

# On Graded English Teaching Models—A Case Study of Tianjin University of Technology\*

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**Abstract**—Graded English Teaching Model is based on Krashen's Input Hypothesis and Learner-centered Theory. Based on the two theories, Three-Division Model of Graded College English Teaching is put into practice in Tianjin University of Technology. The data shows that the Model has been well received by the students and the positive result has been achieved.

**Index Terms**—Graded English Teaching Model, Input Hypothesis, Learner-centered Theory

## I. INTRODUCTION

Since the enrollment of colleges and universities expanded in 1999, the number of the colleges students has increased greatly. In 2001, there were 11,000,000 students in China's colleges and universities, but in 2005, the number has reached 23,000,000, which, especially, is considered to be a big challenge to the English teaching in colleges and universities of China. A statistic conducted by Foreign Languages Committee shows that the average size of the English class in colleges and universities is 50 students. In 2007, *College English Curriculum Requirements* was formally issued, which indicates college English education has entered into a new phase. Requirements points out that "As China is a large country with conditions that vary from region to region and from college to college, the teaching of college English should follow the principle of providing different guidances for different groups of students and instructing them in accordance with their aptitude so as to meet the specific need of individualized teaching".

## II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

### A. *The Theory of the Input Hypothesis*

The Input Hypothesis, advanced by Stephen Krashen, a famous American applied linguist, in the late 1970s and the early 1980s, is an all-round theory concerning second language acquisition. The theory provides a good theoretical framework for China's foreign language teaching. The Input Hypothesis is the most important one of Krashen's theories of second language acquisition. The input hypothesis attempts to explain how learners acquire a second language. In other words, this hypothesis is Krashen's explanation of how second language acquisition takes place.

Krashen argues it is essential not to focus on explicit grammatical structures or learning activities but rather to occupy classroom time with acquisition tasks or activities. Therefore, the Input Hypothesis is only concerned with "acquisition", not "learning". Given the correctness of the Natural Order Hypothesis, how do acquirers move from one stage to another? More generally, how do acquirers move from stage "i", where "i" represents current competence, to "i+1", the next level? The Input Hypothesis makes the following claim: a necessary (but not sufficient) condition to move from stage "i" to stage "i+1" is that acquirers understanding input that contains "i+1", where "understanding" means that acquirers focus on the meaning but not the form of the message. According to this hypothesis, acquirers improve and progress along the "natural order" when they receive second language "input" that is one step beyond their current stage of linguistic competence. How is this possible? This is done with the help of context or extra-linguistic information. That is, acquirers use more than their linguistic competence, context, knowledge about the world, extra-linguistic information, to help understand language that contains structures a bit beyond their current level of competence.

Furthermore, the Input Hypothesis says that input must contain "i+1" to be useful for language acquisition, but it need not contain only "i+1". If acquirers understand the input, and there is enough of it, "i+1" will be provided. In other words, if communication is successful, "i+1" is provided automatically. This implies that the best input should not even attempt to deliberately aim at "i+1". While the teaching syllabi try to deliberately cover "i+1". Usually both teachers and learners feel the aim of the lesson is to teach or practice a specific grammatical item or structure. Once the structure is mastered, the syllabi proceed to the next one. On the basis of the Input Hypothesis such a deliberate attempt to provide "i+1" is not necessary.

The Input Hypothesis also states that acquirers must not be forced to produce early. Their production is not taught directly. That is, a certain amount of comprehensible input must be built up before acquirers start to produce their own

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structures. Acquisition will come when acquirers feel “ready”. For example, if an acquirer is at a stage “i”, then acquisition takes place when he/she is exposed to enough comprehensible input that belongs to level “i+1”.

The best methods are therefore those that supply “comprehensible input” in low anxiety situations, containing messages that students really want to hear. These methods do not force early production in the second language, but allow students to produce when they are ‘ready’, recognizing that improvement comes from supplying communicative and comprehensible input, and not from forcing and correcting production. (Krashen, 1985).

Krashen believes that by means of context and other extra-linguistic cues language acquisition is caused by acquirers’ understanding input “i+1” which is slightly beyond their current stage of knowledge “i”. Krashen defines “i+1” as comprehensible input which means that learners should be able to understand the essence of what is being said or presented to them. Comprehensible input is particularly beneficial in acquisition and production. It is crucial that acquirers receive the input that is comprehensible and challenging enough to lead to improve in linguistic competence. The main task of a teacher is to provide comprehensible input to the students as much as possible. When an acquirer is provided with comprehensible input, his/her LAD is activated and he/she acquires. Comprehensible input has four characteristics: (1) comprehensible; (2) interesting and relevant; (3) not grammatically sequenced; (4) sufficient “i+1”.

#### B. *Learner-centered Theory*

Learner-centered teaching is an approach to teaching that is increasingly being encouraged in higher education. Learner-centered teachers do not employ a single teaching method. This approach emphasizes a variety of different types of methods that shifts the role of the instructors from givers of information to facilitating student learning.

Traditionally instructors focused on what they did, and not on what the students are learning. This emphasis on what instructors do often leads to students who are passive learners and who did not take responsibility for their own learning. Educators call this traditional method, “instructor-centered teaching.” In contrast, “learner-centered teaching” occurs when instructors focus on student learning.

Educators commonly use three phrases with this approach. Learner- centered teaching places the emphasis on the person who is doing the learning (Weimer, 2002). Learning-centered teaching focuses on the process of learning. Both phrases appeal to faculty because these phrases identify their critical role of teaching in the learning process. The phrase student centered learning is also used, but some instructors do not like it because it appears to have a consumer focus, seems to encourage students to be more empowered, and appears to take the teacher out of the critical role (Blumberg, 2004).

### III. RESEARCHES ON GRADED COLLEGE ENGLISH TEACHING

A few researches have been conducted to investigate the graded English teaching in China. Huang (2009), Wang (2008) and Qu (2007) study the major factors involved in this regard, such as class division, teaching methods and curriculum design. Huang (2009) surveys 26 universities and colleges in China about class division for graded teaching. The research shows that 2-level class division is adopted in 5 colleges and universities, 3-level class division in 16 and 4-division in 5. At the same time, each university carries out the graded English education according to its own evaluation and class division system. The survey also shows that students’ English marks for college entrance examinations are used for the measure of class division in 5 colleges and universities; a test is administered by 13 colleges and universities to test the students’ different language skills and divide them into different levels based; 8 colleges and universities adopt the combination of the two. Ming Anyun (2009) also focuses his research on class division of graded English teaching. In his research, he has put class division into four categories: 3-level class division.

### IV. METHODOLOGY

#### A. *Procedures of Graded Teaching*

To explore the feasible approaches and effect, we, School of Foreign Languages, Tianjin University of Technology, experimented with the teaching reform with graded teaching for Grade 2008, 2009. The concrete methods are as follows:

#### B. *Class Division*

We began to try graded teaching among the students of Grade 2008 and 2009. In this new teaching program, the freshmen of each Grade were divided into new classes with levels A, B, C according to their actual English scores upon entrance. 20—30% of the students with higher scores were graded into levels A to begin their study, which were supposed to attain the higher requirement and pass CET Band 4 at the end of the first year. The students with medium—level B (40—60%) and low—level C (20—30%) learn the courses according to the original teaching program to attain the general requirement in two years.

#### C. *Curriculum Design*

We made curriculum adjustment according to the new teaching program mainly for the students of classes A. When those students of classes A passed CET Band 4 in the first year, they were classified into advanced classes once again in

the second year and were provided with some practical courses like Advanced English, Practical Translation and Writing, Listening—Speaking course and English and American Culture, etc. These courses aimed to create a supportive environment to excite the students motivation so that they could exert their internal learning mechanisms to study actively and independently.

#### D. Promoting and Demoting Mechanism

At the end of each term all the students used a one—level test paper to participate in the final examination. 10% of the students of classes B or C could go on the more advanced classes to study respectively or vice versa, namely those students of classes A or B who failed to pass the examination would be descended to the lower classes. This kind of competitive mechanism urges all the students to study harder to meet the requirement of the course.

#### E. Benefits of Graded Teaching

Until now, we carried out graded teaching for three terms. The experiment showed that the mode of the graded teaching stimulated greatly students' initiatives and participation in study, and realized individualized learning and met the needs of students' different levels and learning styles. The teachers and students benefited from it. The nearly 70% the students with classes A passed when they took part in CET Band 4 by the end of the second term. Most of them not only mastered necessary linguistic knowledge but also learnt language practical application and improved expressing abilities in spoken and written English. The students with classes B or C played the solid foundation in linguistic basic knowledge. In a word, all the students made greater progress in it. In order to know the effect brought by graded teaching, after a year in December, 2010, we made an investigation which contains students' perspectives and benefit from graded teaching. The students investigated were selected from three different classes (A, B, C). We delivered 400 questionnaires and got back 370 effective ones. The result is as follows:

TABLE 1  
THE STUDENTS' RESPONSE TO GRADED ENGLISH TEACHING

	Necessary	Partly Necessary	Not Necessary	Total
Number	301	34	35	370
Percentage	81.4%	9.2%	9.4%	100%

TABLE 2  
THE STUDENTS' BENEFITS FROM GRADED ENGLISH TEACHING

	Very Beneficial	Beneficial	Not Beneficial	Total
Number	77	261	32	370
Percentage	20.8%	70.5%	8.7%	100%

Table 1 shows that students suited to his / her English level study all along. The students who considered graded teaching necessary took up 81.4% of the total number. Most of them took positive attitude towards graded teaching. The statistic of Table 2 shows that the students who benefited from graded teaching took up more than 90% of the total and not beneficial only 8.7%.

#### V. CONCLUSION

From the above analysis we can see the experiment of graded teaching in Tianjin University of Technology has achieved success. The mode of Graded Teaching also stimulates the students to take initiatives in their English study and improve their English level. At the same time, the students can exercise more choices to choose the textbooks tailoring to their needs than before. Graded teaching has become a wide scope in our college and gave an unparalleled advantage which displayed new vitality. It will produce the positive and profound effect on college English teaching reform.

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