

# *The Impact of EFL Curriculum Design on the Teaching Quality in Compulsory Education*

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**Abstract:** For students under compulsory education, English courses serve as their first contact with a second language. In most provinces and regions in China, English is one of the major courses that students must take English exams to enter middle school and senior high. In this concern, the quality of teaching English is of great importance. This paper discusses how different kinds of teaching arrangements and curricula affect the teaching quality of EFL education while providing suggestions better to improve the EFL teaching framework for the future. This paper argues that different teaching arrangements and types of curriculum affect the quality of EFL teaching in a different way. Small-sized classes, NESTs' classes, and interest-based courses play an important role in promoting teaching quality. Meanwhile, as for credit hours, further reduction might lead to unsatisfied results in EFL teaching. Suggestions are given after a series of explorations of curriculum design, which includes adding output-oriented and practice-oriented sessions in EFL classes and keeping a balance between textbook contents and extracurricular materials.

**Keywords:** Compulsory education, EFL teaching, curriculum design

## 1. Introduction

EFL education remained a heated discussion in recent decades in China. Foreign language teaching, particularly English language teaching, occupies a prominent role in Chinese education. The Chinese view English primarily as a necessary tool that can facilitate access to modern scientific and technological advances and secondarily as a vehicle to promote commerce and understanding between the PRC and countries where English is a major language [1]. Although there were previous research about English curriculum design, most of them focused on English courses in colleges or universities. Consequently, the EFL curriculum study in compulsory education in China remains relatively blank.

At the primary and middle school levels, a draft of a national plan for teaching English exists [2]. At the tertiary level, the Ministry of Education has drafted guidelines that provide a framework within which separate curricula are developed for English majors and non-majors. This paper focuses on varied types of teaching designs of EFL curriculum in compulsory education in China, and in the meantime, explores the impact of these curricula on teaching quality.

## 2. Teaching Arrangements in EFL

### 2.1. Credit Hours

According to the new version of *English Curriculum Standards in Compulsory Education* published by China's Ministry of Education(MOE) in 2022, the total credit hours of all curricula should be 9,522 lessons, among which English classes are set to take up 6% to 8% [3]. It means that students under compulsory education are supposed to have around 571 credit hours of English lessons at least and 762 credit hours at most. In addition, the MOE does not make a clear requirement that Grade one and Grade two students should have English classes at elementary schools. Except for Grade one and Grade two, from the third to the eighth Grade, there are 35 weeks per year. For the ninth Grade, it is 33 weeks since the ninth grade students are to attend Senior High School Entrance Examination. Hence, there are 243 weeks throughout the seven years of compulsory education. Divide the number of hours by the number of weeks, which is equal to the number of lessons per week. Consequently, students under compulsory education in China have 2.4 to 3.1 average credit hours of English Classes per week.

Although compared to the previous version of *English Curriculum Standards* released in 2011, the total credit hours remain unchanged. The MOE announced permission to open English classes in the first and second grades in primary school in 2021. Tremendous primary schools followed this in mostly first-tier cities opening English courses in Grade One and Two, but the average credit hours per week are less than 3.

There is no official data about the fixed credit hours of English courses in primary and middle school respectively. However, there are more complex grammar points and vocabulary in middle school English classes. Therefore, under the same credit hour requirements, the knowledge points taught in each middle school English class lesson are denser. In summary, according to the new *English Curriculum Standards*, although there is no change in credit hours both in primary schools and middle schools, the efficiency of teaching English classes increased. Despite the fact that schools are not allowed to extend their time for English courses in compulsory education, the pressure from the competition among schools forced them to add more extra-curricular materials in English classes. In the meantime, pushed by the schools, the teachers have to speed up their teaching to reserve more time for supplementary materials learning, and they are more aware of the aim of their teaching.

### 2.2. Classroom Capacity

Classroom capacity is the total number of students in a particular class under the guidance of a teacher. It is one of the important factors that affect the quality of education. In general, the effects of smaller classes on student learning, attitudes, and behavior decrease as grade level increases, and disadvantaged or minority students achieve more academically in smaller classes [4]. According to Glass and Smith's class size curve, students' average grades increase as class sizes shrink, and their effectiveness increases when they shrink to less than 15 people. By contrast, in a bigger class with more students, teachers cannot pay attention to every student in the class, especially in primary schools, since elementary children have lower self-discipline.

The Chinese government realizes the negative effect of large-size classes and releases relevant laws and regulations to control classroom capacity strictly. According to data from the MOE, in 2017, the decline in the number of large classes and super class sizes was the largest in the past ten years. Before that, there were 86,000 extra-large classes with more than 66 students nationwide, accounting for 2.4% of the total number of primary and secondary schools. But long before this, some schools, mainly in first-tier cities, had begun reforming small-class teaching. Shanghai started its pilot small class teaching in 1996, followed by a huge success in students' academic performance. Wuhan started

its reform in 1999 when Qingshan Shihua Elementary School firstly enrolled their Grade one pupils in small-size classes in September. Qingshan Shihua Elementary School took advantage of small class teaching (small number of people and sufficient time) to add a variety of group cooperation links in the English classroom and increase the interaction between teachers and students, including group discussions, class presentations, and teachers' observation through group-work. Compared with the previous year, there has been a significant improvement in the average English score. In general, the average English score of students in smaller classes was around 94, while students in larger classes scored 64.5 [5]. Although other effects cannot be completely excluded as smaller classes in the same period at the time of the survey had two more years of English courses than the larger classes.

Under the small-size class pattern, some specific teaching measures are enabled to develop, such as one-by-one pronunciation correction, role-playing, etc. These helped to raise students' enthusiasm in English classes and make sure everyone engaged in the classes.

### 3. Different Types of Curriculum in EFL

#### 3.1. Curriculum-based Courses

*English Curriculum Standards* points out that the general targets of English courses in compulsory education are to develop students' language ability, cultural awareness, quality of thinking and learning ability. It also demonstrates six elements that must be included in the content of EFL teaching under compulsory education: topics, discourses (dialogues, interviews, narratives), linguistic knowledge (vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation), cultural knowledge, language skills and learning strategies.

In general, the EFL courses are supposed to be holistic and structured. To reach the goals mentioned in the *Standards*, English teachers ought to cover listening, speaking, reading and writing in their courses in every lesson. *Standards* also suggest adding "profound reading sessions" using the "what-why-how" teaching method, representing three questions. What is the topic or content of the article? Why is the story end like this? (the meaning that the article conveys) How is the article arranged? It is also worthwhile to mention a suggested teaching measure the *Standards* indicate: teaching-learning-evaluation. In the teaching and evaluation process, teachers can collect evidence of whether students comprehend the knowledge, what they can express in English, or any obstacle they encounter during their study.

In conclusion, in light of the *Standards*, teachers develop diversified ways to teach their students motivated by the learning goals indicated in the *Standards*, thus raising the teaching quality to some extent. The curriculum-based courses are desirable for theory teaching, such as grammatical knowledge.

#### 3.2. Native English-speaking Teachers' Classes

Medgyes points out that non-Native English-Speaking Teachers (NESTs) usually feel unsafe using the language they have to teach [6]. Due to this fear, they tend to adopt two kinds of attitudes: pessimistic or aggressive, and the ideal school has a good balance of NESTs and non-NESTs. In recent years, more and more elementary and middle schools, especially those so-called foreign language schools or international schools, attached great importance to introducing NESTs to English courses.

Chinese English teachers are taught in accordance with the textbooks compiled by Chinese publishers, while NESTs do not have fixed teaching materials. Their teaching content tends to be life-oriented. Generally, NESTs use one or two lessons to understand the English level of all students and carry out various topics that may attract them, such as hometown, table manners, Christmas, sports

activities. In addition, Chinese English teachers emphasize phonetic, grammar and vocabulary in their teaching, which is relatively one-sided and fragmented. While NESTs focus on contextual teaching, whose teaching contents are more related to real-life situations [7].

A study carried out in Dongmalu Primary School collected 63 questionnaires from Grade three students who had English classes taught by NESTs. A detailed analysis of the views of 63 participants found that almost all the participants believe that having English classes taught by NESTs is conducive to better understanding the Western culture and improving their English speaking ability at the same time. 87% of the students feel that their listening improved after having the foreign teachers' classes. It was found that most students think that English classes taught by NESTs can stimulate their interest in English learning, help students enhance self-confidence, and broaden their horizons. Secondly, oral interactions with foreign teachers help students build self-confidence in English learning.

### 3.3. Interest-based Courses

Numerous new types of interest-based courses have been introduced in EFL classes in China, thus changing the traditional teaching mode based on teachers explaining the texts, increasing the frequency of students' use of English [8], and promoting classroom activities. More students can present themselves differently while learning English, rather than just listening to the teacher's lectures. A typical example of this type, of course, is the English Drama class.

Many schools, both primary and middle schools, open their own English Drama courses or hold English Drama Festivals. Mostly in city schools, teachers let the students role-play the article in the textbooks or classic Western stories; let them write English stories by themselves or translate Chinese folk stories and make them into English dramas. Schools with English Drama festivals hold drama competitions, inviting parents to their school hall and giving awards to the well-performed groups.

Beijing Fangcaodi International School is an ordinary public primary school in Chaoyang District, Beijing, that features drama English teaching. With the principal's support and experts' guidance, it has set up a weekly English drama school course for all students in Grade One to Six, forming a team of English teachers to carry out drama teaching. After three years of practice and exploration, the school has developed materials suitable for teaching English drama to primary school students. Drama teaching brings natural and pure English pronunciation and intonation, good language sense and pragmatic ability, and strong self-confidence and self-expression to primary school students. Third-grade pupils speak fluent English lines in drama with tricky words and complex sentence structures [9].

## 4. Optimizing the Curricular Content Design in EFL

### 4.1. Input-oriented and Output-oriented

The input-oriented mainly includes listening and reading, while the output-oriented includes speaking and writing. Some scholars believe that only after a great amount of language input (including massive reading materials), can the students gain the ability to output their English. The learner's language ability level depends not only on the degree of input but also on the frequency of their outputs. The higher the frequency of their outputs, the stronger their language ability [10]. Students learning a foreign language should first be exposed to a large number of easy-to-understand languages and then understand their meaning through specific communicative situations and contexts. In this way, the sentence structure contained in the communicative language is naturally learned, and the communicative function of the language will be naturally realized, which is the only way to acquire a second or foreign language [11].

Consequently, previous educators did attach greater importance to English teaching inputs by letting students do more listening tests or reading comprehension. Nonetheless, for teachers as non-native speakers, the problem of lacking speaking and writing ability or lacking confidence to output the language cannot be neglected. But the problem was also obvious: students could only listen and read English materials but could not speak or write in English. After the educational reform, people emphasized the importance of output-oriented course design [12]. Nowadays, most schools try to balance the inputs and the outputs. Teachers expand students' English reading volume by reading textbooks and extracurricular English reading materials and further broaden the channels of language inputs by playing English movies, learning to sing English songs, and other multimedia methods. Meanwhile, the teachers also design presentations, English writing competitions, mini-English speeches, and other sessions to enhance students' ability to speak or write. Some also use task teaching methods to allow students to complete specific communicative tasks through individual preparation, and group work, such as modeling an interpreter receiving foreign guests in the classroom or a presenter of the gala.

#### 4.2. Textbook-oriented and Extracurricular Material-oriented

Textbook-oriented refers to courses that focus on knowledge in textbooks. In general, teachers will explain the grammatical knowledge, teach students how to pronounce the words in the glossary attached to the textbooks and guide students to read the texts. For English courses under compulsory education, teachers tend to let students recite the texts and dictate the words and expressions in their textbooks. Teachers also assign homework to let students do textbook-related grammatical exercises and explain the grammatical points in class repeatedly to ensure students master them.

For the content in the textbook, students are required to do an intensive reading. For extracurricular materials, students are only required to read them extensively. But the vocabulary in extracurricular materials is often more complex. The teacher will ask the students to listen to a short extracurricular listening material to summarize or repeat the text. For others, teachers showed written English materials ranging from English newspapers and magazines to classic literature. However, it usually does not take long to explain extracurricular materials than to explain the text. The midterm or final exam is also almost exclusively about the grammar points and vocabulary of the textbooks.

#### 4.3. Theory-oriented and Practice-oriented

Theory-oriented courses refer to theatrical teaching, through which teachers educate the students only with grammatical knowledge. The content of teaching is mainly centered on theoretical knowledge. In addition, theory-oriented courses aim to let the students remember the book's contents or prepare them for written exams. On the contrary, practice-oriented courses refer to curricula that focus on student practice, which involves applying theories. In practice-oriented courses, students are required to interact more with their classmates, do experiments.

As John Dewey said, the real education process should be learning to think through the application of real problems. Nevertheless, the teachers in China followed the exam-oriented teaching method for a long time until the proposal of *suzhi* education in 1985. *Suzhi* education means improving students' well-round development, including the ability to put the theories into practice. But after more than 35 years of the proposal of *suzhi* education, some primary and secondary schools now will inevitably adopt the method of test-oriented education. Reasons include schools wanting to get good students or parents putting great pressure on their children. Some factors that are from public remarks, for most people think that in order to have a good job, you must go to a first-class university; If you want to go to a first-class university, you need to enter a first-class high school, junior high school, elementary school or even kindergarten.



This vicious circle has to stop since this is already far from the goal of education or cultivating the students. Once the students enter society, they mostly serve society in different positions using their practical skills. Hence, this kind of exam-oriented course offers no help. But in order to change this situation, great education reform will come. The author believes that schools and teachers should advocate more classroom interactions and practices under current circumstances.

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the structure of English teaching is relatively fixed in China, under the management of MOE and the *English Curriculum Standards in Compulsory Education*. Thus, In general, EFL education in China is very standardized, except in a few rural areas, where the hardware facilities are difficult to keep up with and negatively affect teaching quality.

The level of EFL teaching in China has reached an unprecedented level, whether it is innovative teaching methods or novel curricula, which has promoted the teaching level of EFL in China's compulsory education. At the same time, due to the lack of application experience in some new teaching methods, there are also some drawbacks. In terms of credit hours, there seems to be no change in the recent decade. However, considering the domestic enthusiasm for raising the Chinese cultural identity, there is a possibility that the MOE will reduce the credit hours of the English curricula in the future, which will lead to a backlash for EFL teaching. Speaking of classroom capacity, small-sized class learning shows unique advantages in monitoring every student's performance and involvement, thus improving the EFL teaching quality. Furthermore, different types of curricula affect teaching quality. The curriculum-based courses, as required in *English Curriculum Standards*, lays a foundation for future advanced EFL learning. Its impact on teaching quality largely depends on different arrangements of teaching sessions or methods. However, generally, the teaching quality of this kind, of course, is relatively high due to the need to meet the request demonstrated in the *Standards*. NESTs' English classes also arouse students' learning interests considerably, proving it a good way to promote teaching quality. Interest-based courses such as drama courses give more opportunities for the students to output their language by speaking and acting and get every student involved in English classes. In the meantime, there are also some traditional problems of test-taking education that have not been resolved.

In the future, output-oriented courses are expected to be introduced in EFL classes in compulsory education, concerning the benefits it brings to improve students' ability to apply the language. Additionally, the schools ought to strike a balance between textbook content and extra-curricular material ones to provide multiple information and diversified knowledge aside from textbook content. Practice-oriented courses emphasize pragmatic uses of the English language and are expected to add into future curriculum design, including dialogue exercises for the application of English in specific scenarios. The suggestions could be considered for teaching practice in the time to come.

It would be useful to explore other teaching models conducive to improving the EFL curriculum design in compulsory education or the primary education stage in other countries, to make a comparison or contrast.

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