

Student and teacher attitudes about competence-based instruction in secondary English classes in China

Dianping Liu

College of Foreign Languages
Yanbian University
977 Gongyuan Road
Yanji City, Jilin Province, China

Abstract

Recently China has begun national educational reform that focuses on development of key competences in all subjects, include English. This study explores student and teacher attitudes toward competence-based instruction in secondary-level English classes. 835 college freshmen at Yanbian University in Jilin, China were surveyed about their experiences in high school English. The results showed that high school English instruction is perceived as still mostly exam-focused rather than competence-focused, and that students consider exam-focused instruction to be a desirable goal. The results also showed that students are unclear about the nature of the key competences in English. It is concluded that challenges for national educational reform in China include attitudes arising from local educational practices: Both students and teachers prefer exam-focused rather than competence-focused English instruction, given the importance of performance on evaluations such as the national college entrance examination.

Key words : key competences, secondary English instruction, China, educational reform

1. Introduction

This paper explores the role of student and teacher attitudes in translating national educational reform into local practice. The specific focus of the paper is on Chinese student and teacher attitudes toward competence-based instruction in secondary English classes. As explained below, increasing competence-based instruction in all K-12 classes, including English, is a current focus of national educational reform in China.

Competence-based reform assumes that key competences in language include not only basic knowledge such as vocabulary and grammar, but also the capacity to understand and express meanings, emotions, and attitudes, to engage in critical analysis, and to otherwise participate in meaningful communication (Cheng & Zhao, 2016; Jiang, 2016). Although many factors have contributed to competence-focused reforms in China, an important influence is a document released by the Chinese Ministry of Education (MOE) in 2016 entitled "the Development of Chinese Students' Key Competences." This document is authoritative, in the sense it that conveys official national policy concerning competences that must be met through educational practices (Cheng, 2017; Jiang, 2016). All provincial and local educational systems are expected to comply with the legal mandate expressed in this document. For convenience, this document will be referred to here as the "MOE competence directive", or "MOECD."

The purpose of the MOECD is to describe policies and practices that promote reform toward more competence-centered rather than knowledge-centered instruction in all subjects, including English. In the first part of this Introduction, I describe some of the recent historical developments that gave rise to competence-related reforms in China, including the dissemination of the MOECD. In the second part of the Introduction, I describe some of the known challenges that China faces in implementing the reforms described in the MOECD. In the final part of the Introduction, I describe the survey research conducted for this paper which sheds light on the role of student and teacher attitudes in implementing competence-related reforms.

This research is based on the assumption that competence-oriented reforms will be facilitated if students and teachers value competence-based instruction, whereas challenges arise to the extent that students and teachers value knowledge- or exam-focused instruction (Chen, 2016). In the final part of the Introduction I will argue that there are reasons to expect that Chinese students and teachers prefer exam-focused instruction, in spite of growing emphasis on competence-oriented instruction.

1.1 Recent impact of EU on Chinese educational reform

The identification of key competences necessary for individual and social well-being are central to the European Union's educational mission, and these competences are receiving increasing attention in international educational circles. With the launch of the DeSeCo Project by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in 1997, discussion about the definition and selection of key competences began, and this work has continued through the present (Jiang, 2016). In December 2006, a recommendation of the European Union working group on key competences for lifelong learning was adopted by the European Council and the European Parliament (European Council, 2006). This group defined "competence" as a combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes appropriate to a particular context. "Key competences" are those which all individuals need for personal fulfillment and development, active citizenship, social inclusion and employment. This definition is consistent with usage in the scientific literature – for example, the term "competence" has been defined as "the ability to successfully meet complex demands in a particular context through the mobilization of psycho-social prerequisites" (Rychen & Salganik, 2003, p. 43). Of the eight key competences identified by the EU working group, the one of greatest relevance to the current paper is "communication in foreign languages", although two others have some relevance ("learning to learn" and "cultural awareness and expression").

The EU's work on key competences has sparked greater discussion at the UN and in countries such as the USA, Japan, Singapore and China (Tsai, 2016). Along with recent increases in China's globalization, the Chinese government has realized the importance of basic education that provides its younger generations with competences necessary to help them achieve their own potential, adapt to their environments, and contribute to the social good (Jiang; 2017; Xia, 2017). However, debates among Chinese experts on how to define these key competences have been spirited (Zhong, 2015), and these debates illustrate a challenge to implementing educational reform: Identifying the goals for reform and defining the key concepts on which those goals are based (Chen, 2016; Cheng, 2017; Xia, 2017).

1.2 Key competences in Chinese educational reform

In the MOECD, key competences are defined as "the key abilities that students should have for their lifelong learning and adaptation...related to knowledge, skills, emotions, attitudes and values", a general formulation of the ultimate goal of basic education in China. In considering the more specific goals of national educational reform, Chinese experts have presented their own classification systems for key competences based on definitions provided by the OECD, by the DeSeCo Project, and by experts in other countries. Although definitions vary from expert to expert, these definitions share the assumption that key competences in areas such as foreign language consist of something more than basic knowledge and skills. Thus, Cai (2016) indicated that key competences in English include not only knowledge and skills but also the capacity to express attitudes and emotions, while Li and Zhong (2015) included problem-solving and scientific thinking among the key competences. Cheng and Zhao (2016) proposed that any list of key competences should answer the question: "what kind of person should education cultivate?" and emphasized that these competences thus include not only the learning of knowledge and skills, but also the promotion of broader personal development and lifelong learning capacity, a definition similar to that of the OECD. In sum, there is some discussion among experts in China about the nature of the competences that should be the focus of educational reform. Additional debates have concerned the routes by which emphasis can be shifted from knowledge-centered to competency-centered instruction (Chen, 2016; Ji, 2016, Xia, 2017a, Xia, 2017b).

1.3 Current study

Key English competences, the focus of the current paper, consist of critical abilities that students should acquire during English education at different levels. These include basic language skills, learning capacities, thinking strategies and cultural competences (Cheng & Zhao, 2016). Although, as noted, experts disagree on the exact nature of the competences in English, national curricular standards do appear to provide clear guidance for implementation of competence-based instruction (Cheng, 2017; Curriculum Standards of Normal High School Education in China, 2016).

However, it is unclear to what extent current teaching practice in China is focused on promoting these competences, nor is it clear what students and teachers prefer, as apparently no research has been conducted on these topics. To this end, the present study examined student and teacher attitudes toward competence-based instruction, as opposed to more traditional exam-focused approaches. Based on anecdotal evidence, I hypothesized that Chinese students perceive that English instruction in China both is, and should be, primarily exam-focused, owing to the need to perform well on English tests such as the English portion of the national college entrance examination ("gaokao").

If the hypothesis stated above is correct, then a challenge to the implementation of national education reform in China can be thought of attitudes that have developed in response to local practices that meet existing needs. In other words, existing educational practices, particularly those related to testing, make both students and teachers feel that competence-based instruction is not the best use of time. To evaluate my hypothesis, I surveyed university freshmen concerning their experiences in high school English classes. Survey content was informed by the MOECD, and pertained to both the way English was taught in high school as well as the way students would like it to have been taught. Survey questions also pertained to evaluation in high school English classes, under the assumption although instruction may be primarily exam-focused, secondary-level evaluation is not based purely on exam scores. If students indicate that instruction is exam-focused, while recognizing that evaluation is based on many factors, then the results will be stronger because they show that survey responses are not based on a global tendency to relate all aspects of the educational experience to exams. In short, the purpose of evaluation-related survey items was to determine whether students could differentiate between the extent to which instruction versus evaluation is exam-focused.

2. Method

2.1 Subjects

The original sample consisted of 851 non-English major college freshmen who voluntarily completed surveys administered by their English instructors during a break in class. These students were drawn from a total of 24 classrooms. Survey administration took place during the academic year of 2017-2018 in Yanbian University, a comprehensive four-year university located in Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture in Jilin province, in the northeastern part of China. Convenience sampling was used in conjunction with purposive sampling (Dornyei, 2010); students were eligible to participate if they were freshmen meeting the conditions described above, and were available to participate.

With respect to demographic background, 68% of the sample self-identified as Han Chinese, while 32% were Korean Chinese or some other ethnic minority. 42% of the students were male, 58% were female. 69% of the students came from Jilin province where the university is located, while 31% were from other provinces. The proportions of ethnicities, gender, and provincial backgrounds are consistent with those of the university overall.

2.2 Procedure

The purpose of the study was explained to each of the instructors of the participants from the 24 classrooms, and instructors were given detailed instructions on how to administer the survey, including the use of student class registration numbers rather than names. The surveys were distributed during the break time of each class during the second week of their first semester in 2017. The purpose of the study was explained to students, and each participant's individual agreement was obtained before completing the survey. Students were asked to complete their surveys independently, without discussion with other students. Among the 851 participants, 835 surveys were fully completed and thus used for data analysis.

2.3 Measures

The survey was a self-report measure that relied on multiple-choice formats. The multiple choice options were informed by themes and concepts discussed in the MOECD.

The first part of the survey consisted of three questions on students' views of how English instruction should be carried out, and how it was actually carried out, in their high school classes:

1. "What purpose should high school English teaching serve?" (Response options: dealing with exams, meeting individual needs, meeting social needs, and promoting key competences.)
2. "What did your teachers emphasize in high school English classes?" (Response options: knowledge of language, use of language, exam-taking skills, key competences.)

3. "What was the approach to instruction in your high school English classes?" (Options consisted of three statements: instruction was exam-knowledge oriented, instruction was teacher-knowledge oriented, instruction was student-competence oriented. For each statement, responses were indicated on a Likert-type scale with five response categories ranging from "mostly agree" to "mostly disagree".)

The second part of the survey consisted of two statements about students' experience with evaluation in high school English classes:

4. "Evaluation in high school English classes was based only on exam grades."
5. "Evaluation in high school English classes was based on a combination of effort, language level, and exam grades."

Responses to each of these two statements were indicated on a Likert-type scale with five response categories ranging from "mostly agree" to "mostly disagree".

Finally, one survey item simply pertained to the competences as a whole:

6. "I know what the key competences in English are."

Responses to this statement were also indicated on a Likert-type scale with five response categories ranging from "mostly agree" to "mostly disagree".

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Student impressions of how high school English instruction should be – and actually is – carried out.

The results of the first part of the survey (see Tables 1, 2, and 3) illustrate a pattern: Students felt that high school English classes should – and actually do – emphasize preparation for exams.

In response to Question 1 (What purpose should high school English teaching serve?), 51% of students indicated that high school English teaching should serve the purpose of handling exams (see Table 1 for details). This percentage is more than the percentage of choices for any other response option, a significant difference in each case according to a Chi-square analysis of frequency data with post hoc pairwise comparisons (Bonferroni-corrected $p < .05$). The remaining responses were divided fairly evenly across the other response options, with only 18% of students asserting that high school English teaching should promote key competences.

Table 1: Results for Question 1 (What purpose should high school English teaching serve?)

<u>Response option</u>	<u>Percentages of responses (N = 835)</u>
dealing with exams	51%
meeting individual needs	15%
meeting social needs	16%
promoting key competences	18%

Table 2 presents data for Question 2 (What did your teachers emphasize in high school English classes?). In response to this question, 45% of students indicated that teachers emphasized exam-taking skills, a significantly greater value than for any other response option according to a Chi-square analysis of frequency data with post hoc pairwise comparisons (Bonferroni-corrected $p < .05$). The second most common response was knowledge of language (29%), with only 10% of students indicating that teachers place emphasis on promoting key competences.

Table 2: Results for Question 2 (What did your teachers emphasize in high school English classes?)

<u>Response option</u>	<u>Percentages of responses (N = 835)</u>
knowledge of language	29%
use of language	14%
exam-taking skills	45%
promoting key competences	10%

According to the results for the first two questions, not many students believe that key competences should be – or actually are – emphasized in English class, although it is interesting that roughly twice as many students felt that competencies should be emphasized as indicated that they actually are (18% vs. 10%, respectively).

This finding suggests that although students recognize the importance of test preparation, they may value the acquisition of key competences to a greater extent than these competences are emphasized in English class.

Results for the third question on the survey (What was the approach to instruction in your high school English classes?) are presented in Table 3. Student responses to exam-knowledge and teacher-knowledge approach options were quite similar: 79% of students mostly or somewhat agreed with the statement that their high school English instruction was exam-knowledge oriented, while 73% of students mostly or somewhat agreed with the statement that their high school English instruction was teacher-knowledge oriented. However, only 54% of students mostly or somewhat agreed with the statement that high school English instruction was student-competence oriented.

Table 3: Results for Question 3 (What was the approach to instruction in your high school English classes?)

Response option		Percentages of each Likert-scaled response (N = 835)				
Instruction was...	somewhat disagree	mostly disagree	mostly agree		somewhat agree	
			uncertain			
...exam-knowledge oriented			31%	48%	11%	6%
...teacher-knowledge oriented	25%	48%		13%	10%	4%
...student-competence oriented	19%	35%		24%	16%	5%

A key difference between Questions 2 and 3 is that whereas Question 2 requires students to choose between options, Question 3 allows students to indicate greater or less emphasis on different teaching orientations. In spite of the different question format, the results for Question 3 seem consistent with those for Question 2: Although students seem to recognize that instruction to some extent reflects all three orientations described in Question 3 (exam-knowledge, teacher-knowledge, and student-competence orientations), they see somewhat less orientation toward instruction that promotes student competence.

3.2 Students' impressions of high school English evaluation practices.

The results of the second part of the survey also show a pattern (see Tables 4 and 5). 38% of students mostly or somewhat agreed with the statement in Question 4 that evaluation in their high school English classes was based only on exam grades. In contrast, 69% of students mostly or somewhat agreed with the statement in Question 5 that evaluation in their high school English classes was based on a combination of effort, language level, and exam grades. Only 11% of students somewhat or mostly disagreed with the latter statement. After combining the mostly and somewhat agree options into one "agree" category, a Chi-square analysis showed that the frequencies of "agree" responses to Question 5 were significantly greater than the corresponding frequencies for Question 4 ($p < .05$). Taken together, the results of Questions 4 and 5 suggest that evaluation in high school English classes tends to be perceived as based on multiple factors rather than just exam grades.

Table 4: Results for Question 4 (Evaluation in high school English classes was based on exam grades and Question 5 (Evaluation in high school English classes was based on a combination of effort, language level, and grades)

Question (N = 835)	Percentages of each Likert-scaled response (N = 835)				
	somewhat disagree	mostly disagree	uncertain	mostly agree	somewhat agree
4. Evaluation in high school English classes was based only on exam grades.	14%	24%	24%	24%	14%
5. Evaluation in high school English classes was based on a combination of effort, language level, and exam grades.	28%	41%	20%	8%	3%

3.3 Student knowledge of key competencies in English.

The results for Question 6 (I know what the key competences in English are) are presented in Table 5. Only 23% of students mostly or somewhat agreed with the statement that they know what the key competences in English are. 32% of students somewhat or mostly disagreed with this statement. Nearly half of the students (45%) were uncertain. This finding is consistent with anecdotal evidence that high school English teachers in China have not yet consistently called students' attention to the key competences that are a mandated part of the curriculum.

Table 5: Results for Question 6 (I know what the key competences in English are).

Percentages of each Likert-scaled response (N = 835)				
mostly agree	somewhat agree	uncertain	somewhat disagree	mostly disagree
7%	16%	45%	20%	12%

4. Conclusion

The survey findings suggest that although students' key competences in areas such as English have been legally established as goal of basic education in China, the focus of high school English instruction continues to be preparation for exams. Most student in this study indicated that exam-focused instruction was the main emphasis in their high school English classes. Moreover, most of the students appear to prefer exam-focused instruction. Students not only do not see the key competences as a major focus for English classes, but they also indicate uncertainty or lack of knowledge about what those competences are. At the same time, although these students see English instruction as exam-focused and believe it should be this way, they also recognize that assessments by their teachers are more holistic and not just based on exam performance.

In the Introduction it was noted that one obstacle to national educational reform, in the case of China's shift toward competence-oriented instruction in English and other subjects, is that experts may disagree about the nature of concepts fundamental to reform (Chen, 2016; Cheng, 2017; Ji, 2016, Xia, 2017a; Xia, 2017b). In China, experts are still debating the nature of key competences. The results of the present study suggest that another obstacle to reform is the attitudes arising from local educational practices that meet existing needs. Students need to perform well on English exams, such as the English section of the national entrance examination. Thus, students hope for English instruction that is exam-focused. Meanwhile, for much the same reasons, teachers provide knowledge-oriented, exam-focused instruction.

Thus, progress toward educational reform will be facilitated by helping both teachers and students understand the value of competence-focused instruction, and by reforming the evaluation and examination systems so that key competences are more thoroughly assessed (Cheng, 2017).

The present study is apparently the first to examine student attitudes and teaching practices with respect to key competences taught in high school English classes in China. The use of self-report surveys is a limitation of the study, as students may not be fully reliable sources of information about teaching practices. Future research into this topic should include classroom observations and/or teacher interviews as a means of better understanding teaching practices in Chinese high school English classes. In addition, since the survey used in the current study consisted of only six questions, future research could probe student and teacher attitudes in a deeper way through more extensive survey items and interviews.

Acknowledgments: This research was supported by the following grants: (GH170036): “How to Promote College English Teaching Quality through Key Competencies.” Jilin Education and Science 13th Five Year General Plan, 2017, Jilin Head Office for Education and Science. (JGJX2018D348): “English Key Competencies and College English Teaching Reform.” Jilin Higher Education Scientific Research Project, 2018, Association of Jilin Higher Education. (2018B37): “Study on College English Teaching Reform from the Perspective of Key Competencies in English.” Jilin Social Science Fund Project, 2018, Jilin Head Office for Social Science Fund.

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