Graded Teaching Of College English In Chinese Mainland Universities

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ABSTRACT

This article probes into college freshmen' foundation in English and the current situation of college English teaching to explore the pattern as well as the reform of graded teaching by using the case study approach. More importantly, the pros and cons of graded English teaching are summarized. Also, the corresponding solutions to the disadvantages of this teaching by using the case study approach are advanced to promote the reform of college English teaching.

Key words: Graded teaching, pros and cons and solutions of graded teaching, teaching reform, college English.

INTRODUCTION

College English graded teaching, as it is practiced in Chinese post-secondary classrooms, aims at teaching students in accordance with their aptitude. Previous scholarship on college English graded teaching has looked at the current teaching situation and compared it with the theoretical basis for graded teaching. This line of inquiry has been argued for the necessity of graded teaching reform and further inquiry into the origins of current practices, so as to enhance college English teaching quality and usher college English teaching into a new stage.

The American educator Bloom (1961a) figured out that the major reason for students' failure to obtain good marks lies not in their intellectual inability but in the absence of appropriate teaching conditions and reasonable assistance. If provided with suitable conditions, the majority of students will become similar in many aspects such as their learning ability, learning speed, and motivation for further study (Zhu, 1999). Graded teaching is meant to offer such learning conditions and necessary study opportunities for students at all levels.

The American education psychologist Ausubel (1963) pointed out that the most significant factor affecting students' learning is what they already know. Teaching should be implemented on the basis of students' prior knowledge. Therefore, grading and teaching based on students' current level can make teaching more targeted and help to build up students' confidence in English learning as well as enhancing their learning enthusiasm and creativity.

The hypothesis of language input theory advanced by Krashen (1985), a famed applied linguist in the United States, is a significant second language acquisition theory whose "i+1" theory provides graded English teaching with its theoretical basis. The theory points out that "i" refers to language input corresponding to the linguistic level of a learner; such input is the existing language knowledge of the learner. "i+1," which is the most easily-accepted language input, refers to language input a bit higher than the real language proficiency of the learner. Only when the input is slightly above the existing level of the language acquirer can it be regarded as comprehensible input. "i+1" is considered as the best instructors that can be offered to language learners. Meanwhile, Krashen (1985) brought forward the importance of emotional filtering factors in language inputs, which include motivation, self-confidence, and anxiety arising from second language acquisition. Teachers’ teaching in traditional Chinese classes is unable to ensure language input above the i level throughout a classroom because of the discrepancy in students' English levels, which result in an adverse effect on
teaching. Only through graded teaching based on students’ actual language level can language input be optimally ensured as comprehensible input.

“Teaching students in accordance with their aptitude” means that teachers should base their teaching on students’ actual situation, take full account of the individual distinctions among students, and accordingly give corresponding lessons (Li et al., 2007). This has long been a principle advocated in China’s national education history. As early as 2000 years ago, Confucius, China’s nationally famed education thinker, pointed out that individual discrepancies exist between students; hence, different requirements should be set in accordance with students’ different characteristics. Such a proposition subsequently formed the theory of “teaching students in accordance with their aptitude,” referring to the idea that teachers should base their teaching on students’ practical abilities and capitalize on the trend of adopting various teaching measures.

In the transition of China’s national higher education from “elite education” to “mass education” (Su and Li, 2006), the increase in the number of college students has contributed to the unevenness of the students’ English foundation. Higher education tends to develop diversely rather than unitarily, and thus students’ language proficiencies differ a lot among different majors. Hence, the previous uniform teaching pattern has lagged far behind the demands on teaching in the new era. Four articles published in the “Focus” column of China Higher Education’s 11th edition in 2002 advanced the transformation of national college English teaching through “graded teaching.”

In 2003, a teaching quality and reform project in higher education was launched by China’s Ministry of Education. College English teaching reform was listed as one project, whose guiding ideology was “teaching students in accordance with their aptitude” by placing importance on students’ language application ability, inspiring their passion for English learning, and improving the efficiency of language study (Chang, 2009).

Graded teaching is an important reform of college English teaching in China. The College English Curriculum Requirements (2004) pointed out that college English teaching should stick to the principle of “teaching students in accordance with their aptitude” and adapt to individualized teaching, hence satisfying the demand for improving college students’ comprehensive English skills. With regards to teaching requirements, the proposition of “three levels (three requirements)” was put forward, dividing the requirements for college English teaching into three levels: preliminary requirements, vantage requirements, and higher requirements. The new requirements lay a solid foundation and gave vigorous support for graded teaching. These requirements were intended to spur the reform of foreign language education.

As an organizational form of college education, the defect in classroom teaching lies in the inability of a unitive teaching pace to account for students’ individual differences (Ren, 2009). Due to historical reasons and the examination system, educators in China tend to neglect individual differences between their students. Therefore, it is necessary for educators to admit discrepancies to appreciate personality differences, and to give fair consideration to both students with good groundwork and those with a poor foundation, so as to offer a favorable learning environment for all to achieve individual development.

METHODOLOGY

A number of universities in mainland China have been carrying out the above-mentioned policy for a period of time. This study evaluated the policy using a case study: Guangdong University of Business Studies (GDUBS), an important finance and economics-oriented university in the south of China.

In this case study, the effectiveness of the graded teaching policy at GDUBS was examined in two ways. First, an interview with the dean of the Foreign Languages Department revealed the history of the department’s implementation of the policy. Then, three teachers and three students involved in the policy were asked to give written form answers to the following research questions:

- How do you understand College English graded teaching?
- What are the cons and pros of the policy?
- Can you comment on the policy?
- Do you have any advice for improving the policy?
- What are the problems in the implementation of the policy?

FINDINGS

Interview results: History of policy implementation

According to the dean of the foreign languages department at GUBS, the college undertook the following four stages in its implementation of policy.

Ten years ago, the provincial education department launched an exploration of graded teaching and its management model for the foreign languages school. This study was called “Research and Practice on College English Graded Teaching and Its Management Pattern”, and it offered theoretical preparation for the practice of college graded teaching.

From 2002 on, the foreign languages school led a discussion group that explored the work of “the testing
system of college English graded teaching.” They spent a year improving the system as well as the test database after acquiring statistics from the grading simulation tests taken by the college's freshmen.

In 2005, the college president's office cooperated with the foreign languages school on college English graded teaching and convened coordination meetings several times with relevant departments. In 2006, they jointly released the Implementation Scenario of College English Curriculum Graded Teaching (Tentative). In 2007, the foreign languages school mapped out the College English Syllabus of Graded Teaching (Tentative) and the College English Examination Syllabus of Graded Teaching (Tentative).

Beginning in 2008, the college's freshmen have written a grading test. There have been different requirements for college English teaching at A, B, and C levels. Students from A level classes have to reach higher requirements requested by the College English Curriculum Teaching Requirements promulgated by the Ministry of Education; students from B level classes need to achieve the vantage requirements, and those from C level classes are expected to pass the curriculum examination. Based on the diverse teaching requirements above, regulations have been made concerning teaching plans, content, schedules, patterns, and assessment at the A, B, and C levels.

**Questionnaire results: Pros and cons of the policy**

Based on the interviewees' answers, the pros and cons of the policy are summarized hereafter.

There is need to determine the connection and transition between English teaching in high schools and that in colleges. College English is a stage that is independent from rest of the sphere of English teaching, differing from elementary English teaching in high schools and professional English teaching as well. The students who take college English teaching are new intake coming from high schools, which accounts for the difficulties in the college graded teaching.

Graded teaching possesses many advantages as an attempt to reform college English teaching, such as helping students at different levels to make progress, facilitating teaching that satisfies students' various demands, and creating a good atmosphere for English learning (Chang, 2009). College English graded teaching, to a large extent, reflects the success of quality education. From the perspective of quality education, graded teaching should aim at shaping students' professional qualities as well as cultivating their nonprofessional ones. College English graded teaching is the best embodiment of this approach (Li et al., 2007).

Traditional Chinese teaching tends to adopt a one-sided method that compromises teaching objectives for many students, causing excellent students to feel bored while students with poor English encounter hardships in learning English and lose their learning initiative (Li et al., 2007). In contrast, graded teaching lays out various teaching objectives based on different levels. It works out different lesson plans for students with different starting points and supplies diverse teaching content and teaching schedules. It is an approach that favors students' ability to convert external pressure into internal motivation and to achieve personal progress, and highlights the individualized education ideology and students' autonomous learning.

If college English graded teaching is not well handled, the fulfillment of the syllabus, which is a key component of college English teaching, is likely to be affected. Because of practical problems, it is difficult for graded teaching to be fully effective. Students in the A level classes set high objectives because of a sense of superiority, while, in contrast, those in B-level classes may suffer from a sense of inferiority; some of them may struggle to enter the upper level, but the students who are left far behind tend to give up on themselves.

Some students in the A level classes may feel that they have a good English foundation and that they can learn English well without teachers' guidance; meanwhile, many of those in the B-level classes are hopeless about the effectiveness of their English classes because they hold the opinion that the teachers assigned to them have relatively lower teaching ability (Li et al., 2007). Both situations bring huge stress to the teachers in charge of graded teaching. The worst of all, some students classified in the C-level classes are self-abundant on English learning. Students in C-level classes tend to be inattentive in classes, to be unmotivated to learn English, to be without a sense of competition or self-discipline, and to hold negative attitudes towards learning English. Besides, they seldom interact with teachers.

In this study, almost all teachers wanted to teach in the B-level classes (Li et al., 2007). The reason was because, although the college had implemented graded teaching, the college still followed the prior appraisal system to assess teachers, and there was no difference as to whether the students did well or badly in the exams. There was no mechanism motivating teachers to teach the A-level classes over the B-level ones.

**DISCUSSION**

According to the interviewees' written form answers to the research questions, the following suggestions could be tried out to improve the college English grading teaching policy in China.
Teachers at all three levels should set up research groups on lesson preparation to guarantee teaching quality by adopting collaborative lesson planning and making agreements on teaching content. Relevant departments should lay importance on graded teaching, and special attention is needed to strengthen collaborative lesson planning and to encourage experience teachers to help newer ones as part of a faculty team. A team should be set up to supervise teaching by means of observing classroom teaching periodically, checking up on teaching plans, and collaborative lesson planning, to improve teaching quality constantly.

The classes in college English graded teaching should be based on students’ scores on both the English part of the college entrance examination and the college English grading test. The excellent students should be classified into A-level classes, the medium students into B-level classes, and the lower-achieving students into C-level classes. In addition, the proportion of grading should be balanced, with the students from A-level classes and C-level classes respectively accounting for 15% of the total number and students from B-level classes accounting for 70%.

Pre-education work must be done before classifying students into the three level classes, so as to inform them of the purpose and merits of graded teaching. Freshmen are often unclear about the meaning of graded teaching, so college English teachers should firstly launch pre-education right before grading by explaining it to students and making a distinction between the college English graded teaching and fast and slow classes in high schools. It must be made clear to students that the facilities and resources are the same at all levels; only the teaching requirements, content, and methods vary. In this way, teachers could help students overcome psychological obstacles and build up their confidence. This would create a harmonious learning atmosphere. Teachers should also adopt suitable teaching methods according to their actual situation, so as to leave students a sense of achievement after each class. Furthermore, students in all levels of classes should be encouraged to work hard for satisfactory results in their future studies.

The relationship among students, textbooks, and teaching practice should be well handled. Teaching materials play an extremely significant role as they are a medium connecting teaching and learning, a reflection of the syllabus, and a ground upon which teachers arrange their teaching. Therefore, teachers using graded teaching should select appropriate materials based on students’ actual situation at all levels. Students from A-level classes can select some learning materials slightly higher than their actual level; for instance, teaching materials containing much listening and speaking content should be preferred. As for those from B-level classes, due to their relatively weak foundation, small vocabulary size, and unclear understanding of grammar, they should choose materials aiming at instilling basic language knowledge to make up for the gaps in their knowledge.

To further motivate students’ activeness in English learning and to intensify their sense of competition, dynamic management should be practiced on students among A-, B-, and C-level classes. Dynamic adjustments should be worked out according to the students’ actual learning situation, achievements in the final exams and personal inclination, and the teachers’ recommendations at the end of each term; those with good grades can leap to an upper level, and those with poor achievement can move to a lower level. Such an out-and-up system would not only equip the A-level students with a sense of crisis and awareness of their own relegation, but motivate the initiative of those from the B- and C-level classes. Hence, a favorable atmosphere for autonomous learning would be formed throughout the campus. Simultaneously, this system would put pressure on teachers to teach in a more responsible way, resulting in the enhancement of college English teaching on the whole.

The examination standards of graded teaching need further improvement. They should be worked out more comprehensively, objectively, reasonably, and accurately on the basis of the teaching requirements as well as students’ actual situation. Written examinations should feature unified papers, marking, and an assembly-line approach in order to separate teaching and examination. The written examination papers’ propositions should be set by specially-assigned persons, and each level should use the same paper. On oral tests, unitive standards and questions should be adopted at each level. As for the propositions of oral tests, the spoken English reform team should set this task. Before the oral test, all teachers should be trained to use the same standards to conduct the test. An appropriate conversion should be imposed on the scores of the three levels to account for test difficulty.

When arranging teachers to teach graded classes at any level, the college should firstly respect the teachers’ personal inclination and encourage the teachers to teach in the most-needed classes. On the teachers’ side, they should also give consideration to the overall situation, and try to obey the college arrangement.

CONCLUSION

The implementation of graded English teaching is a systematic project, involving reforms in teaching ideology, objectives, curriculum design, principles, materials, and teaching management (Ren, 2009). In classroom activities, teachers should not only have language knowledge and organize teaching in a scientific way, but keep changing their roles in their classroom teaching and adopt methods
to fully engage their students.

Graded teaching is an inevitable consequence of college English teaching reform and a necessary precondition for teaching students in accordance with their aptitude, achieving good teaching effects, and ensuring teaching quality. Graded teaching regards quality education together with students’ development as its fundamental mission, takes cultivation of students’ ability as its final objective, and complies with governmental requirements for college English education as well as the demand for foreign language teaching development. Nevertheless, graded teaching is not a universal teaching method fit for all students; therefore, it still requires further research and practice.

Graded English teaching admits students’ discrepancies in their learning abilities, respects their individual personality development, meets their different levels of learning, leaves sufficient freedom for their self-development, and follows a humane educational philosophy (Chang, 2009). As college English education is part of education aimed at developing the whole person, English educators should get a clear understanding of its current development; launch a responsible reform of teaching methods, instruments, and content and curriculum design; and strengthen education by fostering college students’ English motivation and comprehensive quality in accordance with social demands (Su and Li, 2006). Only in this way can higher education realize the objective of serving social development.

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