

# On the Evaluation of the Appropriateness of Competency-Based Language Teaching (CBLT) in Teaching English Reading in Chinese Universities

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**Abstract:** CBLT (Competency-Based Language Teaching) has brought about a profound change in education for English reading teaching. It emphasises competency-based, student-centred, formative, and summative assessment, bringing objectivity and fairness to educational assessment. It adopts contextualised teaching, attaches importance to the fit between English reading and modern vocational technology, practical skills, and social needs, and improves the educational quality of English reading. At the same time, CBLT is in line with students' learning psychology and individual differences and has brought about the effective implementation of flipped classroom, task-driven, and project-based teaching in English reading. CBLT aligns with the concept of OBE education, which is “student-centred, SC, outcome-based education, OBE”. The “Student-Centered (SC), Outcome-based (OBE), Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI)” accreditation concept of Chinese universities is not only related to the “appropriate education” orientation of China's education policy but also to the “development-oriented education” concept. There is a dialectical relationship between the concept of accreditation and China's education policy of “appropriate education” and “development-oriented education,” which is a dialectical relationship between the concept of accreditation and “development-oriented education.”

**Keywords:** Competency-Based Language Teaching; English reading; Chinese universities

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## 1 Introduction

Over the last few decades, China has greatly invested resources and policy efforts in the pursuit of an all-encompassing movement of modernisation. This process could not have been realised without a matching



educational mission, as evidenced by recently published articles like Xu (2024), Cao & Zhao (2024), and Liu (2024). Therefore, the Chinese government aimed to build an educational system that would emphasise equality, quality, productivity, efficiency, practicality, and rejuvenation (Li, 2017). Various measures must be implemented to achieve this. In this context, it is worth exploring ways in which teaching methods can be leveraged to modify the national curriculum and improve teaching efficiency. Chinese students enter university with varying levels of English proficiency. Since competency-based language teaching places significant emphasis on tailoring instruction to meet the unique needs of each student and ensuring that the acquired competencies are applicable in real-world contexts (Sturgis, 2012), this essay chose to explore the potential of competency-based language teaching (CBLT) to optimise English language teaching (ELT) in China.

As defined by Richards and Rodgers (2001), CBLT refers to the application of Competency-based education principles to language education, making the development of competency a key element of the learning process. Under this system, each competency is evaluated through clear performance criteria (Auerbach, 1986; Richards & Rogers, 2001). As such, its proper application would allow students to independently examine their level of proficiency and identify the strengths they can leverage and the weaknesses on which they should improve. Furthermore, according to Sturgis (2012), competency must be personalised. Students with varying degrees of foundational reading skills should select modules that align more closely with their abilities, based on their specific requirements. This essay aims to critically evaluate the potential benefits of applying CBLT to the teaching of reading in ELT at the university level in China. More specifically, it will attempt to answer the four following research questions:

1. How can CBLT promote educational equity in university English reading education?
2. How can CBLT promote education quality in university English reading education?
3. What are the main obstacles to implementing CBLT in university English reading education?
4. Prospects for Implementing CBLT in College English Reading Teaching?

## 2 Discussion

### *2.1 CBLT promotes educational equity in university English reading education*

The implementation of CBLT can enhance the likelihood of all Chinese university students attaining the essential reading abilities to fulfil their academic needs. Chiefly, its contribution in this sense stems from this model's emphasis on employing more personalised assessment methods to evaluate students' English reading proficiency. This would be also particularly helpful to evaluate areas that are difficult to assess using standardised examinations, such as critical reading comprehension skills. According to Wong (2008), receiving feedback based on a singular formative assessment framework would make university students in Hong Kong uncertain regarding their proficiency in certain skills essential for academic reading. These skills include, among others, the ability to identify and critically evaluate corroborating evidence from reading materials, which are markedly different from the competencies acquired by students during basic compulsory education. While this study examined the specific context of Hong Kong, the inadequacy of current assessment methods for students' academic reading skills is observed throughout China. A key part of this problem lies in the excessive reliance on

standardised examinations such as the CET-4 exam. Although most undergraduate students eventually manage to pass this exam, which is a fundamental requirement for graduation in mainland Chinese universities, it does not comprehensively assess certain aspects of their academic reading abilities. Reasons for this may be linked to the difference between achievement and competence. Gonczi et al. (1993) explained that achievement is a directly observable notion, while competence is a combination of the attributes that correspond to achievement. The use of CBLT may help bridge the gap between these two notions and improve Chinese universities' assessment methods. As mentioned above, CBLT is, in essence, the application of competency-based education to second language acquisition (Richards and Rodgers, 2001). Its strength is rooted in the combination of traditional formative assessments and summative assessments, which allows teachers to deeply investigate students' mastery of certain skills (Griffith & Lim, 2014). This assessment method also helps guarantee that students receive instruction that is targeted to their proficiency level and learning difficulties. By customising the assessment of competencies based on individual students' characteristics (Sturgis, 2012), this method ensures that students who fail to pass summative evaluations cannot progress to the next stage of learning (Richards & Rogers, 2001). Instead, they will be encouraged to practise until they master their weaker abilities. Consequently, this language teaching method aligns with the goal of China's education policy to foster educational equity (Li, 2017), as it provides equal opportunities for all students to pursue reading competency according to their aptitudes.

In 1981, the concept of outcome-based education (OBE), also known as competency-based education, goal-oriented education, or demand-oriented education, was proposed by the American scholar Spady. It is a student-centred, reverse-designed, forward-constructed, and reverse-thinking concept of educational accreditation (School Planning and Construction Development Centre of the Ministry of Education of China, 2017). On 26, 2017, the Ministry of Education of China released the "Measures for the Implementation of the Certification of Teacher Training Programmes in Ordinary Institutions of Higher Learning (Provisional)", which puts forward the concept of "Student-Centered (SC), Outcome-based Education (OBE), Continuous QualityImprovement (CQI)" accreditation concept. Emphasis is placed on allocating educational resources and arranging teaching activities centred on students' learning outcomes and personal development; focusing on what students have learned and what they can do after education; focusing on the requirements of students' core competencies and qualities, and conducting all-round, whole-process tracking and evaluation of students' professional teaching. The teaching mode of CBLT directly echoes the concept of professional certification based on the concept of OBE, and the emphasis on focusing on the requirements of students' core competencies reflects the CBE (Competency-Based Education). Students, parents, and employers jointly participate in the evaluation of students' ability, avoiding the traditional teaching method of evaluation in which the teacher is the only subject of educational evaluation and the test paper is the only form of examination, and adopting a combination of formative and summative evaluation, emphasising the concurrent roles of formative and summative evaluation. In the process of a formative evaluation of college English reading teaching, the teaching institutions or teaching management departments must establish a diversified way of formative evaluation, evaluation standards, and evaluation scores based on CBLT, taking students as the centre, combining the actual environments of the school, society and students, giving full play to the strengths and advantages of each student, mobilising the students' subjective participation, and increasing the proportion of formative evaluation scores, at least up to 50%, or even 70%, to avoid the insufficiency of formative evaluation planning and systematic, and to carry out



the analysis of the reasons for failing to pass the summative evaluation based on reading ability and continuous improvement. Such as homework completion, English speech, extracurricular literature reading, course paper writing, service social practice, etc., to cultivate students' listening, speaking, reading, and writing abilities and insist on reaching the core competence quality requirements of English reading in the learning process. The student-centred, competency-oriented, or goal-oriented formative assessment, in which everyone can perform and excel, also brings objectivity and fairness to the assessment results.

## ***2.2 CBLT promotes education quality in university English reading education***

CBLT can improve the quality of English education in Chinese universities, filling another key objective of current Chinese education policy. Initially developed to help non-native English-speaking immigrants adapt to working and living in English-speaking countries (Griffith and Lim, 2014), CBLT is now also applied to higher education. In this context, it is considered particularly well-suited to support the career development of non-native English-speaking university students. Notably, this includes not only those who want to work in English-speaking countries, but also those in other nations who will require English for the completion of their daily work tasks, or even for continued learning and professional development. In line with the goal of helping students achieve the specific English abilities required in their future careers, this method drives English courses to adopt more practical teaching approaches. Generally, in CBLT, students acquire the skills to manage specific authentic communicative situations that they are likely to encounter outside the classroom (Griffith & Lim, 2014). Since most Chinese students will only ever employ English in specific and predictable situations, they do not need to continue developing a broad, systematic proficiency in English. Instead, they should focus on specific areas of use, such as the specialised terms they will need to know in their future careers. For instance, many Chinese universities offer courses in Medical English for medical students, teaching them the necessary language competencies needed to meet their future work requirements. CBLT thus focuses on teaching students' specific competencies to improve their employability, something that cannot be achieved with the same effectiveness through other language learning methods. Luisa (2012) points out that the sole reliance on traditional teaching methods may result in university graduates lacking the essential competencies employers seek. Her surveys also show that employers prioritise skills such as critical thinking, creativity, problem-solving, and the capacity to adapt to new situations, which are the least developed and most inefficiently evaluated competencies in higher education. In contrast, a CBLT methodology based on university students' future career needs may facilitate the acquisition of the necessary English language skills in a limited time and enhance their employability and competitiveness in the labour market.

“During the drafting process of China's National Programme for Medium- and Long-Term Educational Reform and Development (2010–2020), ‘suitable education’ was once a topic of discussion. However, based on the stage characteristics of China's educational development, ‘suitable education’ was not finally expressed as an overall national goal. However, it is proposed in the planning programme to ‘care for every student, promote the active and lively development of every student, respect the laws of education and the laws of students' physical and mental development, and provide a suitable education for every student’” (Ge, 2017). From the “two-factor theory” of intelligence founded by Spearman, a famous British psychologist in the early 20th century, to “The Structure of Intelligence: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences” published by Gardner, an

American psychologist, in the 1980s, it has been demonstrated through scientific research that the individual differences in human intellectual ability exist objectively” (Wang et al., 2011). “Vocational ability is the most individualised ability and is most closely related to an individual’s specific life. It is the comprehensive quality of individuals in different learning or working scenarios and various career development courses” (Pang et al., 2010). CBLT uses contextualised and tailored teaching to meet students’ learning psychology and individual differences. Teaching is organised in a structured manner based on vocational competence derived from vocational analysis and job analysis, which maximises the quality of education and provides students with vocational competence. CBLT is in line with the essence of “suitable education,” which embodies the harmony between human beings and the world and allows education to be full of love so that teaching according to the individual’s abilities can become a trend. In addition, it is important to fit knowledge, ability, and quality to social roles, pay more attention to the practical and goal-oriented nature of education, and adapt education to the needs of society as a criterion for measuring the quality of education. Excellent English reading is not achieved by sitting and talking but by integrating speech, competition, communication, and interaction into the broad social practice and vocational context, and how heartfelt it is to experience the activities of applause, flowers, and cheers. At this point, she has mastered it forever, and everything is in the words, and any description in the language of teaching seems powerless. This “use of all available senses and abilities in the practice of thinking to form an appreciation of knowledge and to promote the development of one’s abilities in authentic and rich experiences” (Chin-Fen Yang, 2022) brings about an improvement in the quality of education.

### ***2.3 Obstacles to implementing CBLT in university English reading education***

It must be noted that the application of CBLT in China’s higher education ELT sector may encounter some obstacles. These, however, are not as difficult to resolve as some scholars previously assumed. Some people argue that the integration of CBLT in university-level English curricula may increase the pressure on English teachers. Liu and Wu’s (2021) research evidenced a high level of anxiety among English teachers in Chinese universities. Since English is a compulsory course for all university majors in China, educators must teach a high number of class hours, while also being required to fulfil a certain research output and publication standard to attain professional advancement. In this context, implementing CBLT, which tasks teachers with being aware of each student’s level, as well as the competencies they need and the steps they should take to master them (Auerbach, 1986), may greatly amplify their workload. This is especially true in China, where classes tend to be substantially large. Albeit valid in some respects, this argument ignores two key factors of CBLT: its inherent flexibility, and students’ learning motivation. Building a flexible CBLT programme is crucial to allowing students to choose the modules they wish to study to attain their desired competencies. In the Chinese higher education context, flexibility can be obtained by improving coordination between university departments (Wong, 2008), and by implementing online courses (Iswari & Kusumawati, 2020). At the same time, most students possess an intrinsic drive to acquire the English knowledge and skills to obtain their degrees and succeed in their future careers (Wong, 2008). Therefore, these intrinsically motivated students will be more active and attending when studying English language modules that match their academic and career requirements, even without strict supervision from teachers. Hence, by leveraging the flexibility of CBLT and students’ learning motivation and independent learning skills, the added pressure on English teachers caused by this learning method may be



avoided.

The acquisition of competencies brings multiplicity to the teaching and learning process. Teaching based on CBLT stimulates students' thinking, learning psychology, and interest in learning. In the process of constructing student-centred teaching and learning, students' individuality is completely opened up, and they give full play to their strengths, engage in various kinds of process learning experiences, and carry out personalised learning and group cooperative learning. Through group interaction, listening, deduction, feedback, and division of labour, students practice their communication skills and teamwork. In the process of learning, the potential, individuality, and effectiveness of learning and learning burst out. At the same time, CBLT-based teaching also brings about changes in teachers' teaching methods and approaches and continuous innovation in student-centred teaching strategies and design. They endeavour to explore the dialectical unity of the teaching concept of "teaching as the leader, learning as the main body," the psychological development concept of "unity of independence and dependence," and the learning concept of "learning to learn" as the theoretical basis of the teaching model. The teaching model is based on the theory of "independence and dependence," "learning to learn," adhering to the learning methods of participation-experience, guidance-discovery, situation-cultivation, self-learning-guidance, carrying out situations, projects, roles, etc. to test the students' practical application of English reading, effectively realising the flipped classroom, task-driven, and project teaching, and further condensing the teaching method.

The students can effectively realise the flipped classroom, task-driven, and project teaching, further condense the teaching cases, expand the curriculum resources, make full use of modern information technology to build micro-courses and MOOCs, and fully stimulate the new educational productivity of "Internet + Teaching" and "Intelligence + Teaching" in English reading. They pay more attention to the fit between English reading and modern vocational technology, practical skills, and social needs and purposefully carry out career-oriented education to cultivate students' vocational interests. Based on CBLT, "a change in the roles of students and teachers has been realised, changing the single mode of instruction of 'teacher speaks, the student listens,' and the teacher has changed from the provider of knowledge to the collaborator, guide, and facilitator of students' learning development. Students also take responsibility for their own learning" (Pang et al., 2010).

#### ***2.4 Prospects for implementing CBLT in College English Reading Teaching***

"In the 1990s, the competence-oriented paradigm replaced the knowledge-oriented paradigm, or rather absorbed it and placed it in a new framework" (Jurgovsky, 2011). "The term development-oriented education (Entwicklungsorientierte Bildung), on the other hand, describes a nascent paradigm shift: i. e., development-oriented education has begun to replace competence-orientation by considering competence as a part of development." (Arn & Munsch, 2022) "Development-oriented education is reasonably described as an open-ended concept that integrates knowledge and competencies. So far, there is no stereotypical definition of development-oriented education: the concept of development is recursive, and it should be able to evolve. Different definitions can enrich the concept because of active reflection. One of the basic ideas of development orientation is to take a clear sense of self as a starting point, to increase the freedom of self-formation" (Pieper, Neuhaus & Vogt, 2023). "Developmentally orientated education starts more from the developmental implications for the learner than from thinking about the learning session in terms of content (but also in terms of content). In



other words, it is more learner-centred than standards-oriented education (which is also learner-centred) (Carl Rogers discusses this at length)” (Arn, 2022).

Development-oriented education is “more learner-centred and more developmentally meaningful”, which seems to mirror the “Implementing Measures for the Accreditation of Teacher Training Programmes in General Colleges and Universities (Provisional)” issued by China’s Ministry of Education, which proposes a “Student-Centered, SC” approach to education. Centered (SC), Outcome-based Education (OBE), and Continuous QualityImprovement (CQI). “One of the basic ideas of the developmental orientation is to take explicit self-awareness as the starting point, with the aim of increasing the freedom of self-modelling” and China’s orientation of “appropriate education,” which proposes “caring for every student, promoting every student’s ability. This maps to China’s orientation of “appropriate education,” which states: “Care for each student, promote each student’s active and lively development, respect the laws of education and the laws of students’ physical and mental development, and provide each student with an appropriate education.” “The competence-based paradigm is entered when knowledge is no longer viewed in terms of its potential for application, but rather in terms of what knowledge is needed in the context of an application. The developmentally orientated paradigm is entered when the learner is no longer approached from the point of view of knowledge and competence, but rather the learner is examined from the point of view of what knowledge and competence can be taken into account” (Bratianu, Hadad & Bejinaru, 2020).

While “fit education” suggests that “the ultimate fit must be fit between a child’s knowledge, abilities, and qualities and his or her social roles, the true fitness of the child for his or her future roles is achieved by continually trying to find out what social roles he or she is suited to in practice. We need to both discover differences and solve them through practice” (Ge, 2017). This precisely responds to the essence of development-oriented education. Based on the above viewpoints, CBLT should further establish the concept of “student-centred” teaching and learning development on the basis of the competency-based approach, so as to make English reading proficiency serve the development of human beings. In the design of teaching, students should be assessed not only from the point of view of competence but also from the point of view of students and the significance of this competence for their further development. Such as evaluating the usefulness of the acquired English reading competence in the subsequent courses and its influence on the career they will be engaged in in the future and taking the competence goal as a dynamic or living, non-terminal goal.

At the same time, teachers’ perceptions of the goals of English reading in overall English teaching and overall English careers, as well as their willingness to develop the professionalism of the overall student body and the teachers’ development, all become important factors in development-oriented education. However, “just as the paradigm shift from ‘knowledge-orientation’ to ‘competence-orientation’ has shifted the focus of understanding education from ‘knowledge’ to ‘competence,’ it is clear that we still need knowledge, though perhaps in a completely new way. The focus of our attention in education is now shifting to this process of holistic personal change that is both ‘intense’ and ‘moderate,’ with the equally clear understanding that ‘competence’ and ‘knowledge’ therein are still so important” (Bratianu, Hadad & Bejinaru, 2020).

### 3 Conclusion

In conclusion, based on the various studies and evidence mentioned above, CBLT can help achieve two key



goals of China's education policy: educational equity and quality. CBLT has changed the teacher's single-teaching and single-test-paper evaluation methods and formed a student-centred, formative, and summative evaluation model, which provides an equal opportunity for all students to pursue their reading ability according to their capacity and brings objectivity and fairness in the evaluation results. CBLT adopts contextualised teaching, focuses on practice, tailors teaching to the needs of the students, and organises teaching in a way that the vocational competence itself is structured according to vocational analysis and job analysis, maximising the quality of education.

At the same time, the implementation of this model brings flexibility in teaching methods and student's motivation to learn English, effectively realises the multiplicity of flipped classroom, task-driven and project-based teaching, and stimulates the "Internet + Teaching" "Intelligence + Teaching" of English reading. It stimulates the new educational productivity of "Internet+Teaching" and "Intelligence+Teaching" in English reading. At the same time, CBLT is in line with the OBE education concept of "Student-Centered (SC), Outcome-based Education (OBE), Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI)." The accreditation concept of "CQI" echoes China's education policy of "caring for every student, promoting the active and lively development of every student, respecting the laws of education and students' physical and mental development, and providing every student with 'suitable education'".

From the perspective of the CBLT outlook, it should continue to develop into "development-oriented education" based on the competency-based approach so that English reading proficiency can serve human development even more.

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