

On the Key Competencies for China's Secondary Vocational School English Curriculum Standards

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Abstract: To cope with the challenges in today's world, students' abilities should go well beyond basic reproduction of accumulated knowledge and concomitant acquisition of certain basic skills at school or university. Accordingly, competencies including knowledge, skills, attitudes and values are required for individuals' sustainable development. This paper provides an overview of key competencies for China's Secondary Vocational School English Curriculum Standards. The research panel of 11 members entrusted by the Ministry of Education of China (MOE) carried out a project of the key competencies in secondary vocational English since the official launch of the research project in May, 2017. On this basis, the research panel had China's Secondary Vocational School English Curriculum Standards released in May, 2020. The key terms of competence and competency are first defined. Studies on key competencies abroad and at home are then reviewed. Four key competencies for China's Secondary Vocational School English Curriculum Standards (2020) are then extracted from the review. These are workplace language communication, perception of thinking mode differences, cross-cultural understanding and autonomous learning – which are relatively independent but mutually integrated in that they form an organic whole. The criteria and process of extracting the four key competencies of secondary vocational English are described and the formulation and interpretation of the key competencies are elaborated upon. While the proposal concerning the key competencies provides conceptual support, the transformation from idea to practice needs considerable effort, especially in integrating these key competencies in curriculum design.

Keywords: Key Competency, English Curriculum Standards, Curriculum Design

1. Introduction

Since the introduction of compulsory education in China in 1986, the definition and selection of the learning that is considered essential for any student have been of great importance. The ways in which this selection is incorporated into the curriculum have taken many forms, from a list of subjects or content in the shape of themes to a set of general skills and behaviors to be developed [32].

To cope with the challenges in today's world, characterized by increasing diversity and interconnection, students' abilities should go well beyond the basic reproduction of accumulated knowledge and the concomitant acquisition of certain basic skills at school or university [32]. Accordingly, more is required for sustainable development and social cohesion, namely, competencies, which cover knowledge, skills, attitudes and values.

After the International Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [29] launched the research project on key competences, 12 countries including Austria, Germany, and the United States have followed up and submitted their own reports since 2003. The project immediately increased research on key competences around the world, promoting the development of education reform and evaluation in mainland China. In March 2014, the Ministry of Education of China issued "The Opinions on Comprehensively Deepening the Curriculum Reform to Implement the Fundamental Task of Cultivating People with Morality" [31], which took the key competencies system as the focus of the new round of curriculum reform. The report highlights the notion that key competencies aim for the enrichment and improvement of the connotations of quality education, and asserts that curriculum reform in China is directed to subvert the "knowledge-based" teaching concept

and transfer the approach from core knowledge to key competences.

It is admitted that skill structure and emotional development without knowledge accumulation is almost empty talk, but if language learning is merely focused on the acquisition of knowledge and knowledge structure, problems and crises would arise [23]. Under the impact of the instrumental rationality value of knowledge itself, the teaching process is reduced to knowledge learning, and students tend to focus on simple knowledge acquisition or repeated skill training, and are satisfied with superficial learning of knowledge reproduction [6].

Teaching based on key competences so as to help students form key abilities, essential qualities, correct world outlook as well as outlook on life and values is intended to meet the current requirements for the cultivation of secondary vocational English education talents in the new era. However, the English Teaching Syllabus of Secondary Vocational Schools issued in 2009 lacks the elaboration on the key competences in English subject and the educational function of English curriculum. As a result, China's Secondary Vocational School English Curriculum Standards (2020) were reworked starting in 2017, and issued as a formal document in 2020. Based on the document, the current chapter explores the key competencies in terms of extraction criteria, definitions, objectives and connotations and provides suggestions for operationalizing and improving these key competences of secondary vocational English as China's secondary vocational schools are faced with challenges of curriculum goals, course design, course evaluation as well as teacher development.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Definitions of Key Terms

The educational literature and official documents on competence and competency entail a great deal of terminological ambiguity. In fact, the two terms are often used indiscriminately.

The term "competence" first appeared in Lundberg [21] and then in McClelland's seminal work [22]. According to Boyatzis, "competency" is the capacity existing in a person of behaviors that meet the job demands within the parameters of the organizational environment and in turn bringing about desired results [2]. The OECD's DeSeCo project in 2001 defined competence as "the ability to successfully meet complex demands in a particular context ... the mobilization of knowledge, cognitive and practical skills, as well as social and behavior components such as attitudes, emotions, and values and motivations" [29]. *Competence* was therefore a "holistic notion" functionally linking a complex of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that enable successful task performance and problem solving [1]. Based on ILO standards, *competency* is a more specific ability that can be observed in performing an action in a given context and producing a set outcome. From the perspective of etymology,

competence and competency have almost the same meaning, but the former is more commonly used. In international education documents, competence is used more often by the EU and competency is preferred by OECD [14].

2.2. Research Abroad

It was the OECD's DeSeCo project that proposed the term *key competencies* for the first time, with its final research report, published in 2003, classifying key competencies into three broad categories: *using tools interactively*, *interacting in heterogeneous groups*, and *acting autonomously*. These three categories are roughly consistent with the five core pillars proposed by UNESCO – *learning to know*, *learning to do*, *learning to live together*, *learning to be* [11] and *learning to change* [9]. In 2005, the organization released *The Definition and Selection of Key Competencies: Executive Summary* to argue for the operationalizing of the implementation of the key competencies [10] and developed the corresponding assessment tool PISA (Program for International Student Assessment). In the same year, the EU proposed eight key competences that students should develop in a wide range of everyday contexts by the end of initial education [34], with the *European Reference Framework on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning* being approved one year later [35]. As a result, the development of key competences has come to be increasingly emphasised in most European countries [28] and almost all the countries have included these EU key competences in their steering documents [12, 15] – albeit with some differences in the way these key competences are defined and unpacked.

Following in the EU's footsteps, the United States of America promulgated its *21st Century Skills Framework for Elementary and Secondary Schools* in 2007, and Japan proposed its *21st Century Skills Framework* in 2006, which calls for the ability to condense "competencies in disciplines" and at the same time, takes the "thinking" competency as the core competency. Guided by the value orientation of "cultivating moral people", Singapore constructed a three-dimensional 21st century competency structure model in 2010. Following this wave, countries around the world have started systematic research of their educational goals based on key competencies, constructing key competency models that accord with actual national or regional requirements, and promoting curriculum reforms to cultivate students' key competencies.

In retrospect, the definitions and theoretical structures of key competencies in the OECD, EU, USA, Singapore and other countries have been varied. The OECD is based on the achievement of successful lives and the development of healthy societies; under the influence of UNESCO, the EU is based on life-long learning, promoting self-realization and development, fostering positive citizenship, and strengthening social integration and employment; the USA highlights 21st century workplace needs; while Asian countries place more emphasis on the cultivation of core values such as teamwork spirit, social responsibility and patriotism. Although the definition of key competencies is

education [39]. Key competencies reflect the concept of whole person education and is about “making people people”. Peng and Zeng point out that the educational value of key competencies in the English subject should be analyzed from such dimensions as educators, educated, and educational impact [27]. The main teaching goal is then not to instill knowledge, but to develop students’ cross-cultural communication abilities, international visions, learning strategies and active learning consciousness. Zhang et al. suggest that foreign language key competencies may be divided into three levels [38]. These they lay out as *competencies of English*, namely the must-acquire skills and content of the foreign language subject, e.g., listening, speaking, reading, writing, phonetics, grammar, vocabulary, and etc.; *competencies with English*, meaning that students can acquire cross-cultural communication ability and expand their international vision through foreign language learning; and *competencies beyond English*, which refers to the abilities that are of vital importance to students such as critical thinking and innovative thinking.

To define key competencies is therefore a complex task, since the competences present an intersection of multiple determining units and scientific fields. Definitions stated by various researchers differ, as can be seen from the three elements of key competencies: two are consistent, namely knowledge and skills, while the third one involves attitude, ability, approach, attributes and behavior, respectively. It is evident, nonetheless, that each individual needs a good command of a wide range of key competencies in order to adapt to the fast-changing world that comes with globalization.

It is worth pointing out, however, that the introduction of the idea of competency in basic and university education has given rise to a debate that did not take place when it entered the field of vocational training in the 1990s [5]. Traditionally, the notion of competency has applied to vocational education and training (VET) because of its direct link with the labor market and of the description of skills and attitudes required for some specific tasks or responsibilities in the real contexts. With more importance attached to vocational education in China, it is of great significance to extract the subject key competences of vocational English.

3. Subject Key Competency Extraction of the Curriculum Standards

Under the leadership of the Teaching Materials Bureau and the Vocational Education Department of MOE, and with the specific guidance of the Central Institute for Vocational and Technical Education of MOE, the research panel of 11 members carried out a solid and in-depth investigation and study of the key competencies in secondary vocational English since the official launch of the research project in May, 2017. On this basis, the research panel held over 20 intensive seminars and made careful revisions, and had China’s Secondary Vocational School English Curriculum

Standards released in May, 2020.

3.1. Defining and Interpreting Key Competencies in English Subject

In the past two decades, significant progress has been made globally in conceptualizing key competencies, which are some of the essential qualities and key abilities necessary for those who would meet the challenges of the new era. The key competencies have no subject boundaries, and develop simultaneously with all curriculum content areas. All areas and subjects can contribute to the development of diverse competencies, but none of the latter depends exclusively on one of the former. In other words, there is multiple cross-linking between areas, subjects and competencies [32].

However, with the emergence of key competencies, some related concepts have been put forward one after another, such as “English key competencies”, “Chinese key competencies”, “mathematics key competencies”. These terms are, to an extent, controversial in that logically and essentially, only a human being can have competencies while a subject cannot. Competency does not point to certain subject knowledge, and key competencies are not the sum total of knowledge of a subject. For the sake of this study; however, the appropriateness of these terms may be left aside and priority should be given to understanding the relationship between key competencies and subjects.

A subject helps teachers to educate students, and it can promote the cultivation of students’ key competencies. In this sense, subject key competencies may be understood as certain key competencies that can be achieved by students through subject learning. The subject itself is a bridge and a path. The cultivation of students’ key competencies should and must be carried out in specific subjects, and the realization of key competencies needs to rely on subject practice. On this basis, subject key competencies may be defined as follows: subject key competencies are the concentrated embodiment of the educational value of a subject, and they are the correct values, essential traits and key abilities gradually formed by students through the study and practice of a subject.

It is believed by Liu & Zhang that “key competency” is a general term, taking the dominant position, higher than the curriculum standards or syllabuses of all subjects; it has a guiding effect on the teaching design of all subjects (including the English subject) [19]. Zhong proposes that key competencies are higher in rank than subject key competencies, followed by unit design, and finally by lesson plans [40]. To cite a common metaphor, instruction based on subject key competencies can not only offer students fish (subject content), teach students how to fish (acquiring subject content), but also let students enjoy fishing (enjoy subject learning) with humanistic care and humanistic spirit.

3.2. Criteria and Process of Developing Secondary Vocational English Key Competencies

Students need a wide range of competencies in order to

face the complex challenges of today's world, but it would be of limited practical value to produce very long lists of everything [23]. Special care should be taken to avoid the "multiplier effect" for the greater the number, the less likely they are to receive the power of attention in teaching and learning. This requires the research panel to identify the very key competencies that are related to students' prioritized and essential needs.

The definition of key competencies framework is usually undertaken through two kinds of research train of thought. The first of these is the top-down model, based on the target and framework of students' future successful life and healthy development which leads to discussions on key competencies theory, with opinions solicited from people from all walks of life to invite suggestions on modification and perfection. For example, through the DeSeCo Project, the OECD collaborated with a wide range of scholars, experts and institutions to identify a small set of key competencies, rooted in a theoretical understanding of how such competencies are defined [24]. The second is the bottom-up approach, that is, to discover the shortcomings of students through empirical research, based on which a key competencies framework may then be developed. In this study, both the two methods were adopted.

In view of the key competencies of English subject that secondary vocational students should develop in the new era, the research panel entrusted by MOE adopted the research methods based on literature review, needs analysis [20] and the Delphi method [16]. An analysis of existing studies of competencies found a considerable degree of inconsistency, pointing to the need for an overarching framework. The research panel contributed to this convergence with the literature review by creating and applying a common framework to define and integrate key competencies in secondary vocational English. A clarification of the concepts of competence and competency helped to build a common understanding of key concepts. To carry out the needs analysis, research participants from 19 provinces and municipalities in China including students, teachers, graduates, educational administrators and employers, etc. were invited and the sources of data collection included questionnaire survey, interview, classroom observation and proficiency test, etc. By adopting the Delphi method, the research panel gave out our initial selection of the set of key competencies in English subject, based on the existing studies, needs analysis and our empirical research, and fed in perspectives from scholars, experts, researchers and experienced teachers in different provinces of China to consolidate an agreed framework. The whole process took place between the inception of the Secondary Vocational School English Curriculum Standards project in early 2017 and the release of China's Secondary Vocational School English Curriculum Standards (2020) by the Ministry of Education of China.

3.3. Formulation and Interpretation of Secondary Vocational English Key Competencies

In order to carry out the fundamental task of cultivating

students with morality, develop quality-oriented education, and promote equity in education, the Ministry of Education of China issued a document in January 2018, "Curriculum Plan for Ordinary Senior High Schools and Curriculum Standards for 14 Subjects including Chinese (2017 Edition)" after a number of years of research, revision and validation. The Curriculum Plan was then first implemented in the fall of 2018. One of the most important changes in the English Curriculum Standards for Senior High Schools (2017 Edition) involved distilling the concept of English subject competencies into four aspects: language ability, cultural awareness, thinking ability and learning ability [30].

In formulating the key competencies of secondary vocational English, the research panel basically took two reference points. On the one hand, the DeSeCo Project's conceptual framework classifies its key competencies in three broad categories, which served as a reference point. Using tools interactively points to such key competencies as language communication and thinking ability; interacting in heterogeneous groups may be closely related to the key competency of cross-cultural understanding in an increasingly interdependent and diverse world, and acting autonomously will lead to the key competency of English students' autonomous learning. On the other hand, the four key competencies of the English Curriculum Standards for Senior High Schools (2017 Edition) serves as the other reference point. However, a more vocationally-oriented competencies profile is needed [33], which emphasizes the competencies considered essential for secondary vocational English that have not been the focus of traditional education and therefore require special attention. Accordingly, compared with senior high schools, the key competencies of secondary vocational English are more specific and have both disciplinary and vocational characteristics. The key competencies chosen for secondary vocational English are composed of four aspects, namely, workplace language communication, perception of thinking mode differences, cross-cultural understanding and autonomous learning, which are relatively independent and mutually integrated to form an organic whole.

3.3.1. Key Competency 1: Workplace Language Communication

Workplace language communication refers to students' mastering language characteristics and rules of application through the learning and practice of English language knowledge; developing language skills such as listening, speaking, reading and writing; correctly understanding different types of discourse information in the workplace; and conducting effective communication and exchanges on career-related topics.

As the basic English knowledge and English skills of students, workplace language communication competency is the prerequisite for the development of students' thinking ability. The correct way to develop students' key competencies is not the banishment of knowledge, but the

returning of knowledge [41]. Competencies and knowledge are not binary opposites, and competencies are not supposed to develop at the cost of knowledge acquisition; instead, they are generated naturally based on the knowledge student acquire. Therefore, it is not about choosing between competencies and knowledge, but allowing both to develop together, with knowledge acquisition laying a solid foundation for competency improvement. Without the support of pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary knowledge, students cannot improve their listening, speaking, reading and writing skills, realize cultural understanding and appreciation, and learn independently, not to mention critical consciousness and creative thinking. The focus on language ability is mainly due to the consideration of students' needs for the acquisition and transmission of information, which reflects the instrumental nature of English to some extent. This key competency concerns the effective use of spoken and written language skills in multiple situations. It is an essential tool for functioning well in society and the workplace and participating in an effective dialogue with others. The communication and interaction based on real language and corpora, real contexts and real tasks provides a solid foundation for the improvement of students' key competencies in the English subject.

Language makes the social environment accessible, helps individuals to develop perspectives, attitudes and patterns of perception. A positive attitude towards communication in foreign languages involves a disposition to critical and constructive dialogues, the appreciation of cultural diversity, curiosity about languages and an interest in interaction with others. This implies an awareness of the impact of language on others in the workplace and a need to understand and use language in a positive and socially responsible manner.

3.3.2. Key Competency 2: Perception of Thinking Mode Differences

Perception of thinking mode differences means that in the process of English learning and use, students make use of such ways as observation, analysis and comparison to know the expressive features of oral communication and written communication, perceive the diversity of cognitive thinking under different cultural backgrounds, understand the differences between Chinese and Western ways of thinking, observe and know the world from a different perspective, and make reasonable judgments.

Perception of thinking mode differences is the most important dimension that is closest to students' personality development, as well as the dimension with the highest degree of differentiation from the objectives of Key competency 1, which can be regarded as the most important of key competencies. Language learning and using requires thinking, which can meanwhile further promote the development of thinking. By perceiving the thinking mode differences between the East and the West, the internalization and solidification of emotions, attitudes, and values may be realized.

Language is a cloak conforming to the customary

categories of thought of its speakers [4] and different languages can endow people with different thinking patterns. In the 1930s, Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf made a comparative study of the differences between different languages and concluded that different language users have different ways of thinking. Wang points out that the essential difference between English and Chinese lies in the difference of time and space, and that Asians are spatial and integral in thinking and cognition while Westerners are better at temporal and analytical thinking [34]. Jiang et al. found that learning English can effectively improve students' analytical thinking, which can be used as an effective supplement to Chinese thinking and help students gradually form their unique or good thinking ability and mode of thinking [17]. Cheng believes that learning English language helps students to form a new way of thinking, summarizing ten functions of English learning in students' thinking ability based on the characteristics of English language and English learning [7]. Among these functions are logical thinking ability, concept construction ability, the ability to judge time and space, and innovative thinking ability. Cheng and Zhao point out that the process of understanding and expressing in English is not only conducive to the cultivation of students' general thinking ability, but also conducive to the gradual formation of unique thinking modes and thinking abilities that English users are good at [8].

3.3.3. Key Competency 3: Cross-cultural Understanding

Cross-cultural understanding means that in the process of learning English, students study the Chinese and foreign fine cultures to broaden international perspectives, to form the correct understanding of foreign cultures, the profound cognition of the Chinese fine cultures and the objective understanding of the Chinese and foreign corporate cultures, and to open inclusive mentality to understand cultural diversity, strengthen cultural self-confidence, and promote cultural communication.

Cross-cultural understanding involves respecting and understanding other countries' cultures and respecting the emotional attitudes and values of other countries on the premise of full understanding and learning. At the same time, the competency is concerned with cultivating students' ability of sensitivity and discrimination. Students should not blindly worship the culture of another country while denying their own culture, but should take the essence and resist the dark sides of the foreign culture to establish their own cultural attitude. In cross-cultural communication, different cultures collide, resulting, at times, in inevitable misunderstanding and conflict. A higher cultural quality not only makes students less likely to make mistakes in diversified social communication, but also help them adapt their approaches, thoughts and decisions to guarantee positive outcomes in cross-cultural interactions.

Cross-cultural understanding can equip people to participate in an effective and constructive way in social and work life, and particularly in increasingly diverse societies, and to help resolve conflict where necessary. In the "Outline

of the National Plan for Medium- and Long-term Education Reform and Development (2010-2020)" issued by MOE in 2010, vocational education is supposed to "actively promote cultural communication, carry forward fine traditional cultures and develop advanced cultures"[25]. The English subject has significant cross-cultural characteristics and indicates students' behaviors, emotional attitudes, values and other educational directions from a cross-cultural perspective [13]. Accordingly, cross-cultural understanding is put forward as a core component of key competencies, which fully reflects the important transformation of English curriculum from instrumental orientation to educational value orientation. English learning needs to cultivate students' cultural character, arouse and strengthen students' cultural consciousness, and internalize them into values. Good cross-cultural understanding enables students to make fewer mistakes in diversified social interactions and helps them to maintain respectful and inclusive attitudes towards cultural differences between China and the West (including corporate cultures at home and abroad). At the same time, the fine Chinese cultures will spread to the world to enhance students' sense of mission and responsibility as "cultural ambassadors".

3.3.4. Key Competency 4: Autonomous Learning

Autonomous learning refers to the sustainable development of language learning and learning ability by students who, based on their own characteristics, make learning plans, choose and use appropriate learning strategies and develop good learning habits.

Autonomous learning as a competency is the basis and foundation of English key competencies and expands the previous concept of learning strategy because it includes not only the use of learning methods and learning strategies, but also the motivations, emotions and attitudes of learning English. In addition to cultivating the cognitive, metacognitive, social, emotional, and resources strategies, teachers should also pay close attention to students' emotional experience of the English subject, making students emotionally aware of the importance of learning English, and stimulating their interest in learning English [35]. Due to the lack of adequate listening and speaking environment and the strong exam-oriented atmosphere in China [20], it is very important for students to master certain learning strategies and establish interest, motivation and confidence in learning English so as to learn sustainably according to their own needs and capabilities. As the ability to explore and make unremitting efforts, autonomous learning is one of the most important abilities in the cultivation of 21st century talents, as well as being a prerequisite for students to actively learn, self-regulate and seek self-improvement [26].

The development of key competences requires that teachers and schools focus on two things simultaneously: teaching a subject's content, and helping students to develop the competencies [27]. A question for educators is then how to develop the key competencies, through which means and what activities within a particular school subject [3].

4. Integration of Key Competencies in Vocational English Curriculum Design

However good a curriculum design may be, the absence of a structured and integrated process to develop it will prevent valuable results from being achieved [32]. The integration of key competencies in teaching and learning changes teachers' and students' roles in the classroom and learning activities take on a more student-centered approach. For instance, in classrooms where key competencies are applied, students have an active role in decision making related to their learning and are consequently entitled to more choices in learning. Teachers in such classrooms respond to student needs, provide quality feedback to students and manifest themselves as students. In addition, learning activities employed may make learning meaningful by providing students with authentic contexts. Such types of learning experiences ultimately create students who are motivated to learn, think critically, manage themselves, and build as well as maintain positive relationships.

Subject key competencies emphasize that teachers teach for students' understanding, attach importance to the deep processing and mining of knowledge, guide students to develop higher-order thinking activities, explore the essential principles and ideological significance hidden behind knowledge symbols, and pursue the development of students' active learning ability, innovative thinking and critical thinking. Truly implementing subject key competencies does not therefore permit students to stay at a shallow level of learning, but pushes teachers to thoroughly reform past teaching modes, and to attach importance to the integrity and profundity of unit design. Zhong makes the point that "the decisive part in unit design is to integrate different teaching strategies based on key competencies" [40]. That is to say, the focus of unit design should fall on the cultivation of students' key competencies. Only when curriculum design conforms to students' actual situation, takes students as the center, embodies key competencies, and integrates teaching materials, can teaching activities help to realize teaching objectives. Based on students' learning styles, learning experiences, learning motivation, learning interest, language level and learning ability, effectively integrate course content, teachers should select appropriate teaching methods and teaching modes, provide students with diverse learning options, and enable students of different types and levels to experience and enjoy the fun of learning English. By organizing group discussions, peer assistance, cooperative learning and other activities, students may be guided to improve their workplace language communication, their perception of thinking mode differences, their cross-cultural understanding and autonomous learning ability in the process of solving real problems and completing practical tasks.

5. Conclusion

As has been illustrated through the course of this chapter, key competences represent a valuable but complex view of

learning. The four key competencies for secondary vocational English have been extracted and elaborated upon, and the difficulties associated with incorporating them into the curriculum so that they may act as factors for improvement does not reside in the use of the term, but in the concept that is ultimately associated with it. It would appear then that the term is destined to become the norm, both in university education and vocational training and in compulsory education [32].

Currently, a curricular design based on competencies is not in line with the predominant vocational school culture in China, and this can only be changed over time. The proposal of subject key competencies raises the education target of “teaching students to be adults”, and progress is greatly needed in such aspects as curriculum design.

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