

# English Education in High Schools in China: — Its Current Status and Problems —

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## ABSTRACT

This article introduces the current status and existing problems of English education in high schools in China. The first section explains the current status of English Education in high schools in China. Then, the second section discusses a major problem that exists in China's English Education in regular high schools: that is, the negative impacts of the National Matriculation Test on English education for regular high schools. The final section concludes the whole discussion with further suggestions and possibilities.

【Key Words : English education, China, High schools, Test system】

## Introduction

English education has been paid much attention in China as well as in Japan. In China, the government has been conducting the fourth round of China's basic education reform (CBER in short). Regarding English education in high schools, the National English Curriculum Standard for Regular High Schools (trial) (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2003a) (NECS in short) is considered as one of the most important guidance. At the same time, the examination system, the National Matriculation Test, has given such a huge impact to the students, teachers, schools, parents and the society. Specific social values have influenced to this social phenomenon as well as to the English education in Chinese high schools.

### 1. The Current Status of English Education in High Schools in China

The first section overviews the general education system in China, and discusses the importance of the English education with the national policy and guideline, particularly in high schools, then explains applications of the national guideline by using a case of one high school in Beijing.

#### 1.1 An Overview of the General Education System in China

According to *the Education Law of the People's Republic of China* (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 1995), China's educational system shall be

divided into four stages: preschool education, primary education, secondary education, and higher education (Table 1). Senior secondary schools include regular upper secondary schools, senior secondary vocational schools, regular specialized secondary schools, technical worker schools, upper secondary schools for adults and specialized secondary schools for adults (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2004). As for regular upper secondary schools which is an official term, it is generally called "regular high schools" instead. Among senior secondary schools, the number of regular high schools versus other schools is 291:119 (Beijing Municipal Commission of Education, 2014).

Regarding the academic calendar, the school year for basic education in China is divided into two semesters. A new school year starts at the beginning of September and ends at the end of January. The second semester starts at the end of February and ends at the beginning of July.

As for the educational policy and guidelines, according to Yi (2010), basic education in China has undergone four reforms after the Cultural Revolution in 1976. The fourth round of China's basic education reform began in 2001. Provinces and municipalities have joined CBER since then. For example, Shanghai joined CBER in 2006. One year later in 2007, Beijing joined it. *The Reform Program for Basic Curriculum (Trial)* (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2001a) provides that the new curriculum system covers the pre-school education, the nine-year compulsory education, and regular upper secondary school education. The overall objective of CBER is to transform from "emphasizing the input of knowledge" to "emphasizing the development of abilities." As for

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the nature of the regular high school education, *The National Curriculum Program for Regular High School (trial)* (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2003b) stipulates that regular high school education is universal basic education, which further improve the citizens' educational level after the nine-year compulsory education. The regular high school education lays the foundation for the students' lifelong development.

The key school system is one of the distinct characteristics of Chinese education system. From kindergartens to universities, schools can also be divided into key schools and regular schools. Regular upper secondary schools are further divided into key schools and regular schools. After the end of the Cultural Revolution (1976), the Chinese government was strongly in need of talents. Therefore, the key school system was established in order to train a group of talents in high efficiency. Jin (2000) states that to establish the key school system, the government collects special education resources, promotes key schools to become a model for the regular schools, and selects the academically outstanding talents through a strict examination system. A group of students have access to such favorable educational conditions and they are trained to become China's potential elite class.

Table 1. School Systems in China

Education Stages	Educational Institutions	Age	School Years	
Preschool education	Kindergarten	3-6	3	
Primary education	Elementary school	6-12	6	
Secondary education	Primary secondary school	12-15	3	
	Senior secondary school	Regular upper secondary school	15-18	3
		Senior secondary vocational school	15-18	3
	Regular specialized secondary school	15-20	3-5	
	Technical worker school	15-20	1-5	
	Upper secondary school for adults	15-18	3	
	Specialized secondary school for adults	15-18	1-3	
Higher education	University	18-22	4	
	Higher vocational school	18-21	2-3	

## 1.2 Importance of English Education in Regular High Schools

In this section, the authors will introduce the significance of English education in regular high schools from three aspects: first, the importance of English education in high schools in comparison with the one in other stages; second, the great importance of English education in high schools to Chinese society; and last, the significance of training talents with English competence to the national development strategy.

According to *The Ministry of Education Provides Guidance on the Promotion of Offering English as a Course in the Primary Schools* (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2001b), it is generally recommended that the English course for primary schools shall begin at the third grade. However, in many educationally developed areas in China, English education begins at preschool education. In general, English education in China starts from primary schools and continues until undergraduate education. The certificate for a certain English test, which is organized by Ministry of Education, is one of the key requirements for graduation from universities.

As mentioned above, China is undergoing the fourth round of CBER. According to NECS (the National English Curriculum Standard for Regular High Schools (trial)), which is equivalent to the Course of Study in Japan, the overall objective of English education reform for regular high schools is to transform from "emphasizing the input of language knowledge" to "emphasizing the development of a comprehensive capability of language application." Meanwhile, as for a comprehensive capability of language application, NECS provides that a comprehensive capability of language application develops on the basis of the integrated development of language skills, language knowledge, attitude, learning strategies and cultural awareness.

According to NECS, English education for regular high schools in CBER plays multiple roles from both humanistic and social perspective: it shall meet the needs of the graduates, who are to be employed, further their study or have future needs; and it shall train adequate talents who can contribute to the development of economic construction and science and technology.

Secondly, the public attaches great importance to English education in high schools. For example, the reform of the National Matriculation English Test (NMET in short) enjoys national concern. The National Matriculation Test, which is equivalent to

National Center Test for University Admissions in Japan, is organized by the government only once a year in June. The result of this once-in-a-year examination decides whether a candidate can be enrolled by their ideal university or not. Cheng (2015) believes that the reform program for The National Matriculation Test, NMET in particular, holds the spotlight. The test result directly relate to the destiny of the students, even affecting the stability of the whole society. Therefore, The National Matriculation Test has produced extremely special impact in China.

The tutoring market for English education also enjoys great popularity. According to *White Papers of Chinese Basic Education 2014* (U-Can Secondary School Education, 2014), Chinese tutoring market scale has reached 6502 billion RMB (9983.5 billion yen). Meanwhile, the white papers also points out an analysis provided by the Baidu (the largest searching engine in China) searching database. In the past 2013, among the three main subjects (Chinese, Math and English) in the secondary education, math gained the highest popularity, followed by English.

Thirdly, the Chinese government considers English education in high schools as an essential part for the country's long-term development. For example, in NECS, descriptions that connect English education in regular high schools with national development are as follows: "...to train talents who can meet the needs of national economic construction and the development of science and technology." "With the globalization of social life and economic activities, foreign language ability has become one of the basic and essential accomplishment for the citizens in every country." and "...helpful for improving the citizens' educational level, for China's opening to the world and international exchanges, and for enhancing China's overall comprehensive national capacity." As it is written above, training talents with English competence is closely related to the national development in China.

### 1.3 In the Case of the W High School in Beijing

In this part the authors are going to present how the policies mentioned above are reflected in the teaching arrangement, taking W high school as an example.

#### 1.3.1 A Brief Introduction of W High School

One of the authors has an English teaching experience of seven years from 2007 in one public high school in Beijing, China (It will be named as "W high school" in this writing). W high school was established in 1928, certificated as one of the

key high schools in Beijing in 1959. The school is located in the Dongcheng District, which is one of top three educational districts in Beijing. According to *Beijing Education Yearbook 2014* (Beijing Municipal Commission of Education, 2014), there are 291 high schools in Beijing and 34 high schools in Dongcheng District. Among the 34 high schools, there are 12 key high schools in total. W high school has a total of 28 classes with roughly 350 students (about 35-50 students in each class). The number of full-time teachers employed in total is 117 with 14 full-time English teachers. W high school ranks in top class in its achievement in the National Matriculation Test in Dongcheng District in the past five years and the details of its achievement can be found in appendix 1.

The daily schedule of W high school is as follows: for the first two years, students arrive at school at 7:10 in the morning and leave at 16:45. For the third year, however, the school arranges special guidance hour and evening self-study hours to prepare for the National Matriculation Test. For example, special guidance hour for English is once a week, four times a month. English teachers choose the students who have more potential in raising their test scores. The majority of the students chosen rank more than average in the class. Evening self-study hours last from 18:00 to 20:30 in the first semester, and extend to 21:30 in the second semester. Teachers voluntarily stay at school if they feel it necessary to continue special guidance.

#### 1.3.2 W High School's English Education System

When Beijing joined CBER in 2007, all the high schools started using new textbooks approved under CBER. All the high schools in Dongcheng District have been using a set of textbook named "New Senior English for China" published by People's Education Press. This set of textbooks contains 11 books, ranging from English 1 to English 11. Every textbook contains five units with a certain topic. In NECS, the Ministry of Education has made certain policy on the structure of English curriculum. W high school's English teaching syllabus has been made accordingly. Table 2 presents the changes W high school has made under the policy.

Since 2007, W high school has two math key classes and one English key class for the first year. In the second year, students are given the right to become students of arts (humanities and social science) or students of science. Apart from the three key classes mentioned above, W high school has one key class for arts in the second year. Everything remains the same until graduation.

Table 2. The Policy in the NECS and W High School's Teaching Arrangement

	<b>The Policy in the NECS</b>	<b>W high school's Teaching Arrangement</b>
Class Hour for Each Course	English 1 to English 11 are all prescribed with four class hours per week (40 minutes for one class hour).	English 1 to English 4: 4 class hours /week English 5 to English 8: 5 class hours /week English 9 to English 11: 8 class hours / week
Course Types	Compulsory courses (English 1 to English 5) and selective courses (selective I: English 6 to English 11; selective II: 3 types of courses)	Compulsory courses (English 1 to English 8) and selective courses (selective I: English 9 to English 11; selective II)
The Objectives of the Courses	Compulsory courses: basic language skills and cross cultural abilities. Selective courses: vocational needs, further study and personal interest.	Compulsory courses: the language skills that the Graduation Examination for Regular High Schools and NMET require. Selective courses: the language skills that NMET require and personal interest.
The Policy for Selective II	Three types of courses: 1. Language knowledge and skills 2. Language application 3. Appreciation (e.g. English songs and movies) Schools shall offer one or two courses each from one of the three types.	W high school only offers two courses from the appreciation type.

Before the start of the first year, W high school ranks all the students admitted according to the total scores in "The Graduation Examination for Junior Secondary Schools and the Entrance Examination for High Schools." The first 100 students go to the math key classes (50 students each). The following 40 students go to English key classes. At the end of the first year, when students have handed in the application form for becoming students of science or arts, W high school ranks all the students of arts according to their score in the final-exam for the second semester. Only the top 50 students go to the key class for arts. However, students of math key classes (for the first two years) and the key class for arts (for the second year) have no choice but to change classes if their rankings in the mid-term exams or final exams go beyond a certain number twice. For the students of the rest of the classes (for the first two years), if their rankings reach within a certain number just once, they can decide whether to go to the key classes or stay at their original classes. In the third year, although there is virtual NMET every month, students do not change classes regardless of their test results.

It is noteworthy that students' English average score in the English key class is evidently lower than the other three key classes. That is to say, W high school's policy is that the outcome of English teaching of English key class is not the first priority. All the English teachers who teach the other three key classes have many years of successful experience in teaching

top key classes.

As for English curriculum, in each grade English teachers are supposed to finish teaching a certain amount of vocabulary and grammar points provided in the textbook. NECS provides that high school students shall learn 24 grammar points (items) before graduation. NMET requires that candidates to master 3500 words. Table 3 presents the vocabulary and grammar points to be taught for each grade in W high school.

Table 3. Vocabulary and Grammar Points for Each Grade

Grade		Vocabulary	Grammatical Points (items)
The 1st year		1200	14
The 2nd year		1300	12
The 3rd year	Regular classes	300*	5
	English key class	593*	9
	Math key classes & key class for arts	848*	12

\*In addition to the vocabulary in the textbook, teachers focus on the 3500 words needed for NMET.

## 2. The Problems of China's English Education in Regular High Schools

The previous section gave an overview of the Chinese education system with a focus on English education in regular high school. Further, the concrete example of W high school in Beijing was provided. As mentioned before, CBER (China's basic education reform) in regular high schools has proceeded. However, problems also gradually come into existence. To find out the major problems, key articles from CNKI, which is similar to Cinii in Japan, are analyzed. It is worth mentioning that unlike Cinii, the resources of articles that CNKI provides are divided into two categories: the resources in pink and the ones in black. Although the number of resources in pink is less, they are published in journals or magazines of high academic value. Therefore, this time only the articles from the resources in pink were chosen when describing the major problem.

Among the resources in pink in CNKI from 2012 to 2016, 25 articles in total discuss the problems of China's English education in regular high schools. Among them, 12 articles focus on the problems that the National Matriculation Test produces, and 6 articles on the lack of associating Chinese culture with English learning in the textbooks. The topics of the rest of the articles are quite varied. Of all the problems mentioned above, the problems that the National Matriculation Test produces enjoys most public concern, including the media and researchers. Therefore, in this section the authors focus on the negative impacts of National Matriculation Test on English education for regular high schools.

The National Matriculation Test, which is organized only once in a year, was introduced in the previous section. In Japan, the system of National Center Test for University Admissions can provide the candidates with more than one opportunity, because after the Center Test the candidates can take exams offered by each university. In contrast, the result of the National Matriculation Test in China is the only and the most decisive assessment for the universities to enroll candidates. That is to say, a once-in-a-year examination can determine the candidates' fate. This unreasonable assessment system has brought an enormous impact on the whole high school education system. From the perspective of English education, this will be further analyzed from the following three aspects: English Teachers in a dilemma between CBER and NMET; Students' test-oriented English learning values; and reasons behind the problem.

### 2.1 English Teachers in a Dilemma between CBER and NMET

Since CBER(China's basic education reform) was carried out since 2001, some studies (Liu, 2006; Wang, 2008; Wang and Zhang, 2011; Wu, 2014; Zhong, 2014), show that teachers are universally under pressure brought by the policy of CBER. NECS (the National English Curriculum Standard for Regular High Schools), the most important policy of CBER for English teachers, provides that: "High school English curriculum should set up a diversified evaluation system to promote students' all-round development." "...a combination of formative evaluation and summative evaluation is recommended. Teachers should not only focus on the result, but also the learning process. Formative evaluation plays a major role..."(translated by one of the authors). However, the one-time evaluation system of the National Matriculation Test evidently contradicts NECS. High schools carry an important role of training talents for universities, and the result candidates get from the National Matriculation Test is the most important standard for the public to evaluate the teaching quality of schools. Therefore, students' performance in the National Matriculation Test also decides the future of their high schools. However, with CBER being a national campaign, pressure coming from both CBER and NMET falls on English teachers.

In order to verify the universality of this pressure, one of the authors conducted an interview on teachers' pressure in W high school, and the findings are as follows: first, English teachers feel the stress in a similar way as mentioned above; second, as for the reason behind, teachers under the pressure from the school, generally consider CBER as "an image project" and only follow CBER when there are special events; third, students and their parents evaluate high schools' teaching quality from schools' previous results in the National Matriculation Test. Therefore, English teachers can not fail in NMET. Otherwise, it will influence the school's reputation and teachers of other subjects will complain as well.

### 2.2 Students' Test-oriented Values on English Learning

According to NECS, the overall objective of English education reform for regular high schools is to transform from emphasizing the input of language knowledge to emphasizing the development of a comprehensive capability of language application. That is to say, what the students should acquire from English classroom is not just language knowledge, but

a comprehensive capability of language application. However, several studies (Chen, Wang, Chen & Yu, 2014; Zhang, 2013; Shu, 2011; Chen, 2008) show that high school students tend to learn English with the mere purpose of getting a high score in the exams.

The once-in-a-year National Matriculation Test is the final assessment for a candidate's three-year English learning. The public often uses "a single-log bridge" or "a cruel battlefield" as a metaphor to describe how severe the competition is. Therefore, in order to give their best performance without any regret, even from the first grade, students' English learning becomes more and more test-oriented. For example, when one of the authors was teaching English in W high school, the students seemed not to be motivated when teachers guided them to appreciate reading articles from textbooks, newspaper or original English novels. In contrast, when teachers started pointing out vocabulary and grammar points which are often tested in NMET, students would become much more interested. Writing is also the case. The improvement for writing skills takes a process. However, students are more inclined to take shortcuts, and the sentence patterns which will help increase writing scores are very popular among them. These sentence patterns are given to some of them as the specially made learning materials by the famous cram schools they attended.

### 2.3 Reasons behind the Problem

Liao & Yan (2015), Qiang (2013), Wang (2010), Wang (2012) and Cai (2005) point out that the idea of pursuing "Fame and Fortune" is a popular social phenomenon in China's society and it also plays an influential role in the field of education. In China, with parents playing a key role in education for their children, their values of "fame and fortune" have given a strong influence in their children, as well as the schools and teachers. In Chinese society, parents often relate "academically outstanding students" to students who can earn high test scores. Gao (2005) explains that only those students with high test scores will be enrolled by key universities. The degree of a key university can guarantee a decent job. And a decent job offers high income and high social status. That is to say, it brings fame and fortune.

However, the authors believe there exist a deeper reason why parents have formed the false values mentioned above. Gao (2012), Zhu (2012), Tan & Huang (2012), Gao (2005), and Qiang (1999) point out that the society considers students' test scores

and enrollment rate for universities as the most important standards to assess students and their high schools' teaching quality. That is to say, the Chinese society is still test-oriented, causing people, parents in particular, greatly influenced by the test system for selecting talents.

## 4. Conclusion

In China, the fourth round of basic education reform has been proceeded. The National English Curriculum Standard for Regular High schools is set as the key guidance for English in high schools. However, as discussed before, English education in China has certain problems, especially with NECS and the National Matriculation Test contradicting each other. At the same time, there is no doubt that the current education approach has gained unique advantages. For example, high schools attach great importance to teaching grammar, vocabulary and reading comprehension skills. Students must be able to read different types of articles, quickly and accurately locate detailed information, grasp the main idea, infer the purpose of the authors, and even analyze long and complicated sentences. Through the 3-year training, English education in high schools lays a solid foundation for students so that they can apply the language to practice, such as reading many materials in English for their majors. Also, in terms of TOEIC score, it is announced that the average in China is 716, while the one in Japan is 512 (the Institute for International Business Communication, 2014).

However, English education in high schools in China is still far from meeting the requirements of NECS. That is, all the students' individual development shall be paid attention to. The National Matriculation Test plays a major role in this. First of all, it can be said that the system of the National Matriculation Test has ignored students' different qualities or skills, because it has caused test scores to become the most important criteria for evaluating students. Tan & Huang (2012) and Zhu (2012) point out that, due to the influence of the National Matriculation Test, teachers often ignore other qualities or skills in their teaching practice, which seriously restricts the overall development of individual student. The public has formed the idea that good students have high test scores and those who have low scores are failures. This idea itself is against the purpose of education. However, under the intensive pressure from the National Matriculation Test, teachers have to give priority to the scores, leaving students' overall

development unattended.

Furthermore, the current system of the National Matriculation Test has strengthened key school system, causing educational opportunities and educational resources to be unequal. Jin (2000) points out that key school system is a policy which has caused the Chinese basic education to be graded. In the stage of basic education, unequal distribution of educational resources is unfair, preventing citizens from receiving education equally from having their educational level improved. Having top educational conditions, key schools gain much more outstanding achievements in the National Matriculation Test than regular schools. As a result, more educational investment is offered by the government, further widening the distance between key schools and regular schools. Besides, due to the severe competition between key schools, key classes in each key school being the top priority, the most experienced teachers are assigned to teach such classes. Teachers focus much of their attention on top students in each class, and the average students are often ignored.

It can be concluded that the English education in high schools in China is still in a stage where only certain students' educational needs are satisfied. Therefore, it is still a long way to go before the majority of students or even all the students are paid enough attention to. In order to show concern to the majority of students, schools can try to provide more choices in the selective courses to meet the diverse needs of students, if conditions and situations are allowed. In addition, schools can also try to be flexible in stratified teaching, such as assigning different homework and providing different classroom exercises to suit students' levels. English education in China is still in the process of development, which might be the same where the major reforms in English education in Japan are in the middle of process. Toward the global society, both countries have different as well as similar concerns and problems in English education. Both countries also can learn from each other to educate students for the world in the future.

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## Appendix W high school's Achievement in the National Matriculation Test in the Past Five Years

Year	The Passing Score for Key Universities (Total score: 750)		W high school's Achievement in the National Matriculation Test
	Science	Arts	
2012	477	495	Almost 100% of the candidates (science and arts) achieved the passing score for key universities.
2013	550	549	100% of the candidates (science and arts) achieved the passing score for key universities. The average score of all the subjects is 620(science), 610 (arts).
2014	543	565	100% of the candidates (science and arts) achieved the passing score for key universities. The average score of all the subjects is 611(science), 631 (arts).
2015	548	579	40% of the candidates' total score was above 650. The average score of all the subjects for math key classes was 666, with the average score of math and English over 140.
2016	548	583	100% of the candidates (science and arts) achieved the passing score for key universities. The average score of all the subjects for math key classes was over 650. In the math key classes, 2 candidates' NMET score ranked No.2 in Dongcheng District.

### The Passing Score for Key Universities and for Regular Universities

Undergraduate courses are divided into key universities and regular universities. The passing score for key universities and for regular universities are decided according to a certain proportion of the number of candidates whose total score is above the passing score and the enrollment plan of the year.

### Key Universities

The universities and colleges which are in the first group to enroll candidates. Key universities have professors and facilities that are much better than regular ones.

### The Rate of the Candidates who Achieved the Passing Score for Key Universities

The higher the ratio of the number of the candidates who achieved the passing score for key universities to all the candidates is, the better the teaching quality of the school is.