information technology is used both in teacher training and learner learning. On the one hand, online teaching and research discussions, online cooperative teaching design, and online seminars are organized regularly for teachers who are extremely busy so that they can participate at their own time and anywhere they like. Sharing of resources through the Internet also helps teachers with their teaching and research significantly. On the other hand, more and more multi-media and Internet classrooms are being set up to provide a better language learning environment for children. Moreover, more learning materials designed based on the use of information technology have been produced to facilitate learning effectively.

6. Empower teachers with research projects to facilitate teacher development.

In order to raise teachers' awareness of the importance of research, school-based research and action research has been introduced and encouraged. Teachers become teacher researchers in their own classroom. The kind of research conducted by teachers include: how to teach the same content with different methods; how to conduct formative assessment; how to embed moral education in language teaching; and how to improve instructional design. Teachers are empowered through the research and strongly feel that they have the ownership of their teaching. Their motivation for self-development has been stronger and stronger through communication with others and demonstration of their wonderful lessons.

7. Develop Jiaoyanyuan's guiding ability.

It is perhaps only in China that there are people like them. Jiaoyanyuan are normally selected excellent teachers from schools. They have their own style in teaching and are recognized by many teachers and therefore have a lot to share with other teachers. Once they become Jiaoyanyuan, they no longer teach but give guidance to other teachers in teaching and research. The problem is that excellent teachers do not automatically make excellent Jiaoyanyuan, so they need to be intensively trained and learn from other experienced Jiaoyanyuan. It is important and urgent to help Jiaoyanyuan develop as they contact with classroom teachers directly and their belief, understanding of teaching as well as their subject knowledge will surely influence classroom teachers' belief and behaviour. Beijing government has initiated several programmes to train Jiaoyanyuan to improve their guidance.

8. Filling the gap between primary and middle school English

Because of the change of teaching methods in primary schools, many children enjoy learning English. However, they will find it heavy and hard once they start their middle school learning since the competition for universities is keen in China. They have to rely on formal learning of the language in order to pass exams. The differences between the two phrases are obvious and can become a huge obstacle in learning English. Therefore, teachers and the government are trying very hard in filling the gap. The research centres at different levels would organize workshops for primary and middle school teachers to come together and exchange ideas. Or they would organize primary teachers to observe lessons in middle schools and vice versa. The government also requires textbook publishers to provide preparation materials for middle school beginners so that they can review what they learned in primary school and get ready for the actual learning in middle school. Some teachers also come up with some special methods to help their learners adapt to learning in middle school within a short period of time. For example, some would try methods that primary school teachers use so that learners are scaffolded carefully at the beginning of their middle school life^[5]. Others would choose to deal with all the necessary knowledge for middle school learning, such as phonetics, vocabulary, grammar, etc., within the first three or four weeks at the beginning of middle school^[6].

4. Innovative projects

Apart from the strategies taken by the government, some projects initiated by university researchers also play a vital

role in the implementation of the reform. Two projects will be reported here. One aims at meeting the challenge of lack of qualified primary English teachers in the rural area and the other intends to set up higher standards for better schools in the city.

4.1. Pandeng English

A project called "Pandeng (in Chinese it means climbing up) English" has been very successful in making use of the technology. Its major claim is to provide children with authentic input through DVD, VCD or computer instead of Chinese teachers. This project asks teachers of Chinese, maths, music or PE to be in charge of English teaching. As a result, the role teachers play has changed dramatically because these teachers don't have the subject knowledge to teach children English. Instead, they play the role of activity organizers and facilitators. As a result, the class time is returned completely to the children who have to listen, talk or perform in English. This project is reported to help reduce the burden of finding excellent English teachers and build up children's confidence in speaking and improve their language proficiency.

4.2. PEGI (Primary English Curriculum Innovation) project

Apart from the effort in implementing the new curriculum in rural area, Beijing government also supports projects which aim at prestigious schools to help the learners reach a level higher than requested by the new curriculum. PEGI^[7] was initiated to meet such a need. It was a six-year piloting project (2003 to 2009), under Beijing municipal government's "The Tenth-five-year strategic research projects" on social sciences and headed by the Centre for Foreign Language Education and Teacher Education, Beijing Normal University, in collaboration with a private non-profit-making educational institute in Beijing. It involves 7 non-key primary schools with approximately 1500 pupils and 30 teachers as participants. The research team, including consultants, university researchers, course designers, material developers and a number of research assistants and administrative staff, put great effort and expertise in this project.

The project aims to promote pupils' whole person development through 1) reforming the teaching standards (higher than the national curriculum); 2) reconstructing course structures (reading and writing class, Video-Audio-Oral class, and comprehensive class); 3) selecting appropriate materials and teaching methods; 4) developing resources (supplementary teaching and learning materials and materials for setting up language learning environment); 5) implementing new ways of assessment; 6) exploring effective approaches to teacher development; 7) discovering factors that influence curriculum change and exploring solutions to solve the problems; 8) building up a holistic framework for innovative TEYL in more developed cities, such as Beijing. The theoretical basis for PEGI includes: holistic approach, learner-centredness, whole person development, whole language approach with integrated skills development, motivated experience, multiple intelligences, task/project-based and formative assessment.

The major findings of the project indicate that children had made significant progress in listening, speaking, reading and writing at each grade level, much better than students who did not take part in the experiment. They are also more motivated and excited about language learning and willing and confident to express themselves. Apart from English, children

were also better learners in other subjects such as Chinese and maths. PECEI had also made important contribution in understanding teachers' professional development and how to help them become autonomous teachers. Activities such as observing public lessons, talking through lessons, case analysis and reflections, etc. are found to be particularly effective in scaffolding teachers in their professional development. One of the surprising but exciting findings of this project is that the schools involved in the project all reported that it had positively promoted whole school development. It promoted not only the development of English teachers but also teachers of different subjects dramatically as they interacted more with each other and observed English lessons. More importantly, with children's achievement and teachers' development, the reputations of these project schools became dramatically increased, which won a lot of parental support.

Such a project has had strong influence on many schools in Beijing. The fresh and innovative ideas have been published and more children, teachers and schools are benefiting from the research findings.

5. Results of primary English reform

The primary English teaching in Beijing has made tremendous changes and these will be presented from the following three aspects.

5.1. Changes of teachers' belief

Firstly, the teachers begin to pay more attention to the function rather than the form of language. In the past, they were more concerned with the language form and much of the class time was contributed to spelling check, grammar exercises and mechanical drills and translation. The curriculum reform helps to change the teachers' view on language. Language is seen as the communication tool and teachers put more emphasis on the use of the language in the social interaction.

Secondly, the classroom teaching is assessed on how well learners learn rather than how teachers teach. Before the reform, teachers put more emphasis on how to teach on the part of teacher, but now they consider more about how to help learners learn better. Student-centeredness is recognized and accepted by more and more teachers.

Moreover, teachers start to put more emphasis on the design of learning process rather than the learning outcome. They have been more patient with children and try not to push them to produce language when they are not ready. Carefully designed activities which can facilitate learning are used in classroom teaching and teachers think more about how to return the precious class time to children so that children have more ownership of their learning.

5.2. Changes of teaching practice

In classroom teaching, changes have taken place in the aspects of teaching content, teaching environment, learning and teaching approaches.

1. Various of resources and materials have been introduced to the primary classroom apart from the textbook, such as story books, online materials and videos. This helps to provide rich and authentic language input for children. Meanwhile, children are able to choose the best way to learn English according to their learning styles. Variety brings choices and positive learning attitudes and outcome.

2. The focus for teaching has shifted from language knowledge to language application. Language learning is far more than just knowing the form and rule of the language. Teachers start to put more effort in designing activities for learners to practice the language in real life like situations.

3. Teachers are involved in continuous reform and innovation of teaching approaches. Some excellent approaches and models are being carried on, such as the PPP model (Presentation→Practice→Production) and the RPDPC model (Revision→Presentation→Drilling→Practice→Consolidation). Some new approaches are being tried out and researched, such as task-based teaching and project-based teaching. What's more, English teaching is more flexible, personalized and diversified with the rapid development of information technology. Learners are therefore able to experience tailored individualized instruction.

4. The reform of assessment and testing is also happening slowly but surely. The experiment of formative assessment requires teachers to pay more attention to the assessment on the learning process. The reform on the testing, especially the college entrance examination, seems to claim to the teachers that language application is the ultimate goal of language learning. More emphasis is put on the evaluation of learners' overall language competence.

5.3. Changes of learning

Learning does not mean passively accept knowledge transmitted from the teacher but actively experience and construct learners' own understanding of the knowledge. Cooperative learning, experiential learning and inquiry learning has been adopted by many teachers. Children experience the use of the language in real life situation, interact with each other with the language and discover the language rules by themselves.

The learning environment has changed from being overcautious and indifferent to relax and democratic. Children learn happily through songs and rhymes, games and activities. Praise and encouragement from the teachers help them to build up their confidence in learning the language.

6. Conclusions

TEYL in Beijing is undergoing an important phase of innovation along with challenges featured by differences in quality between urban and rural areas due to shortage of qualified teachers and high quality materials and technology. Teachers' professional development is obviously the key for the success of TEYL.

Despite the difficulties, a majority of primary English teachers are overwhelmingly supportive of the new curriculum reform. In practice, teachers of good practices tried to mediate the new teaching theories and rationale in their own teaching contexts. Meanwhile, they understand that teaching and learning activities should fit for purpose (Alexander et. al 1992), as well as fit for the contexts where teaching and learning take place.

The major tasks the Beijing government has to accomplish in the future are: to encourage teachers to undertake more school-based research related to their teaching so that more practical problems can be solved and more teachers can be influenced and changed by the new concepts; to continuously reduce the differences between the urban and

rural areas by providing more effective teacher trainings and useful resources; to make better use of the high technology in terms of language teaching and learning; and to help teachers understand the essence of the innovation and not just the form of teaching.

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