

***Keeping the Ball Rolling:
A Curriculum Change in the College English
Program at a Chinese Institution***

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This paper studies a College English curriculum innovation in the College English program at a Northern Chinese institution, called the Rolling Project. The efforts of this curriculum change met with great difficulty and were terminated after two years of implementation. Through the interviews with the instructors and an administrator involved in the Rolling Project, the author reports the problems that set back this innovation. Drawing from those problems, the author highlights three factors that are important for the implementation of educational change: vision-building, collegiality, and implementation as a learning process.

Since the 1980s, the field of teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) has witnessed a wave of curriculum innovation in the higher educational institutions in China. The background for China's EFL curriculum change is the social reform and the increasing economic development that started in the late 1970s. In this social and political milieu, English language teaching (ELT) has been promoted to an important position particularly in Chinese higher education because English language is viewed as a key to expanding international exchange, introducing advanced science and technology, and participating in international competition (Ross, 1992). To serve needs of the nation's development, the EFL programs in the tertiary education (Chen &

Zhang, 1998) have undergone the curriculum change to improve Chinese students' English communicative competence and to enhance the teaching effectiveness of EFL instructors.

However, the effort to make change has encountered more setbacks than success (Jing, 1999; Li, 1997). In 1998, a curriculum innovation, called the Rolling Project, was initiated to improve the College English program at a higher educational institution in North China, named as the North Institution¹ in this paper. This innovation ended in 2000. The author conducted research interviews to examine what happened to the process of the innovation. The purpose of this paper is to highlight the factors that led to the failure of the Rolling Project and the lessons that curriculum developers can draw from it.

Following a review of the literature on educational change and implementation, an overview of the National College English Curriculum (NCEC) in China will be provided. Then, I describe the problems existing in the College English program in North Institution, the rationale of the Rolling Project, and its implementation in the institution. The findings elicited from the interviews reveal the rough journey that unfolded for the Rolling Project. Based on my findings, I discuss the lessons from the Rolling Project implementation. Although this curriculum innovation took place in a Chinese higher educational institution, its lessons may have implications for the change effort in other higher educational contexts.

CURRICULUM INNOVATION: THE COMPLEXITY FROM PLANNING TO IMPLEMENTATION

There are two components that Morris (2003) claims in the definition of innovation. He suggests that innovation includes not only new and useful ideas, but also the implementation of these new and useful ideas. Researchers on educational change (e.g., Fullan, 1991, 1993; Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996;

¹ For ethical purposes, 'North Institution' is used to protect the identities of the interview participants in this study.

Goodson, 2001; Sarason, 1996) agree that the distance from initiating a new idea to implementing it is non-linear and complex. Implementing a curriculum change often involves much more personal and social factors than the good intention to improve teaching and learning. However, in the past two decades, few EFL curriculum developers and decision makers in China realized the non-linearity and complexity when initiating changes in the foreign language programs at the higher educational institutions. They tended to believe that the instructors would accept the change as long as they saw the rationale for it. Nunan (2001) criticizes such a naïve equation between the planning and the implementation in the EFL curriculum development, as this equation simply assumes that what is planned will be what is taught.

The complexity of the curriculum innovation exists in the micro politics (Goodson, 2001) and the culture of teaching (Sarason, 1996). Goodson (2001) refers to the teachers' work as micro politics that includes their professional work, the instrument they use, and their personal concerns. He believes that micro politics is central to the implementation, and that to change education is to change the teachers' work and vice versa. Sarason (1996) claims that the nature of educational change is to change the culture of teaching—the ways that teachers do and think and the identities and self-image they hold as professionals. She believes that the culture of teaching and the approach to change in schools is similar to that of higher educational institutions. From the points of view of Goodson and Sarason, changes to educational system should address the micro politics of the instructors and the culture of teaching from the planning stage to the implementation stage. Fullan (1991) points out that planning is not just to set a brilliant goal, but it is to plan for the change process. He suggests that in the planning phase, the innovators should take into account the instructors' realities consisting of their concerns, difficulties, experiences, values, and insights, because these realities will expose the problems that must be addressed in the implementation phase. When a change is taken, the planners and the instructors should work together to build a vision through planning, negotiating, experimenting, and learning in the process of innovation.

THE COLLEGE ENGLISH TEACHING AND THE ROLLING PROJECT

The College English at Chinese higher educational institutions is a program for the students who major in all disciplines except English language. This section gives a brief overview of the College English in China and the problems with the College English program at the North Intuition, followed by a description of the Rolling Project and its implementation.

The College English Program at Chinese Tertiary Institutions

The College English teaching at the higher educational institutions across China follows the National College English Curriculum (NCEC) from the College English Band 1 to Band 6, of which, the College English Band 1 to Band 4 is a foundation program and is compulsory for the students who take English as a foreign language. The NCEC sets objectives for each band in listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills that students should achieve. After four terms (or two academic years) of learning, the students take the nationwide College English Test (CET) Band 4, an official assessment to measure the students' English proficiency at the foundation stage. Those who pass the CET Band 4 will get a certificate and have the option to go on with the College English Band 5 and Band 6 and to take the CET Band 6. After accomplishing Band 6, the students could go on to learn the Advanced English in their own disciplines to "develop their English competence" and to "use English in their academic field" (College English Curriculum Revision Team, 1999, p. 4).

The NCEC provides the guidelines for the College English programs at Chinese tertiary institutions. It suggests that from Band 1 to Band 4, the minimum College English teaching is no less than four hours per week. The NCEC takes into consideration the variation in students' English proficiency and suggests that the teaching should match individual students' existing English proficiencies. The NCEC recommends that the students take a

placement test upon their entering the institution so that the faculty of College English can arrange for them to start at their appropriate level.

The College English Teaching at the North Institution

The College English Department (CED) at the North Institution was responsible for the teaching of the College English under the guidance of the NCEC. The CED made the teaching plans, distributed the teaching tasks to the instructors, organized final examinations from the Band 1 to Band 3, and inspected the teaching performance of the instructors. The students had six hours of English every week in three courses—the Intensive Reading (IR), the Extensive Reading (ER), and Listening and Speaking (L&S). English writing was integrated to the IR course. At the end of the fourth term, the students took the CET Band 4 for the certificate of English at the foundation stage.

Owing to a long-term shortage of teaching staff, funds, and resources in the College English Department, there were no placement tests for ten years upon the entrance of the new students. The CED had all the first year students start from the Band 1 regardless of their existing English proficiencies. Usually a College English instructor taught all the courses to two classes of about 100 students throughout the four terms, totalling twelve hours per week. This curriculum arrangement led to two problems—the “mixed-proficiency class” and “one-instructor-package class” (Han, 2000).

The instructors found it hard to meet the needs of the students in a “mixed-proficiency class.” They coped by adjusting the content, methods, and the pace of teaching to fit the needs of the majority of students on the average English proficiency. However, the students with better English proficiency complained that the class was slow and not challenging, and the students with lower English proficiency had difficulties following the class. The students on both ends felt that it did not make much sense to attend the class.

At the same time, the “one-instructor-package class” cut off the chance of collaboration among the faculty members. The individual instructors worked

on their own, each teaching their own classes throughout a round of four terms in two years, and they were seldom aware of what the colleagues were doing and thinking. Working in such an “egg-crate structure” (Lortie, 1975), the instructors did not have any opportunity to share experiences or collaborate on any teaching projects. Gradually, some instructors stabilized their teaching techniques and these did not change much over years of teaching. On the other hand, the “one-instructor-package class” deprived the students of the equal chance of benefiting from the competent instructors and good teaching. To the students, it was only luck. If they had a more competent instructor who was more sensitive to the new ideas of teaching, they would gain impressive progress in English through the College English program; otherwise, they would be frustrated with the instructor for two years who used the dated teaching methods without acknowledging the students’ needs. With a belief that these two problems seriously affected the quality of the College English teaching, the CED decided to initiate a reform in the College English program at the North Institution.

The Planning and the Implementation of the Rolling Project

In the spring 1998, the CED proposed the Rolling Project to change the existing College English curriculum at the institution. The Rolling Project consisted of two parts: (1) grouping students into three levels (A, B, C) according to their English proficiencies upon entering the institution, and (2) setting up team teaching to break the “one-teacher-package class.” Called the Rolling Project, the innovated curriculum would allow the students to “roll” to the higher levels of the program according to the progress they made; or they might “roll” to the lower groups if they did not prove they could follow the study in their current groups.

Grouping students. In the fall term 1998, the Rolling Project took effect in the College English program for the newly enrolled students to the institution. About 1,800 students took the placement test. The testing results streamed 240 students in Group A, 1,340 students in Group B, and 220 students in

Group C. Grouping students was consistent with the requirements of the NCEC that language teaching should address the students' actual English proficiencies. The students in a grouped class would be close in English proficiency so that it was easier for the instructors to choose the appropriate teaching materials, plan learning activities, and tailor teaching methods to meet the expectations of all the students. The initial grouping would be changed throughout the four-term period. The students in Groups B and C had the chance to move up to Groups A and B if they achieved satisfactory results after one term of learning and were recommended by their own instructors. In the fourth term, Group A should expand to its maximum and Group C should shrink to its minimum. The dynamic adjustment of the Rolling Project would provide the students with the opportunity to get the instruction matching to their ongoing progress in English.

Team teaching. The Rolling Project meant to replace the "one-instructor-package class" model with a team teaching model. Three instructors would form a team to co-teach each of six classes of about 300 students in the IR, ER, and L&S courses. For example, one instructor would teach the IR to Class 1 and Class 2, teach the ER to Class 3 and Class 4, and teach the L&S to Class 5 and Class 6, totaling twelve class hours per week. With this arrangement, each class of students would meet three instructors respectively in the IR, ER, and L&S courses. The team teaching had double aims in the Rolling Project. On the one hand, it could enhance the collaboration among the instructors so that they would have the opportunity to share experience and to learn from each other. On the other hand, it would allow more students to benefit from the effective teaching from those more competent instructors and weaken the influence of the ineffective teaching from those less competent instructors.

In the fall term 1998, three instructors collaborated to teach Group A, thirteen instructors worked in four teams to teach Group B, and two instructors co-taught Group C. As the students in Group A generally had higher English proficiency, they expected to learn more than what was prescribed in the textbooks. Their instructors needed to organize more

classroom activities and provide more learning materials to the students. The instruction in Group B was based mainly on the College English textbooks. The instructors in Group C had to prepare extra materials to help the students make up the basic knowledge of grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. At the end of the first term, some students “rolled” to Groups A and B from Groups B and C.

However, the Rolling Project encountered difficulties throughout the implementation. Specific difficulties include: (1) most students did not show much interest in competing for moving to the higher groups as the CED expected, and (2) not all the instructors were enthusiastic about the collaboration with their colleagues. Complaints arose from both the instructors and some students. The strongest resistance was from the Group C students and their instructors. At the end of the second term, Group C ended, and all the students were merged into Group B. In the fall 1999, the new students were grouped into two groups, but there was no “rolling”—no groupings at the end of each term.

Although the Rolling Project aimed at solving the problems of the “mixed-proficiency class” and the “one-instructor-package class” to promote the effectiveness of the College English teaching at the institution, its implementation ended in 2000 with a general dissatisfaction among both the instructors and the students. What was wrong with the to-the-point solutions and the belief that the change was for the good of both the instructors and the students? What factors stopped the “ball” of the Rolling Project from rolling forward? To determine the answers to these questions, I conducted interviews with some faculty members to investigate their perceptions of and reflections upon the Rolling Project innovation.

INTERVIEW AND FINDINGS

After four terms (or two years) of the Rolling Project implementation, I conducted interviews with the CED faculty members in the institution. The

interview participants for this study were convenience samples. When the study was conducted, I was studying in a Canadian university and had to communicate with the interview participants via email and letter correspondence. Therefore, the participants were those who had access to internet e-mail or who were willing to write letters. At the end, three faculty members participated in my study—one CED administrator who initiated the Rolling Project and two College English instructors who were involved in the Rolling Project implementation. I clarified before the interviews that their comments and opinions would be used as data for research purpose and that the name of the institution and their individual identities would not appear in any publications and reports.

The purpose of the study was to investigate what disabled the Rolling Project. The interviews were structured around the following open-ended questions:

- How do you view the Rolling Project?
- What do you think are the problems in the Rolling Project?
- What affected the implementation of the Rolling Project?

The interview questions were sent to the participants in English. The two instructors responded to the interview via emails in English. The letter response from the CED administrator was in Chinese and I translated it into English. The script was coded in theme units. The recurring themes were differentiated and grouped into categories. Three major themes appeared from the data analysis: (1) the perceived visions of the Rolling Project by the faculty members; (2) the general low enthusiasm about the innovation; and (3) the lack of internal orientation and the external support from the institution.

The Perceived Vision of the Rolling Project by the Faculty Members

The data indicated that the instructors had a clear understanding of the rationale and the goal of the Rolling Project. They believed that the innovation project was a good idea for English language teaching and

learning at the institution. They agreed that grouping students provided the students a better classroom environment and the team teaching enabled them to expand the resources for learning.

The top and average students did benefit from this Rolling Project in that as a “tighter” group, their needs were more bounded and more “visible.” So it was easier for the instructors to choose appropriate syllabus and to apply suitable methodology to the class. (Instructor 1)

Grouping takes place at the end of each semester. So students need to treat each semester seriously in order to be in a desired group. (Instructor 2)

The faculty members were consistent in the interview that the collaboration and competition among the instructors would improve the quality of teaching. From the perspective of the CED administrator, the Rolling Project aimed at improving the teaching techniques and the research ability of the instructors through team teaching.

Some pressure from team teaching was beneficial to the instructors in that they could learn from the group collaboration and discussion. (CED administrator)

The instructors held the same view that the collaboration and competition from the Rolling Project should improve learning, teaching, and the potential faculty development.

Competition occurred among instructors as well. Exposed to many different instructors, students would be able to tell which instructor is better, which motivated instructors to show their best in front of students. (Instructor 1)

The General Low Enthusiasm about the Rolling Project

The data showed that the competition system did not produce the desired

effects on enhancing the collaboration among the instructors and improving the students' learning in Groups B and C. Some instructors were negative toward the Rolling Project because they were concerned about their self-image in the competition. Some other instructors were dissatisfied with the low rewards compared to the demand of the Rolling Project.

Instructors' attitudes towards the competition. The three interview participants were consistent in connecting the responses of the instructors to the innovation with the individuals' age and teaching competence. Comparatively speaking, the younger instructors were more positive about the Rolling Project than the elder instructors were, and the competent instructors welcomed the change compared to the less competent ones.

Instructors were not unanimous in welcoming this Rolling Project. Younger and more competitive instructors did not reject it. However, older ones were unhappy. They worried that the reform was pushing them out of the teaching profession. I am not sure what exactly they want or expect. They are just afraid of change. (Instructor 1)

Some incompetent instructors were so conscious of the negative effect it (the Rolling Project) would bring to them that they tried all their means to prevent it from becoming a standard module. (Instructor 2)

The demanding work and low rewards. Another problem appearing in the process of implementation was the implicit pressure and workload on the instructors. The schedule indicated that the courses and teaching hours did not change; however, teaching three hundred students and meeting them once a week implicitly increased the workload and pressure to the instructors.

I just felt the students' face kept changing in front of me. I could only remember a few of them. I called the student by wrong names from time to time, which made me feel awkward. It was more exhausting and tiring (teaching the Rolling Project) than before. (Instructor 1)

Some younger and/or more competent instructors lost their enthusiasm about

the Rolling Project when they felt that the time and effort they spent on the project were not rewarded.

Instructors did not like the project very much because it means extra hours of working and greater pressure of competition, but without any change in their salaries. (Instructor 2)

Students' low motivation. One of the purposes of the Rolling Project was to tailor the program to the English proficiencies of the students so that they could benefit the most from the program. However, only Group A students seemed to get this benefit. The students in Groups B and C were not interested in competing to move to the higher groups.

As far as I know, some top students in Group B didn't want to advance themselves to Group A for fear of facing new classmates and new instructors again. They also didn't want to lose the special favor from their instructors which they have built in the past five months. (Instructor 1)

The resistance from the students and the instructors in the Group C was noticeable to the faculty members.

Unfortunately students in Group C were sort of "humiliated" by the grouping and even the instructors felt embarrassed to teach Group C since it was kind of indication that they were not quite competent. Therefore, there was obvious negative feeling when it came to Group C. (Instructor 2)

The Rolling Project was doomed without the enthusiastic involvement of the majority instructors and students. Although the blueprint of the Rolling Project looked promising and ambitious, the imagined enthusiasm and applause from the instructors and the students, which were vital to the implementation, did not appear. The instructors' concern for competition and the rewards and the students' attitudes toward competition and grouping were the realities of the participants' responses to the innovation. Unfortunately, the CED failed to see these realities in the planning of the Rolling Project and

did not have any solutions to address the problems derived from these realities in the implementation. In team teaching, three instructors taught the same class in turn, as a result, the strength and weakness of their instruction were exposed to the students and the colleagues. Once being dwarfed by the colleagues, the instructors would feel they were “losing face” as professional instructors. When the individuals felt the threat to their images, skills, and identities in the Rolling Project, when they were afraid to be “down and out” on the stage of competition, they would choose to withdraw to protect themselves.

Lack of Internal Orientation and External Support from the Institution

The three interview participants perceived that the problems affecting the Rolling Project were the shortage of in-service training provided to the instructors and lack of ongoing support from the institutional administration.

Internally to the CED, the most striking problem in the implementation was that there was no orientation of the instructors in terms of in-service training and seminar discussion. The instructors were already in the process of implementation before they had any appropriate pedagogy to the needs of the students in their groups.

The instructors are not mentally ready and technically trained for the change. (Instructor 1)

The major problem is (that) the current teaching competence and the teaching techniques of our instructors did not meet the requirements of the Rolling Project. (CED administrator)

When the instructors came to teach Group C, they did not know how to motivate the students who felt humiliated to be arranged in this group. What the situation demanded from the instructor was not just their expertise of helping the students improve their knowledge of English, but the arts of encouraging them to learn. Unfortunately, the instructors were not fully

prepared for these demands.

Externally, the Rolling Project did not get the support from the administration of the institution. The CED administrator said that the Rolling Project could not survive without the policy support and the financial assistance from North Institution. By policy support, the CED administrator meant “the scientific management and the scientific evaluation” of teaching and learning in the whole institution.

The supportive policy and the good management and evaluation would award teaching excellence, guarantee a fair competition environment, and encourage learning. (CED administrator)

Unfortunately, the orientation of the instructors, the in-service training, and the policy and financial support were not available prior to and during the Rolling Project implementation.

DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that the instructors recognized the rationale and the vision of the Rolling Project. However, both the instructors and the students did not show the expected enthusiasm and the support to the innovation. The findings also exposed the weak foundation on which the Rolling Project was implemented, such as the inadequate orientation and training to the instructors, and lack of policy and financial support from the institution. Some problems were beyond the effort of the CED, for example, the policy and financial support from the institution. The macro policy of the institution could hardly break the institutional balance to address the special needs of one faculty. However, the flaws of the Rolling Project can still raise some considerations about the internal structure of the planning and implementation of a curriculum change. These considerations include (1) the instructors’ reality in vision building, (2) collegiality for professional growth, and (3) implementation as a process of learning.

The Instructors' Reality in Vision Building

Fullan (1991) points out that vision building is a dynamic process throughout implementation. He laments that that this point of view seldom draws the attention of the curriculum developers. While the blueprint of the Rolling Project set a promising prospect for the students and the instructors, seeing the vision or even voting for it did not mean that they shared or built the vision. Instructors were involved in the change either because of seeing the rationale of the change (White, 1988) or because of courtesy, "a word reflecting the considerations of tact, style, ethics, and morality" (Sarason, 1996, p. 52). Fullan (1991) claims that vision building is based on the action of change rather than rationale and courtesy.

Vision building should accommodate the realities of the instructors in the phase of planning for the change. The vision is not a one-sided view of the curriculum planners; the instructors' concerns, experience, and values, together with the problems they identify in their routine teaching can enrich the vision and make it more real and accessible. Fullan (1991) suggests that the considerations of the realities of teachers would help avoid the unexpected problems that the implementation has to address. He points out that many efforts to the educational change failed because of the naïve and "logical" assumptions of the planners and the exclusion of the instructors to the planning process. In the Rolling Project, the CED administrators drew up the blueprint of the Rolling Project based on the problems they heard and perceived in the College English program, but they did not take into consideration the realities of the instructors and students. The vision building stayed at the initial stage where the instructors saw the rationale of the project. However, the vision was blurred in the process of implementation when the instructors faced the specific problems in classrooms. What is more, the practical concerns about the workload, rewards, and self-image replaced the rationale of the instructors. They withdrew before really committing to identifying and solving the problems in the process of implementing the change.

Collegiality for Professional Growth

Team teaching and the instructors' collaboration should be based on collegiality rather than competition. Collegiality is quite a different perspective from competition. Sarason (1996) describes the term as follows,

Collegiality is more than a form of friendly togetherness. It represents a willing desire to learn from each other and to assume the responsibility to be knowledgeable about the ideas, efforts, and writings of people who, like themselves, have devoted their energies to the goals of improving schools as well as the field profession. (p. 354)

One of the most striking problems in the Rolling Project was the resentment of competition. Although the innovation intended to advocate team teaching as a means for the instructor improvement, the mechanical structure of the Rolling Project made the team teaching an automatic programming controlled by competition. The instructors performed their best in the classroom not out of their caring about students and their enthusiasm about teaching, but out of the instrumental motivation to compete and to survive the competition. The implicit and the explicit competition made team teaching superficial. It was hard for the instructors to collaborate in a team when they were thinking of beating their colleagues or worried about being beaten. To make things worse, the competition as such hurt the collegiality among the instructors in a long run.

Implementation as a Learning Process

Fullan (1991) believes that it is important, but not enough, for the teaching staff to have in-service training and obtain some support at the early stage of the implementation. He said, "Implementation ... is nothing other than a process of learning something new" (p. 85) because the new conceptions, skills, and behavior are learned during implementation and through the problem solving process. For the Rolling Project, the lack of training prior to

the change was a fatal defect to the program. What was equally fatal was that both the planners and the instructors thought more about “doing” implementation than understanding it as a learning process. The interview participants attributed the failure of the Rolling Project to the shortage of in-service training. However, the orientation and in-service training would not guarantee the success of the Rolling Project if the planners and the instructors did not learn in the process of implementing the change.

CONCLUSION

The interviews reveal the problems that set back the Rolling Project implementation. Some of those problems actually derived from not understanding the complexity of language curriculum innovation. Many curriculum changes originated from the educational goodwill and the passion for improvement. However, educational goodwill is often assumed (Hargreaves & Fullan, 1998); so is the passion for change. Implementation is a process of commitment to vision formation and re-formation, a process of learning from problem solving on the collaboration of the planners and the instructors and on the collegiality of the instructors. Vision building, collegiality, and learning in the process of implementation are the important factors that are able to keep the “ball” of educational change rolling forward. These were missed in the Rolling Project implementation, but they are the lessons and suggestions for the later-on curriculum innovation projects.

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