

Research on the Construction of College English Teaching Materials in the Era of New Liberal Arts

CHEN Yaoting^{[a],*}; WAN Hongfang^[a]

^[a] Associate Professor at the School of Foreign Languages, Hebei University of Technology, Tianjin, China.

* Corresponding author.

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Abstract

The construction of teaching materials serves as an important support for teaching conditions in China, directly shaping teaching quality and talent cultivation. At present, college English teaching materials still face challenges such as unclear positioning, limited diversity, and inadequate incorporation of traditional Chinese culture. This paper, guided by the *Understanding Xi Jinping's Educational Philosophy* and the core principles of the "New Liberal Arts" construction, integrates previous teaching practices to present solutions to the issues with college English teaching materials. It lists specific operation methods and approaches from three aspects ranging from refining college English curriculum goals with an integration of "ideological and political" elements, selecting textbook contents that embodies integration concepts, to employing the qualitative research methods in textbook construction. These insights aim to offer valuable references for the construction of college English teaching materials in the new era.

Key words: New liberal arts; College English; The Construction of college English teaching materials; Integration; Narrative inquiry

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Since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, General Secretary Xi Jinping has keenly understood both global and domestic dynamics, stayed grounded in the overall agenda of the Party and the nation, and introduced a series of new concepts, thoughts, and perspectives on fundamental strategic issues concerning the direction of China's educational reform and development, thereby forming Xi Jinping's significant discourse on education. The Ministry of Education of the people's Republic of China has spearheaded the compilation of *Understanding Xi Jinping's Educational Philosophy* and emphasized the implementation of his educational philosophy. This endeavor is highlighted as a top political priority and should be executed in accordance with the directive to "integrate into textbooks, classrooms, and minds." Throughout the whole process of education and teaching in Chinese universities, it is imperative to constantly consider the overarching and strategic objective of realizing the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. This entails consistently addressing fundamental questions such as what kind of individuals to cultivate, how to cultivate them, and for whom to cultivate them. As university English teaching involves the collision of Chinese and Western civilizations, on a foundation of inclusiveness, it is necessary to embody the will of the Party and the country, the style of the Chinese nation, and the basic values of the country and the nation.

Over the past 40 years, higher education English teaching has made great contributions to China's reform and opening up, economic and social growth through the unremitting efforts of several generations. In this process, college English teaching materials, as an important carrier for achieving teaching and educational goals, have played a significant role through four stages of development. "Adapting to the new standards of the era, the construction of university English textbooks needs to undergo innovation and improvement based on thorough analysis of national, institutional, and individual needs."

Through objective research and analysis, we have found that current college English teaching materials suffer from inadequate promotion of Chinese culture, such as “primarily highlighting Anglo-American culture”, (Zhang and Yu, 2020) and “unclear positioning” in academic English textbooks. (Shen and Zhu, 2011) The author places these issues in the era of new liberal arts for research and reflection, attempting to propose suggestions for the construction of college English teaching materials.

1. TEACHING OBJECTIVES OF COLLEGE ENGLISH COURSES IN THE ERA OF NEW LIBERAL ARTS

We stand in the new era, responding to new demands. In 2018, the Department of Higher Education explicitly defines the construction of liberal arts as part of the “new liberal arts” initiative within the framework of the “four news” (the construction of new engineering, new medicine, new agriculture and new liberal arts). The core essence of China’s construction of the new liberal arts is to promote the integration, zeitgeist, Sinicization, and internationalization of liberal arts, leading the new development of humanities and social sciences, and serving the new goals of human modernization. (Fan, 2020) “Sinicization” and “internationalization” are in response to General Secretary Xi Jinping’s significant remarks at the 2016 National Conference on Ideological and Political Work in Colleges and Universities. He stressed the importance of education in guiding students to “accurately comprehend global and Chinese developmental trends” and “correctly understand Chinese characteristics and international comparisons”. “Zeitgeist” echoes the General Secretary’s emphasis on “accurately understanding the responsibilities of the times and historical missions.”

It can be seen that the modern goals of new liberal arts construction meet the needs of General Secretary Xi Jinping’s requirements for “ideological and political education.” In 2019, General Secretary Xi Jinping delivered an important speech at the forum for teachers of ideological and political theory courses, and he declared that our pursuit of education in socialism with Chinese characteristics means we must boldly and confidently teach ideological and political courses, thus nurturing individuals with the spirit of socialism with Chinese characteristics in the new era. He emphasized that our Party is determined to pursue the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, which requires generations of useful talents who support the leadership of the Communist Party of China, uphold our country’s socialist system, and dedicate their lives to the cause of socialism with Chinese characteristics.” In his speech, General Secretary Xi Jinping also put forward six requirements for teachers of ideological and political courses—strong politics, deep

feelings, new thinking, broad vision, strict self-discipline, and upright personality. These not only apply to ideological and political education teachers but also to all educators. They should serve as the guiding principles for talent cultivation in universities. In the new era, as China steadily approaches the global forefront, the demand for internationalized talent cultivation in higher education has reached unprecedented levels. In this regard, college English teaching assumes an irreplaceable historical responsibility. In accordance with the strategic demands of the new era, it must first clarify the fundamental questions of for whom to cultivate, what kind of individuals to cultivate, and how to cultivate them. When designing course objectives, it’s essential to integrate the demands of the era, Chinese characteristics, school features, and students’ future development. Emphasis should be placed on imparting knowledge, fostering skills, and enhancing overall quality. Each course’s specific objectives should aim for a balanced integration of various dimensions, including scientific knowledge, critical thinking, innovation, humanistic values, as well as socialist core values.

The development of English textbooks in the new era is guided by the curriculum objectives of contemporary university English. Therefore, it’s crucial to first refine the curriculum objectives of university English that align with the needs of the new liberal arts construction and integrate ideological and political theory. This ensures the proper direction for English textbook development.

2. INTEGRATION CONCEPT IN COLLEGE ENGLISH TEXTBOOK CONSTRUCTION

2.1 Sino-Western Integration Concept

The preface of the College English Teaching Guide (2020) describes the significance of learning and English using as “College English courses help cultivate and reserve a large number of talents with a global perspective, international awareness, and cross-cultural communication skills, and who are proficient in international rules and negotiations. This can provide sufficient high-quality talent resources for promoting China’s social and economic development, enhancing China’s ability to fulfill international obligations and participate in global governance, and building a community with a shared future for mankind”. In the new era, as China approaches the center of the global stage, English learning has become increasingly vital for both personal development and national advancement. However, for a long time, our understanding of college English teaching has been relatively isolated, primarily emphasizing Western culture and customs. If we are only familiar with Western culture but cannot fluently express the Chinese perspective in English, how can we claim to possess true intercultural

communication skills? Currently, although the compilers of university English textbooks recognize the importance of incorporating Chinese culture, the execution often falls short. Consequently, some textbooks contain limited content related to Chinese culture, with any inclusion often relegated to the exercises, presenting an implicit approach.” (Zhang and Yu, 2020) The Sinicization of liberal arts necessitates addressing the issue of sinicizing educational content. “Inheriting the essence of Chinese culture, fostering cultural innovation and development, consolidating cultural confidence, and promoting the exchange and integration of diverse cultures are the new missions of liberal arts.” “One of the key tasks in advancing the new liberal arts is to develop textbooks that reflect the latest developments in the theory and practice of socialism with Chinese characteristics, incorporate new research methods, and include updated content.” (Fan, 2020) Therefore, the development of college English textbooks must embrace a new outlook.

Incorporating texts that represent China’s rich traditional culture and reflect its stance, wisdom, and values into university English textbooks will be a new initiative. Simultaneously, we must fully acknowledge that the evolving global landscape imposes new demands on the development of liberal arts, namely, “accelerating the development of highly skilled international organizational talents urgently required by the nation, with a global perspective, a deep understanding of China’s position, and proficiency in regulations; hastening the cultivation of highly qualified international professionals adaptable to the changing global landscape.” (Fan, 2020) In light of this, the construction of college English teaching materials should strive for a balance between Chinese and Western cultures. In considering the “appropriate” (Zhang and Yu, 2020) proportion of cultural content in textbooks, the author suggests that while equal representation of Chinese and Western cultures is one approach, it’s not the sole method. The crucial factor is whether task design effectively guides students to immerse themselves in acquiring knowledge, understanding culture, and conducting cross-cultural comparisons, thereby enhancing cultural confidence and understanding of the world. For instance, when structuring textbooks according to thematic units, themes such as family, friendship, love, and inspirational speeches can all be divided into Western and Chinese sections for comparative writing. The Chinese section may include stories such as the legend of Mulan taking her father’s place in the army, the friendship between Boya and Ziqi, the love story of Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai, and significant speeches by General Secretary Xi Jinping at home and abroad. Utilizing stories and scenarios with profound history, strong interest, and vivid characters as textbook material can inspire students to explore the cultural roots behind cultural phenomena. This enhances their sense of responsibility and capacity to

represent Chinese culture internationally, enabling them to articulate China’s position, offer Chinese solutions, navigate cultural conflicts, and demonstrate Chinese wisdom in international exchanges and collaborations.

2.2 Interdisciplinary Integration Concept

College English is a course designed for cultivating non-English major students in universities. Therefore, college English teaching must meet the needs of students’ majors, otherwise it will become meaningless. Ten years ago, foreign language expert Wang Shouren emphasized the service of college English teaching in his article: “serving the educational goals, the majors, and the students.” (Wang, 2011) To fulfill this service, “college English teaching should combine with the needs of the school and disciplines, achieving its own development in the school’s progress and excellently completing its mission and tasks.” This statement reveals that the sustainable development of college English lies in the integration with the path of disciplinary integration. Today, interdisciplinary and multi-technology integration are common with further advance of scientific research, higher standards and the need to address practical issues in various fields of China’s economic and social development, and humanities are no exception. The intersection of humanities is reflected in the internal intersection of humanities disciplines and the external intersection between humanities and natural sciences. Facing the strategic needs of the country, university English teaching should follow the trend of interdisciplinary development, actively integrate with science and engineering and other humanities disciplines within the school, achieving the integration of science and humanities, and safeguarding the cultivation of innovative talents with a compound knowledge structure.

Interdisciplinary integration will create new growth points for the construction of college English textbooks, especially broadening the development space of academic ones. Currently, the single-textbook model of academic English courses in domestic universities severely restricts the quality of undergraduate teaching and the improvement of students’ own qualities. There is an urgent need to establish a “course textbook system,” that is, one course associated with multiple textbooks, forming an open, diverse, and flexible textbook model. (Wang et al., 2015) Guided by disciplinary categories, the compilation of academic English textbooks according to different majors can solve the problem. Take general academic English textbooks as an example. Compilers first need to understand the common terms, historical evolution, and the latest theoretical and practical achievements in various humanities, science, and engineering disciplines in detail, and then compile the English expressions of the relevant content into the book to meet the ends of students from different majors, enhancing the textbooks’ pertinence and interest. For instance, textbooks for mechanical

engineering students can introduce research achievements in the field of intelligent robotics at home and abroad. Textbooks for communication engineering students can demonstrate the research history of the BeiDou Navigation Satellite System. Textbooks for materials engineering students can introduce applications of nanotechnology, etc. Therefore, the academic English textbooks is a huge task that requires team collaboration and mobilization of all frontline teachers. This way, frontline teachers can complete the entire process of textbook compilation, application, and evaluation. Frontline teachers have the most say in whether the textbooks are well-compiled and how effective their application is, and they can revise them while using them, thereby achieving dynamic improvement of the textbooks.

In the era of new technological revolution and knowledge economy, the construction of “new humanities” and “new engineering” are not parallel lines, but they strongly need to integrate and jointly build the disciplines and educate people. College English textbooks should actively approach students’ majors, and integrate with humanities and social sciences, sciences, engineering, agriculture, etc. Those textbooks should enable students to understand English literature in their fields, express their professional knowledge and technology in English, and cultivate high-quality talents with a fusion of humanistic quality and scientific literacy, adaptable to global integration.

3. QUALITATIVE RESEARCH METHODS IN COLLEGE ENGLISH TEXTBOOK CONSTRUCTION

Reflecting on the 70 years since the founding of People’s Republic of China, a very prominent issue in the research and development of humanities in our country has emerged. The theoretical methods and thinking expression go far Westernized and quantified, which has attracted the concern of many domestic experts and scholars. They have called for the need to accelerate the construction of a Chinese philosophical and social system with inheritance, nationality, originality, zeitgeist, system, and profession, based on inclusive absorption and the practice of socialism with Chinese characteristics. The first task of new humanities construction is to extract and refine our own elements from our own culture and civilization. (Fan et al., 2019) By tracing the roots of Chinese cultural expression, it is not difficult to find the qualitative research method of “narrative.” Narrative is not only an early form of human discourse but also a literary tradition of the Chinese people. Classics such as *The Analects*, *Spring and Autumn Annals*, and *Records of the Grand Historian* are typical representatives of the narrative inquiry method. Narrative research integrates theories from philosophy,

literature, anthropology, history, sociology, and linguistics, reflecting a grand and profound cosmology, which can be glimpsed in Sima Qian’s *Records of the Grand Historian*. Today, when telling Chinese stories, we can still draw inspiration from the grand narrative writing of *Records of the Grand Historian*: the telling of Chinese stories continues the cultural context of China for thousands of years, with inheritance and vitality. Chinese stories are credible and empirical, highlighting righteousness through the depiction of specific actions. Telling Chinese stories not only spreads the voice of China but also tells other cultural stories through the voice of China, deepening the understanding of one’s own and others’ cultures, resolving political and cultural conflicts, thereby promoting the harmonious coexistence of different races and cultures, and ultimately forming an international platform and a Chinese system for discourse. (Wu and Zhang, 2014) It is both a beneficial attempt and a way to carry forward the Chinese literary tradition to change the excessive Westernization and quantification in previous humanities research and to construct a Chinese philosophical and social system by introducing the narrative inquiry method.

People always grow up with stories. According to student feedback, narrative articles are the most attractive and the easiest to remember. Narrative texts have the most significant impact on the formation of students’ culture, the internalization of values, and the encouragement of personality. Taking the “Comparison of Chinese and Western Festivals” module as an example for the university English cultural course, it is natural to introduce the origins, legends, and related stories behind Chinese and Western festivals in the teaching materials. Students can benefit from reading the text, understanding the inseparable relationship between the text and real life, and recognizing the beliefs, aspirations, and different national values conveyed by the festivals. For example, when commemorating the deceased, the Qingming Festival reflects the Chinese values of “ritual and filial piety,” while Halloween represents the Western approach of releasing stress through celebration. Learning through cultural exchange is beneficial for cultivating students’ cross-cultural communication skills and for fostering an awareness of multicultural integration in their future work, enabling them to carry out culturally creative work.

Additionally, we have adopted a narrative inquiry method to attempt a reform of the general academic English reading course. For instance, we selected the most influential figures in the history of IT development, incorporated their family backgrounds, educational backgrounds, and stories of their discoveries or inventions into the teaching materials, and applied them to 60 students majoring in computer science for one semester. According to student feedback, the biographical stories of scientists’ discoveries and inventions in their professional fields are the most authentic and inspiring.

While broadening their professional knowledge, students have improved their problem-solving abilities and critical thinking skills, establishing a perspective and methodology for professional development. The pioneering spirit, relentless pursuit, noble patriotism, and dedication to the country exhibited by both Chinese and foreign scientists have provided positive guidance for the students' personality development and moral cultivation, thereby achieving the goal of talent cultivation.

4. CONCLUSION

General Secretary Xi Jinping's important speeches at the forum on philosophy and social sciences, the National Education Conference, the National Conference on Communication and Outreach, and the symposium for teachers of ideological and political theory, provide a new theoretical height for integrating disciplines such as political science, economics, philosophy, and sociology, and offer an action guide for philosophy and social science workers. For university English textbook compilers, it is essential to first clarify the political requirements of educating people for the party and nation and tell Chinese stories well. It is also necessary to clarify the era's demand for cultivating professionals who can adapt to economic globalization, possess an international perspective, and have international communication skills. This is the fundamental starting point and main line of textbook construction. To fully implement the core essence of the new humanities with integration, zeitgeist, nationality, and internationalization throughout the textbook compilation process, the selection of textbook texts and the setting of exercises need to fully reflect the compilers' consideration of knowledge, values, social responsibility, historical mission, human dignity, and human civilization.

Therefore, university English frontline teachers are particularly encouraged to actively participate in textbook construction, ensuring that the meaning construction generated by teachers in the textbook compilation align with the guidance provided to students during the teaching process, maximizing the effectiveness of textbook use. At the same time, using the narrative inquiry method to record the individual insights and experiences of teachers and students in the process of using the textbooks can form an evaluation of the textbooks. The qualitative research method of narrative makes the textbook content, textbook use, and textbook evaluation integrated and mutually reinforcing.

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