

A Survey of the Course: English for General Education

An Example from Harbin Institute of Technology (Weihai)

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Abstract—College English has witnessed reforms since Chinese National Education Department initiated them in 2003. As a focus of the recent reforms, General Education is life education with universal meaning. Its purpose is to help students develop healthily in lifetime. The College English course is an important part of General Education. The courses “English for General Education” (EGE) are a package of courses. In order to investigate the detailed factors influencing students selecting the package of courses, a questionnaire is designed and done in the author’s university. Based on the analysis of the questionnaire, discussions and suggestions are presented in the paper.

Keywords—college English; general education; English for general education

I. INTRODUCTION

The course College English has been in heated reforms since Chinese National Education Department launched them in 2003. According to the requirements proposed in 2004 by the Higher Education Section of the Chinese National Education Department and the main idea regulated in 2017 in the Short-and-long Term Scheme for National Education and Its Development, college English should feature English linguistic knowledge and its application skills, learning strategy and cross-cultural communication. And higher education should optimize disciplines, majors, levels and structure, and promote the amalgamation of disciplines and focus on the training of talents for interdisciplinary, technical and general purpose.

In order to achieve these purposes, universities all over the country shift their focus on education quality to students’ comprehensive qualities. They emphasized the concept: General Education. Opposite to the concept of Specialty Education, General Education is life education with universal meaning. Its purpose is to help students develop healthily in lifetime.

American professor Alpheus S·Packard recommended in 1829 that universities should present an all dimensional and comprehensive education so that students of any majors could benefit from this mode, but not be limited by their majors. In late 19th century, universities in western countries and Hong Kong, Taiwan, China, all launched General Education Movement. In 20th century, some Chinese universities, Qinhua University, for example, started general education. In 21st century, more and more universities in China realized its benefits and started the system of general education.

The College English course is closely related to general education. College English is a course for the largest students in universities. Its target, content and characteristic, all commit it to much more responsibilities in General Education. English learning is not just the vocabulary, sentence and discourse, but also culture of English speaking countries. It can help students comprehend western culture and history, notice the differences between East and West, and promote their status in thinking and psychology in the era of multicultural fusion. Therefore College English course is an integral thread in the fabric of General Education.

In order to achieve the goals set by the National Education Department, the English Department of Harbin Institute of Technology (Weihai) designed new course system since 2015. The College English course is divided into four parts, namely, English for linguistic training purpose, English for general education, English for studying abroad and English for academic purpose. Each part has set up a package of courses. This paper focuses on English for General Education (EGE).

In our university, the EGE package encompasses 5 courses. They are Survey of English Speaking Countries, Readings in Chinese Culture, Inter-cultural Communication, Appreciation of Poems and Selected Readings of British and American Novels. In recent three years, the package of

courses does not operate stably in terms of the number of classes, students and teachers. As a teacher from the team, the author wants to investigate the package of courses in several aspects so as to present suggestions for the authority.

There are 1400 students selecting EGE courses in our university. They are grade 2016 and divided into 28 classes,

each class comprising 50 students. Among the 28 classes, Survey of English Speaking Countries takes up 16, Readings in Chinese Culture takes 4, Inter-cultural Communication, 4, Appreciation of Poems, 2, and Selected Readings of British and American Novels, 2. Details are seen in "Table I".

TABLE I. THE CLASS DIVISION OF EGE COURSE

	Survey of English Speaking Countries	Readings in Chinese Culture	Inter-cultural Communication	Appreciation of Poems	Selected Readings of British and American Novels
teacher	4	1	1	1	1
class	16	4	4	2	2
student	800	200	200	100	100

As is clearly presented in "Table I", the number of classes and students is not even among the 5 EGE course package. Survey of English Speaking Countries has the largest number of students. The other 4 courses have fewer students because they are opened later and not well known to students, so they are not popular among students.

In order to investigate the detailed factors influencing students selecting a course, a questionnaire is designed and done in 2 of the author's 4 classes. There are 90 questionnaire copies handed out and 85 copies received. 80 of them are qualified. The questionnaire is presented in "Table II".

TABLE II. QUESTIONNAIRE AND ITS RESULTS

1. What's your reason or purpose of selecting EGE course?	
A out of interest (20%)	B to broaden knowledge and enhance self-cultivation (38%)
C to get credit (37%)	D other (5%)
2. Which is your first consideration when selecting the course?	
A the course guide (25%)	B recommendation from senior students (34%)
C teachers' charm (16%)	D easy to pass exam (25%)
3. Which semester is appropriate to open the course?	
A the 1 st semester (16%)	B the 2 nd semester (28%)
C the 3 rd semester (51%)	D the 4 th semester (5%)
4. Do you think the EGE courses opened in your university can meet your demands?	
A Yes, absolutely. (18%)	B Yes, they can. (69%)
C No, they can't. (11%)	D I don't know. (2%)
5. What other courses should be included in EGE package? Write them down the line.	
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6. Which of the following is your favorite course?	
A Survey of English Speaking Countries (74%)	B Readings in Chinese Culture (13%)
C Inter-cultural Communication (5%)	D Appreciation of Poems (3%)
E Selected Readings of British and American Novels (5%)	
7. Which teaching style is your favorite?	
A teacher's lecture (36%)	B teacher's lecture and students' assistance (56%)
C students' lecture with teachers' assistance (8%)	D students' lecture (0)
8. Which examine style do you prefer?	
A thesis or report (19%)	B open-book exam (40%)
C closed-book exam (6%)	D daily performance (35%)
9. What do you think the degree of difficulty of the course?	
A very difficult (10%)	B a bit difficult (35%)
C appropriate (55%)	D very easy (0)
10. What do you think the class atmosphere of the course?	
A very good (53%)	B average (43%)
C very bad (4%)	D I don't know. (0)
11. In what way does the course affect you?	
A broadening my scope of knowledge (73%)	B enhancing my humanistic quality (10%)
C promoting my language level (5%)	D helping understand international relations (12%)
12. Do you have any suggestions on EGE courses in your university?	
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II. ANALYSIS OF THE QUESTIONNAIRE

As is obvious in question 1, students have clear purpose in their mind. 37% of them select EGE course for credits. The same amount goes to students selecting the course to enhance self-cultivation and broaden the scope of knowledge. Only 20% select out of interest. This reflects the fact that

students in universities of engineering and technology lack interest in humanistic accomplishment.

The 2nd question focuses on the considerations that students include when selecting EGE courses. 34% of the students questioned incline to considering recommendation from senior students. This result explains question 6. In question 6, 74% of the questioned consider the course

Survey of English Speaking Countries as their favorite course. Survey of English Speaking Countries starts earliest and goes through several semesters, so many senior students know well about it. They can't recommend other EGE courses. Hence, the course Survey of English Speaking Countries enjoys a high percentage.

Different from the fundamental English, the EGE courses focus on culture of English-speaking countries. Students selected these courses should have firm base in fundamental English course, otherwise, there will be great difficulty for them. Students and teachers arrive at an agreement on questions 3. 51% of the questioned choose the 3rd semester when they are fully prepared for more advanced learning. This result confirms teachers' expectation.

So far, our university only opened 5 EGE courses, the number is far from enough in teachers minds. However, students think they are enough. In question 4, 18% of the questioned choose A, that is, absolutely the amount of the course can meet their demands. 69% choose B. So, 87% of students think that the number of the EGE courses is enough. They don't want other courses to be included in the package. This may relate to the thinking patterns and learning habits of students majoring in technology and engineering. Their major purpose and interest are on technology and engineering, not on humanistic cultivation.

As for the teaching and learning styles, 56% of the questioned like teachers lecture assisted by students. It shows that students wish to be involved actively in the teaching and learning process. In fact, students' role is valued in EGE courses. There are different in-class activities used, including presentation, seminar, scenario, etc. Students are very interested in these activities. Of course, there are still some students who are not so active in class. They lower their heads when asked questions, this may be because the questions designed are difficult, or they are not fully prepared. It is reflected in that 36% of the questioned would like to be in teachers' domain. It makes them feel safe and comfortable.

The question that students concern most is actually the examination system. This is also a question haunting around teachers' mind. But students can't come to an agreement on this. 40% like open-book exam; 35% choose testing by daily performance; 19% like testing by writing report or paper. They do come to an agreement in that 94% of them prefer no testing by closed-book exam. The hatred does not appear in a single day, students went through too many exams. It is natural that students respond in this way. It is high time for us teachers to do some reforms in exam. At present, the testing system in our university consists of two parts, daily performance and closed-book exam. Daily performance takes up 40% and closed-book exam takes 60% of the grade. It is reflected in this questionnaire that students are still not satisfied with the reforms, they need more thorough reforms.

When choosing the textbook for the course, teachers have a clear understanding of students' English level, so they choose the right textbook. It is proved by question 9. Only 10% of the students think that the course is too difficult to

understand. 90% think they can follow the teachers and the textbook.

53% of the questioned like the class atmosphere of the EGE courses. 43% of them think the atmosphere is average. And 95% think the course achieved the purpose expected, that is, broadening the scope of knowledge and enhancing their humanistic cultivation.

The analysis above reflects the teaching and learning situation of EGE courses in Harbin Institute of Technology (Weihai). Generally speaking, the EGE courses achieved success. Of course there are still problems. The biggest one is the amount of students distributed in the 5 courses is not balanced. The second one is that teachers want to open more EGE courses, but they lacked expertise in some area. This problem puzzled teachers. They need support from authority. And of course, 50 students in a class are too large for language course. It is difficult for both the students and teachers to interact. To solve these problems, discussions and suggestions are presented as follow.

III. DISCUSSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

- Propaganda and publication are needed to make the EGE courses known to more students. We should expose students to the significance of the courses and involve them in the package of the courses. Still, the improvement of courses needs strong support in policy from the authority. And relevant Teachers should also do propaganda when teaching the courses. By means of internet that covers all the campus, teachers can present on-line courses to students, and interact with them, so as to fulfill their demands and expectations
- The package of the EGE courses needs to be improved in terms of the stabilities and continuity. In the 5th and 12th question, students listed some courses which they expect to be included in the EGE package, for instance, Western culture in movies, Appreciation of English Songs, Greek and Roman Mythology, etc. But the teaching office does not want to cooperate. They think quality is more important than quantity. More communication is needed between the two sides.
- We need to strengthen the construction of the teaching staff. There is a formula from the UNESCO on the quality of teaching and learning of foreign languages, that is, $Quality = Competence \times \{ Environment (4 \text{ pts.}) + Teaching Methods (3 \text{ pts.}) + Textbooks used (2 \text{ pts.}) + Students (2 \text{ pts.}) \}$. As is known from the formula, when other variables are kept unchanged, the quality of teaching and learning is proportional to teachers' competence, i.e., the more competent the teachers are, the higher the quality of teaching and learning is. Therefore universities and colleges should encourage teachers to further their learning and study. Teachers are willing to further their study so as to teach well and open new courses, but they are not willing to lose salary because of the

further education. So the teaching authority should support teachers in economy and policy, sweep the obstacles and barricades.

IV. CONCLUSION

Based on the statistics from questionnaire, this paper analyzed in details the situation of EGE courses in Harbin Institute of Technology (Weihai). Advantages and disadvantages are pointed out and suggestions are presented to solve the disadvantages and problems. It is subjected to the Teaching Authority for reference. When they are discussing policies on the EGE courses, it is highly appreciated if this paper can help them improve teaching and learning in English courses.

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