

An Investigation of College English Tiered Instruction in Chinese Universities

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Abstract

This paper investigates the application of tiered English instruction in Chinese universities as a response to the diverse English proficiency levels among students resulting from the rapid expansion of higher education in China. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach, the research surveyed thirty-two universities to assess the implementation and outcomes of tiered instruction strategies. The study focused on student differentiation, faculty allocation, innovative teaching methods, and management and assessment systems. The findings reveal that while a three-tier class system is widely adopted for its operational convenience, challenges persist in establishing differentiation standards and validating teaching effectiveness, which stimulate emotions in low-tier students. Despite these challenges, tiered instruction has proven effective in aligning teaching content and methods with student capabilities and enhancing student motivation. The study underscores the need for a robust framework to further develop and sustain tiered instruction, suggesting that such a framework could significantly improve educational outcomes. Recommendations are made for policy adjustments and future research directions to address the identified challenges and enhance the effectiveness of tiered instruction strategies.

Keywords

College English, tiered instruction, differentiation

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Tiered instruction has been identified as an effective strategy to address the diverse needs of learners in school education (Coil, 2007; Turville et al., 2010), including second language acquisition in overall learning achievement (Magableh & Abdullah, 2020), listening skill (Pourdana & Shahpouri Rad, 2017), speaking skill (García Fonseca & Casallas Gordillo, 2016), reading skill (Aliakbari & Haghghi, 2014), and writing skill (Amkham & Chinokul, 2010).

With the rapid expansion of higher education in China, regional and individual variations in students' initial English proficiency have become increasingly pronounced, due to unequal regional economic growth and disparities in educational resources and subject preferences. The traditional uniform teaching model, with its standardized course settings, teaching pace, and content, no longer meets the diverse learning needs of students at different levels, necessitating a shift towards more tailored teaching approaches.

The Ministry of Education's educational reform measures have established a policy framework that has prompted many higher education institutions to adopt tiered instruction strategies. These strategies are explicitly designed to tailor teaching to students' actual English levels, encouraging universities to innovate and enhance teaching quality by

accommodating their unique characteristics and varying levels of students' competence.

The "College English Teaching Syllabus" (Ministry of Education, 2003) clarified the guiding principles of the College English reform, noting, "Due to the differences in educational conditions, faculty strength, and students' entry levels across various higher education institutions, and even within the same institution, it is necessary to adhere to differentiated requirements and tailor teaching approaches based on actual student levels, referencing the levels outlined in the syllabus from preparatory to higher English levels". This provides an educational policy basis for differentiated instruction and underscores the necessity of setting teaching requirements based on student entry levels.

In February 2004, The Department of Higher Education, Ministry of Education officially issued "A Notification on Piloting College English Teaching Reform", which emphasized the importance of planning, tiered, and step-by-step teaching reforms. This measure reflects an acknowledgment of the importance of educational reform and support for practical exploration. "Stereoscopic, diversified, personalized, and interactive elements will become the fundamental characteristics of teaching and learning in the context of the new educational model" (Ministry of Education, 2004).

In September 2007, the Ministry of Education released the "College English Curriculum Requirements" (hereinafter referred to as "Curriculum Requirements"), which categorized the teaching requirements during the college phase into general, higher, and advanced levels. It proposed that, given the varied teaching resources, entry levels of students, and societal demands faced by institutions across the country, each university should develop its own scientific, systematic, and personalized College English syllabus to guide its English teaching (Ministry of Education, 2007).

In 2020, the Ministry of Education issued the "Guidelines for College English Teaching (hereinafter referred to as "Guidelines")," emphasizing the need to fully consider students' actual English proficiency and needs, the characteristics of teaching management systems, the current conditions to address existing challenges in College English teaching, and propose effective solutions."

The ongoing rollout of these policies has reinforced the necessity and scientific basis of tiered instruction, solidifying policy support for its implementation in higher education. Guided by Ministry of Education policies, many institutions have begun exploring and implementing student-centered reforms in college English teaching, leading to the adoption of tiered instruction (Li et al., 2007). Numerous attempts have been made nationwide to promote tiered instruction tailored to individual learner needs.

Researchers have applied tiered instruction extensively to improve speaking (Zhao, 2017), listening (Zhou, Zhang, & Shi, 2018), reading (Zhao, 2019), and writing (Zhang, 2018). There are also studies in teaching management (Lin, 2018), assessment (Li, 2016) and evaluation (Li & Yang, 2023; Li & Zhang, 2019; Wang, 2018). These achievements have focused on specific skills or a separate segment in language teaching or explored tiered instruction in an assigned higher institution. Therefore, investigating the general situation across universities of various educational levels and tiers is crucial for facilitating exchanges and planning future comprehensive reforms.

1.2 Problem Statement

Despite the recognition of tiered instruction's benefits across various learning domains—including listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills—implementing this approach in the context of College English in Chinese universities presents unique challenges. These include establishing effective differentiation standards, aligning teaching content with student levels, and managing diverse classroom dynamics, and so on.

1.3 Objectives

This study aims to:

- Investigate the implementation of tiered English instruction across thirty-two Chinese universities.
- Analyze the effectiveness of different tiered instruction strategies in enhancing student learning outcomes.
- Identify the challenges and opportunities associated with tiered instruction in College English teaching.

2. Methodology

2.1 Data Collection Methods

This study utilized a comprehensive data collection strategy to assess the implementation and effectiveness of tiered English instruction across thirty-two universities. It focused on student differentiation, faculty allocation, innovation in teaching content and methods, optimization of teaching management mechanisms, and the establishment of a diversified assessment system. The methods included:

- Structured Interviews: These were conducted with a select group of faculty members who are directly involved in

English teaching. The interview protocol was designed to extract qualitative insights into the experiences, challenges, and perceived benefits of tiered instruction.

--- Standardized Questionnaires: Quantitative data were collected using structured questionnaires distributed to both faculty and students engaged in College English courses. The questionnaires comprised both closed-ended and Likert-scale questions, designed to measure satisfaction levels, perceived effectiveness, and personal experiences with tiered instruction.

2.2 Sample Selection Criteria

The universities selected for this study were chosen based on the following criteria to ensure a diverse and representative sample:

--- Regional Diversity: Universities were selected to represent different geographic regions of China, including both coastal and inland areas, to consider the impact of regional economic disparities on educational resources and English teaching approaches.

--- Size of the Institution: Both large and small institutions were included to explore how institutional size impacts the implementation of tiered instruction.

--- Experience with Tiered Instruction: Universities with varying lengths of experience with tiered instruction were selected to analyze the learning curve and maturation effect in the implementation of such programs.

3. Results

3.1 Types of Tiers

The first step in implementing tiered instruction involves classifying students into different language ability levels based on established standards. The survey results show that among the thirty-two universities surveyed, six divided students into two tiers, such as Shandong Technology and Business University; twenty-one adopted a three-tier division strategy, such as Hunan First Normal University; and five established four tiers, such as Guangxi University. Comprehensive assessments and feedback from teachers and students indicate that the three-tier model is operationally convenient and effectively integrates students. In this model, specifically, students in the "higher requirements" tier constitute 15% to 20%, those in the "moderate requirements" tier make up about 60% to 70%, and the "general requirements" tier comprises approximately 15% to 20%. In contrast, the two-tier model posed difficulties in standardization, particularly for students who fall between the two defined tiers, as they may struggle to adapt to either the higher or lower tiers and find it difficult to identify an appropriate entry point for their studies. As for the four-tier model, it generally involves adding an even lower tier to the three existing ones, increasing complexity and challenges in teaching management despite its operational similarities to the three-tier model.

3.2 Standards for Differentiation

All thirty-two universities surveyed classified students into different tiers based on specific standards. Six universities took English scores from college entrance examinations for class placements, such as Shenyang Agricultural University; sixteen universities conducted their placements by designing tests that matched the language skill requirements and differentiated students based on test outcomes, such as Liaoning Petrochemical University; and ten combined college entrance scores with independent placement test results for placement, such as Henan Normal University. Essentially, the practice of differentiating students into tiers in terms of their language proficiency indicates that language teaching can be divided into several distinct tiers, which align more closely with actual educational conditions.

However, establishing a scientific and applicable differentiation standard remains one of the challenges for all institutions implementing tiered instruction. Scientifically differentiating and classifying students is crucial for effectively operating key links of teaching processes, content, and management.

The "General High School English Curriculum Standards" revised in 2020 (hereinafter referred to as "Curriculum Standards"), explicitly required to "follow the laws of language learning and the needs and characteristics of students at different ages in terms of physiological and psychological development, taking into account the diversity of nationalities in China, the vastness of the territory, and the imbalances in economic and educational development, by adopting an internationally recognized differentiating methods that propose nine levels of objectives for listening, speaking, reading, and writing, aiming at reflecting the integrity, flexibility, and openness of the national English curriculum standards" (Ministry of Education, 2020). How to technically connect the "Curriculum Standards" with the "College English Curriculum Requirements" and the "Guidelines for College English Teaching" remains a topic for research. The language skills

emphasized in the college entrance English exams are not consistent with those emphasized in College English teaching, thus taking solely the scores from the college entrance English exams as the standard for students' differentiation is not suitable for the reality of College English teaching.

The objectives of College English teaching are set in accordance with the "College English Curriculum Requirements," which should be taken when establishing scientific differentiating standards, and tests should be designed to reflect the vocabulary and skill levels specified. The exams should be hierarchical, covering both basic and higher requirements, and with efforts for pre-test predictions and post-test analysis, accumulating multiple sets of mature differentiation instruments. Considering limitations in faculty and resources, some institutions adopted placement test papers from other universities, such as Guangdong Polytechnic Normal University making use of Fudan University's placement test for freshmen, which caused significant obstacles in implementing the overall teaching plan and arrangements (Zhu, Xu, & Fu, 2002). Institutions with similar educational levels and tiers can join forces to establish a joint differentiating test research group and create a shared repository of test items, which would save human and material resources while maintaining scientific integrity. Some institutions set minimum English score requirements for certain majors during college admissions to facilitate teaching management. When dividing classes, they maintain natural classes for those majors that meet the specified admission score line, such as Zhejiang University of Finance and Economics for its International Economics and Trade program, where students' English entry scores are equivalent to those in English majors, and they are classified under "higher requirements". After one year, these students have shown pass rates in College English courses exceeding 95%, with some classes achieving a 100% pass rate. In the other hand, students in majors such as arts and sports, who generally have lower English scores at entry, can be placed in natural classes at the "general requirements" tier.

Overall, besides differentiating tests, meticulous adjustments are essential for specific tiering. Detailed analysis is needed for Edge-case students, those whose scores hover near cutoff points, not only considering their total scores but also their performance in specific skills, especially listening and speaking. Furthermore, institutions should respect student preferences and accommodate requests for tier changes fairly and objectively, ensuring optimal learning environments for all.

3.3 Teaching Content, Methods, and Objectives

Once students are scientifically differentiated, the appropriate alignment of teaching content, methods, and objectives becomes key to the success of tiered instruction. Initially, it is essential to establish clear teaching objectives for different student tiers, ensuring that these objectives are both suited to the foundational knowledge and basic skills required and adaptable to the students' actual proficiency. Moreover, teaching content should be organized according to the characteristics of students at each tier, and varied teaching methods should be adopted to meet the diverse learning needs of different student groups.

While some institutions used different textbook series to differentiate tiers, this approach often hindered students' smooth transition to higher levels due to varying content difficulty and depth. Consequently, most schools opt to use a unified series of College English textbooks to ensure that the syllabus and content across different levels are well-coordinated.

In "higher requirements" classes, teaching is generally faster and more in-depth, with a strong focus on enhancing listening and speaking skills, supplemented by extensive extracurricular reading materials. Where possible, native speakers are employed to improve students' comprehensive language skills. Typically, students in these classes can complete the College English curriculum within three semesters and achieve a high level of language proficiency.

"Moderate requirements" classes proceed at a steady pace over four semesters, helping students strengthen foundational knowledge and develop listening and speaking skills. The teaching content and methods in these classes are designed to help students gradually enhance their language application abilities alongside mastering fundamental knowledge.

"General requirements" classes progress more slowly, typically over four semesters, focusing on reinforcing foundational knowledge, with additional hours as needed. Students usually require two years or more to complete the coursework and achieve the basic requirements outlined in the "Curriculum Requirements".

Furthermore, all tiers of students are encouraged to complete foundational credits early and to take elective courses in English listening, speaking, and culture, to broaden their linguistic horizons and improve their comprehensive language skills. These measures ensure that tiered instruction effectively meets the diverse needs of different students and promotes their holistic development.

3.4 Faculty Allocation

In the process of implementing tiered instruction, the allocation of faculty is a critical factor in enhancing teaching quality. Ideal faculty allocation should fully utilize teachers' professional strengths while also meeting the learning needs of

students at different levels. Most institutions preferentially assigned higher-ranked, more experienced teachers to the "higher requirements" classes to foster more outstanding students. However, this practice led to an uneven distribution of teaching resources, affecting the enthusiasm and educational outcomes of students in other tiers.

The advantage of tiered instruction is that it provides a more rational teaching environment, allowing teachers to adopt differentiated teaching strategies based on the varying levels and needs of students, thereby creating opportunities for teachers to fully utilize their capabilities (King-Shaver & Hunter, 2003). Therefore, when allocating faculty, institutions should respect teachers' personal preferences and encourage experienced teachers to serve in the classes where they are most needed. Additionally, each teacher's teaching strengths should be fully figured out, enabling teachers to perform optimally in areas best suited to their capabilities. For example, teachers who are particularly adept at explaining basic concepts in an engaging way might be assigned to "general requirements" or "moderate requirements" classes to stimulate students' interest and motivation. It is necessary to clarify that tiered instruction is not about segregating students or teachers; instead, it aims to ensure that all students progress from their baseline, maximizing their potential and striving to enhance classroom teaching effectiveness across all tiers, which is the sole purpose of the reform (Liu, 2006). Moreover, institutions must provide all students, regardless of level or teaching method differences, access to the highest quality educational resources, including faculty and facilities. When allocating teachers, institutions should balance teaching quality by considering the specific needs of different tiers and evenly distributing faculty across ranks to optimize educational outcomes.

3.5 Assessment and Teaching Management

Establishing assessment standards poses a significant challenge for implementing tiered instruction. Among the surveyed institutions, five, including Henan University of Technology, use unified exam papers for end-of-term assessments across different tiers, while others create separate exams tailored to each tier's characteristics. Thirteen institutions, including Hubei Polytechnic University, separate teaching, and examination to ensure assessment fairness and objectivity. In order to more scientifically evaluate students' English proficiency, assessment standards need to be further improved.

Students have been grouped according to their readiness levels, which should also be matched with the teaching plans, teaching content, teaching methods, teaching objectives, and the textbooks used (Benjamin, 2002). Therefore, assessment standards should be comprehensive, objective, scientific, and accurate, capable of truly reflecting students' English proficiency. Assessment tests at all tiers should be strictly based on the requirements of the teaching syllabus to ensure their authority and scientificity. In addition, establishing a tiered test paper bank based on the teaching syllabus, teaching content, and teaching objectives of each tier is also an effective means to facilitate the implementation of assessments tailored to the corresponding students' levels.

Exams should measure students' language application abilities, not just grammar knowledge. The balance of subjective and objective questions is crucial to prevent an overemphasis on grammar and vocabulary at the expense of language input, which can hinder language proficiency development. Institutions can form expert groups or collaborate with peers to build test banks, enhancing assessment quality and efficiency. For instance, at Zhejiang University of Finance and Economics, Zhejiang University of Technology, Zhejiang Gongshang University, and Hangzhou Dianzi University, Tier 3 ("higher requirements"). English students participate in a "Four-School Joint" final exam as part of a province-wide pilot project led by the Zhejiang Provincial Foreign Language Teaching Guidance Committee.

Most institutions implement a rolling system that adjusts students' tiers based on their semester or year-end performance and language application skills. Top-performing students may skip levels, while those with poor performance may repeat or move to lower-tier classes. This system fosters competitiveness and ensures that all students have equal opportunities to learn and advance, upholding the principle of tailored instruction according to aptitude (Jiang, 2004). Therefore, assessments must be fair, impartial, reliable, and valid to ensure the effectiveness of tiered instruction.

3.6 Teaching Evaluation

Tiered instruction introduces new requirements for assessing teachers. Some institutions, like the International Education College of Hunan University, assess teachers based on students' progress, encouraging attention to individual differences and improving teaching effectiveness. Others, like Hubei Normal University, gauge teaching quality by student mobility between tiers and exam results, which, while reflective of effectiveness, may depend too heavily on test scores.

Institutions like Shandong Agricultural University have formed groups to monitor teaching quality through regular observations, lesson plan reviews, and joint lesson preparation. This approach can comprehensively understand the teaching situation and timely identify and solve problems. Considering the pros and cons of different assessment methods, some institutions combine them to more comprehensively evaluate and enhance teaching quality and motivate teachers.

Therefore, establishing a reasonable teacher evaluation mechanism is a new issue in the new model of university

English teaching reform. An effective teacher evaluation system should thoroughly assess teaching effectiveness, accounting for student progress, teaching quality stability, and teacher workload. Continuous exploration and practice will gradually refine the teacher evaluation mechanism, enhancing College English teaching quality.

4. Analysis

4.1 Advantages of Tiered Instruction

From the implementation process and effects of tiered English instruction in recent years, as a new model of university English teaching reform, it has shown significant advantages in practice. Survey results indicate that tiered instruction not only stimulates students' active exploration and discovery of knowledge but also enhances their enthusiasm for actively constructing the knowledge they have learned, thereby comprehensively improving students' language proficiency and achieving good teaching results.

Firstly, tiered instruction emphasizes personalized education and student-centered learning, which is a shift from the traditional "teacher-centered" to "student-centered" teaching mode. This shift helps to motivate students of different levels to learn more effectively in environments suitable for their own levels (Tomlinson, 2006).

Secondly, the implementation of the rolling system helps to strengthen students' competitiveness, transforming pressure into motivation, thus tapping into students' learning potential, promoting a competitive learning atmosphere, and enabling students to progress continuously through mutual encouragement.

Additionally, tiered instruction fully considers students' actual levels, acknowledges individual differences, and enables most students to receive comprehensible language input at the $i+1$ level (Krashen, 1985). A tiered instruction is a differentiation strategy that addresses a particular standard, key concept, and generalization, but allows several pathways for students to arrive at an understanding of these components based on their interests, readiness, or learning profiles" (Pierce & Adams, 2006).

Lastly, tiered instruction provides teachers with greater space to design and implement student-centered teaching tasks, enabling them to better leverage their teaching strengths. At the same time, many institutions have seized this reform opportunity to establish specialized teaching research groups, deeply explore problems encountered in tiered instruction, advance the in-depth development of College English teaching reform, and enhance overall teaching and research levels.

4.2 Challenges of Tiered Instruction

Tiered instruction, as a new exploration in College English reform, faces new problems and challenges.

Firstly, at the emotional level, students in "higher requirement" classes may experience feelings of pride and complacency, while some students may also feel demotivated in "general requirement" classes due to the difficulty in surpassing outstanding students, potentially affecting their enthusiasm for learning. Emotions play a crucial role in foreign language learning, at least as important as cognitive skills, or even more important (Stern, 1983). If these emotional issues are not handled properly, tiered instruction may reinforce psychological inhibition in foreign language learning, exacerbate polarization of students' English proficiency, and impose a negative impact on teaching.

Secondly, in terms of teacher allocation, a shortage of high-quality teachers is a universal problem. Due to different language levels of students in assigned classes, it may affect the teaching enthusiasm of teachers in "general requirement" or "moderate requirement" classes, while the workload of teachers in "higher requirement" classes may increase. It is also an urgent problem to scientifically evaluate the teaching quality of teachers in classes at different tiers.

Lastly, in teaching management, tiered class-grouping results in English classes that may consist of students from various majors and different natural classes, which complicates scheduling and credit management. Most institutions prioritize scheduling College English courses, and only after English courses for the same college, major, or even the entire school have been fixed, can other courses be arranged. Due to the rolling mechanism, the members of classes may change regularly, which may lead to decentralized student management, unclear responsibilities in their departments, and increased difficulty in teaching and academic management. For example, tasks such as performance registration and archiving, scheduling by the academic affairs office, exam arrangements, test paper marking, student attendance, and teacher assessment, all require more meticulous management and coordination.

5. Discussion

5.1 Findings

The results demonstrate that tiered instruction significantly enhances English proficiency across diverse student groups.

This suggests that educational policies and practices should increasingly focus on adaptable teaching strategies that respond to varied learning needs. The findings advocate for a broader implementation of tiered instruction models, which could serve as a blueprint for national educational reforms aimed at improving language acquisition in multilevel classrooms. Furthermore, the success of tiered instruction in this context implies potential applicability in other subjects where educational disparities are pronounced.

5.2 Limitations

While this study's survey of thirty-two universities offers a comprehensive overview of tiered instruction practices, it has limitations that must be acknowledged. The sample, though extensive, is still limited to institutions that have already adopted tiered teaching strategies, potentially introducing a selection bias that might not accurately reflect the national landscape. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported data from faculty and students could lead to response biases, potentially skewing the interpretation of how effective tiered instruction is perceived to be. The study's cross-sectional design also limits the ability to draw causal inferences about the effectiveness of tiered instruction.

5.3 Suggestions for Future Research

Future research should aim to address the limitations noted by expanding the sample size to include a more varied array of institutions, possibly incorporating those that have not yet implemented tiered instruction to provide a control perspective. Longitudinal studies could also offer insights into the long-term impacts of tiered instruction on language proficiency. Additionally, it would be beneficial to utilize mixed methods research to triangulate data sources, incorporating qualitative interviews or observational data to complement the quantitative survey findings. Exploring the application of tiered instruction in other disciplines could also verify the model's versatility and effectiveness in broader educational contexts.

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