

# A Study of Graduate Thesis Writing Course for English Undergraduates

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**Abstract**—Graduate thesis is an important form to assess students' comprehensive ability. But the questionnaires carried among 36 supervisors and 167 students in the School of Foreign Languages of University of Jinan showed that a number of problems existed in the process and result of thesis writing. The discrepancies in teachers' and students' beliefs and the problems in the graduate thesis writing course are the key causes of the low quality of students' theses. The author of this paper reformed the graduate thesis writing course by doubling teaching hours and adding new contents, namely, the appreciation of academic papers published in journals of high prestige, the revision of former graduate theses, and the writing of academic papers. Results showed that students improved significantly in collecting and using materials as well as language and format.

**Index Terms**—graduate thesis, the teaching of thesis writing, English undergraduates

## I. INTRODUCTION

Graduate thesis is a necessary condition for Bachelor's degree. In China, *The English Teaching Syllabus for Chinese Higher Education* prescribes that "Graduate thesis is an important form to check students' comprehensive competence and to assess their study performance." The thesis subscribed for Bachelor's degree is an important ingredient in undergraduate education and a significant step in college students' final academic stage. The purpose and significance of writing a thesis lie in developing students' comprehensive ability and rigorous scientific approach, enabling them to master scientific research method and raising their awareness of originality. The *Syllabus* declares that "for English undergraduates, their thesis should have smooth wording, clear thought, substantial contents and innovative idea". However, due to students' lack of proper attitudes towards the thesis, their limited linguistic knowledge and academic competence, as well as supervisors' inadequate instruction, the improper teaching contents and methods of thesis writing course and school's lax management, etc., their theses haven't reach the demand set by the *Syllabus*.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Papers on English undergraduates' thesis writing can be classified into three kinds. The first kind is research report (Mu Fengying, 2001; Sun Wenkang, 2004; Yan Jinglan & Ni Wei, 2005; Lu Wenjun, 2008). The second kind is exploration into the administration, assessment and specific links in the instruction of thesis writing (Yu Manjun, 2001; Li Jiayun, 1999; Huang Xiaoping, 2002; Li Ping, 2003). The third kind is the introduction to the instructive strategies and writing skills (Song Fei, 2001; Wang Guihe, 2002; You Xiaonan, 2004; Cheng Xiaoqiang, 2010; Zhao Pingjing, 2012).

Though these papers probed into thesis writing from different angles of view, they agreed on a common point--- the cultivation of students' competence of originality and academy. While how to improve the quality of students' thesis through graduate thesis writing course has not been explored. Thus, this paper will discuss how to improve the quality of students' theses through reading, evaluating, revising and writing academic papers.

## III. RESEARCH DESIGN

### A. Research Questions

Three questions were to be answered in this research:

- a. What are the problems in English majors' graduate theses?
- b. What are the teachers' and students' beliefs in the writing and instruction of graduate theses?
- c. Some practical activities such as reading, evaluating, revising and writing academic papers have been added into graduate thesis writing course. Can the new teaching contents and method effectively improve the quality of students' theses?

### B. Research Procedures

#### 1. Questionnaires

- a. Before the teaching experiment, a questionnaire was carried among 36 supervisors in the School of Foreign Languages of University of Jinan who have ever instructed English undergraduates' thesis writing. The questions are

concerned with the problems in students' graduate theses and teachers' beliefs in thesis instruction, including the significance of thesis writing, requirements, instructing procedures and suggestions for instruction, etc.. There are multiple choices and open questions in the questionnaire.

b. Before the experiment, a questionnaire was carried out among 167 seniors who had finished their graduate theses. It aims to investigate students' beliefs in thesis writing, the difficulties they met in the process of thesis writing and the reward they got from thesis writing.

The analysis of teachers' questionnaires revealed the following 6 problems.

1) Before 2008, it was the students who decided the topics for themselves, which reflected that students are the subjects of the study. However, the topics they chose were usually improper—some topics were too broad to give sufficient direction to students' research and usually resulted in a superficial treatment of the subject, while some others were too narrow to yield adequate information, thus limiting students' ability to reach a valid conclusion. Some topics chosen by students were outmoded, that is, they had already been extensively and deeply explored in academic field. With their current ability, students could hardly make further exploration. Some topics chosen by students were similar to others, that is, many students chose the same topic, and had similar research angle, approach, literatures and finally drew similar conclusions, lacking originality. To tackle the above problem, the school decided to let the teachers choose topics for students from 2009. Teachers chose some topics and then the topics were assigned to students randomly. This way of choosing topics violated the principle that students should have the decision-making right in their study.

2) Students didn't have their own ideas and thoughts, there was no substantial content in their theses, only general argument. A large number of students didn't have the competence of analyzing and solving problems. As a result, they either piled up literatures in their theses, or simply loaded their theses with quotations of others' ideas.

3) Four problems existed in material collection. Firstly, the materials collected by students were outmoded, which could be seen from the years in bibliographies. Secondly, some materials were not relative to their theses and were not adequately authentic. Thirdly, students didn't make their choice in using materials. As a result, the materials either could not fully support their viewpoint or completely buried their own views. Fourthly, the research design was improper in that most theses were based on literature review, instead of being supported by first hand material, which made the theses less persuasive. Students did not know how to select information they need from reference materials. They lacked the ability to analyze and evaluate materials.

4) Many students did not know how to write those typical and compulsory parts of a thesis like abstract, introduction, literature review, conclusion and acknowledgement. Some students' abstracts merely introduced the structure of their theses; there was too much background statement in introduction, which led to the contraction of substantial contents; literature review was mainly composed of other researchers' views, without proper analysis, evaluation or summary; instead of briefly summarizing what has been stated in the main body of their theses, some students simply repeated the sentences in the main body without making any necessary change, nor did they point out the recommendation for further practice; in acknowledgement, some students mechanically applied others' pattern, without presenting definite object and reasons of acknowledgement.

5) Graduate thesis is a special form of argumentation, so the different chapters of it should be written in logical order centering on the theme. However, many students did not constitute their theses into an integral whole with proper devices of coherence. To be specific, different chapters were loosely connected, the structure was improper, the key point did not stand out, some chapters were hollow, the argumentation was verbose without focal point. There was no appropriate cohesive device between sentences.

6) The problems in the language of thesis are as follows: the mood was too subjective, the language was not formal enough, there was mechanical translation, Chinglish and inappropriate choice of words. The problems in the form of thesis lied in the following aspects: some students did not offer the origin of some quotations, some origins of quotations in the main body did not correspond with the references in bibliography, the form of bibliography was not standard in that there were many mistakes in the use of blank space, row spacing, style of calligraphy and punctuation marks. All this indicates that students needed instruction in the standardization of language and form.

In addition, students usually did not initiatively revise and polish their thesis after finishing the first draft. Instead, they passively waited for the teacher to revise their theses. As a result, the same mistake reappeared in their second even third draft even if the teacher had pointed them out in the first draft. Thus, the instruction of thesis which should have been a pleasant process of negotiation, discussion and benefiting, turned up to be a teachers' suffering process. Students also didn't get improvement to the utmost degree in writing thesis.

According to the analysis of teachers' and students' questionnaires, their respective beliefs in thesis writing and instruction were compared in the following aspects.

1) In the purpose and significance of writing thesis, teachers and students hold different views. Teachers unanimously agree on the necessity of writing graduation thesis. They think that writing thesis is a comprehensive form to assess students' study in undergraduate stage. Besides, it can help students to learn some knowledge and skills of doing academic research, which is helpful for their future work. However, students hold different views. Some of them believe that it is insignificant to write graduate thesis. A large percentage of students who think it significant believe that it is only useful for those who will be engaged in scientific research, or it is only used to assess students' English proficiency. Most of them didn't realize the true significance of writing graduate thesis.

2) As for whether originality should be the criterion of assessing thesis, teachers and students also do not have consistent opinion. Most teachers believe that a graduation thesis should have a proper topic and substantial content, but given the undergraduate students' limited knowledge and skills, originality should not be a compulsory requirement for them. Still some other teachers suggest that those excellent students who have the command of solid and extensive knowledge should make some breakthrough. Most of the students attach importance to originality, but they think it difficult for them to achieve it due to their limited competence. Although some students have the will of exploration and want to pursue original ideas, they usually fail due to their limited range and depth of knowledge as well as inadequate research method. Consequently, students either begin ambitiously but finish with poor end or are terrified at the thought of writing thesis and muddle through their work.

3) In the method and significance of collecting and selecting materials, teachers universally agreed that this can check students' comprehensive ability. Through collecting and selecting materials, students are able to study independently and master rigorous scientific approach. However, students did not know how to collect materials efficiently because they hadn't had the experience of writing academic papers, and teachers' relative instruction in class is too abstract and impractical.

4) In the importance of the outline, approximately one third of the students deemed it very necessary, which suggests that many students were not aware of its importance. Although teachers repeatedly emphasize that outline is an important link in thesis writing, and it is a macro design of the thesis based on extensive reading, proper summary and sorting out of materials, some students still hand in their first draft, without writing an outline, or just made an outline casually, which added difficulty to the teachers' work.

5) In thesis revision, only 20% students revise their scripts for more than three times, which indicates that most students didn't realize the significance of revising thesis. Many students would not make big change after finishing their first drafts. They shift the task of revising contents, polishing language and perfecting form onto the teachers. However, teachers thought that since they have great working pressure, their chief work is to help students to make their theses complete in structure, scientific in content and logic in argumentation, while whether the format is standard and the language is correct and smooth are to be judged by students themselves.

All these discrepancies in teachers' and students' beliefs explain to some extent the causes of the problems in thesis writing

Additionally, the following problems in the graduate thesis writing course are also key causes of the low quality of students' theses. In School of Foreign Languages of University of Jinan, the graduate thesis writing course is only set for 8 weeks among senior students. That is, they only receive 16 period (totally 12 hours) formal teaching of how to write graduate thesis. The course centered on teacher's instruction. Although it covered various contents of writing thesis (the general process of writing graduation thesis, how to choose a proper topic, how to collect materials, how to outline the thesis, how to write introduction, conclusion and literature review, the language of academic paper, etc.), students did not have the opportunity and time to practice. Consequently, teacher's instruction appeared to be hollow and abstract and students' interest was not raised and their initiative was not stimulated due to the lack of interaction between teacher and students. The effect of teaching is, of course, very poor.

## 2. Teaching practice

In 2013, the author of this paper set graduate thesis writing course among senior students. The time of the course was doubled into 16 weeks, 32 periods. In teaching practice, besides the original teaching contents, three new contents were added, namely, the appreciation of academic papers published in journals of high prestige, the revision of former graduate theses, and the writing of academic papers.

a. The appreciation of academic papers published in journals of high prestige: Four academic papers respectively probing into topics in literary studies, language and linguistics, applied linguistics, translation studies were chosen as the objects of appreciation. They are *On Alice Munro's "Face"* (Zhou Yi, 2011), *A Contrastive Study of English and Chinese Hyponymy* (Li Dejun, 2011), *The Development of Chinese Undergraduates' Motivation for English Learning in their Junior and Senior Years: Findings from a Longitudinal Study in Five Universities* (Zhou Yan and Gao Yihong, 2011), *The Intralingual and Interlingual Translation of Film Subtitles* (Zheng Baoxuan, 2011). These four papers have relatively popular topics, which are of interest to students. The title was given to the students before class, who were asked to find the paper and read it carefully. Then in class, the papers were explained, appreciated or even critically analyzed from the seven aspects of choosing topic, abstract, key words, introduction, main body, conclusion and bibliography. The purpose is to make students recognize the principle of choosing topic for academic papers, get them familiar with the discourse pattern, and inform them of the method and norms of writing academic papers.

b. The revision of the second draft of former graduate theses: Three second drafts of graduate theses written by former seniors were chosen to be revised. In class, students were divided into groups of four. Each group discussed and answered the following questions raised by the teacher.

- 1) Is the topic of originality? Are the questions significant?
- 2) Is the title proper or not? Does it cover the most important information about the study?
- 3) Is the abstract well-written or not? Does it include research questions, research methodology and the major findings? Are the keywords well-selected?
- 4) Please check the headings at different levels. Are these headings logically linked? Are they in the same type of

grammatical structure?

5) How about the introduction? Does it address the topic directly? Does it attract the reader?

6) Does the literature review clearly explain why this study is necessary? Does the literature review provide the reader with sufficient background information to understand this reported study?

7) Are there any implications in the concluding section? Are the implications directly related to the results?

8) Is the paper well-organized? Are the paragraphs naturally and closely connected?

9) Are there any informal and colloquial words, Chinglish, imbalanced sentences or other grammatical mistakes?

10) Does the thesis meet the criteria in format set by the school, for example, size of words, blank space, punctuation marks, especially the order of references in bibliography? Are the marks of references and the page numbers of journals correctly presented according to the standard?

Students were required to point out the problems in the choosing of topic, the writing of abstract, key words, introduction, main body, conclusion, bibliography and language, and then revise the thesis.

c. All the students wrote a paper under the course teacher's instruction in the procedures of choosing a topic, collecting materials and writing the final draft. Group members revised each other's papers and then handed them in as the final achievement of the term to be assessed by the teacher.

1) Choosing a topic: Teacher and students decided a topic in class through discussion. After voting by a show of hands, among literary studies, language and linguistics, applied linguistics and translation studies, students chose translation studies as their general research field. Then based on teacher's direction and students' discussion, students personally went through a process of narrowing the subject from the general field (translation studies) to specific subject (English-Chinese translation), to narrowed subject (techniques of English-Chinese translation), then to a specific topic (the C-E translation of university introduction website), and finally to a narrowed specific topic: On the C-E Translation of University Introduction Website from the Perspective of Skopos Theory. This is a proper topic for the practice of writing academic paper in that it is relative to students' major, it has a certain theoretical depth and research significance, it is within students reach and of interest to them and there are adequate relative materials to be referred to.

2) Collecting materials: The teacher spent one period introducing to students the functions of the school library and how to retrieve literature efficiently from internet. A multi-media classroom was used so that students' practical skill can be enhanced through on-the-spot guidance and demonstration.

Then the teacher presented different ways of collecting materials and their advantages and disadvantages. For example, theoretical materials should be searched from professional books, dictionaries and encyclopedia, etc. which can ensure the authenticity of the materials. But those materials are usually aged, so journals and internet resources are necessary if students want to find out the latest trend in the study of that subject. Therefore, students need to master how to efficiently make use of data base in the library and internet, i.e. how to skim through and quickly find out relative chapters, how to judge the authenticity and level of the material. After collecting materials, teacher should tell students how to select materials. Students need to analyze and evaluate the materials, use them with a critical view, so that they can make breakthrough and have creative thought. Otherwise, their views can only be buried among various materials. In addition, students were encouraged to collect first-hand materials and analyze them with scientific method, which can strengthen not only the originality but also persuasiveness of their theses.

Then based on the topic they had chosen, teacher and students discussed what materials to be collected. The following 6 kinds of materials are the result of discussion:

a) the general background knowledge related to the topic (the C-E translation of university introduction website and its problems);

b) the theoretical background related to the topic (materials concerning Skopos Theory);

c) materials reflecting the current development of the topic;

d) important argumentations and research methods which stimulated and influenced the question for study;

e) argumentations and facts which can support the author's point of view;

f) the most original and direct first-hand materials: the Chinese and English versions of university introduction

Students were required to collect not less than 15 pieces of materials after class and read them carefully.

3) Stating and outlining the thesis: After collecting and reading enough materials, students began to state and outline their theses. The teacher checked students' outlines to ensure that what they are going to write is relative to the subject and that the framework is proper, different parts are closely connected and ideas are arranged logically. Ten students' outlines were chosen by the teacher to be commented on in class from three aspects: whether the language was clear and concise; whether the outline can present the arrangement of the thesis; whether the outline can serve as a guidance to make the readers grasp the author's train of thought and main thesis.

4) Revising the outlining and write first draft: After revising their outline and thesis according to teacher's advice, students began to write the first draft. Then the teacher chose ten students' drafts and commented on them in class from the aspects of structure, application of materials, language and format.

5) Peer editing: Students revised their theses among their group members based on the following questions: Is the thesis scientific? Are there sufficient grounds of argument? Are the different parts logically linked and well-organized? Are the quotations presented in standard forms? Etc.

6) Writing and revising the second draft: While revising the second draft among group members, students should pay

attention to language style, sentence pattern, coherence, emphasizing devices, grammatical mistakes, word usage, note and bibliography.

7) The final draft:

The processes of collecting and reading materials as well as writing thesis were done outside class, while those activities which need group discussion and peer work were carried out in class, with the teacher offering necessary instruction and help.

All these done, students handed in all the written materials to the teacher, including outline, first draft, second draft and final draft, which were assessed by the teacher and given a score as the final result of this course.

#### IV. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

50 theses written by students who graduated in 2012 and 50 by those graduated in 2013 were randomly chosen to be compared and analyzed. Students who graduated in 2013 had attended the course of graduate thesis writing taught by the author of this paper, with the above mentioned reform being carried out in the course.

Two teachers who have instructed thesis writing for years were invited to assess and give scores to the theses, and the two teachers' average score was taken as the final score of the thesis. The teachers gave four scores for one thesis in choosing topic, collecting and using materials, arrangement, language and format. (Is the topic a student chose original or not? Are the materials sufficient and properly quoted? Is the thesis logically arranged, with adequate argument and evidence as well as deep analysis and substantial contents? Are the language and format correct and formal?) Table 1 makes a comparison in the four norms between the two years' graduates.

TABLE 1:  
COMPARISON IN THE FOUR NORMS BETWEEN THE TWO YEARS' GRADUATES

students	Choosing topic	Collecting and using materials	arrangement	Language and format
2012	63.9	75.2	73.5	79.0
2013	71.8	85.4	76.2	88.4
2013 vs 2012 percentage raised	7.9%	13.6%	3.7%	11.9%

Table 1 suggests that students graduated in 2013 had better competence in all the four aspects compared with those graduated in 2012. They improved more significantly in collecting and using materials, language and format. Compared with students graduated in 2012, students graduated in 2013 improved by 7.9% in choosing topic, 13.6% in collecting and using materials, 3.7% in arrangement and 11.9% in language and format, which prove the effectiveness of the reformed thesis instruction.

However, some problems can still be found. Firstly, students did not make significant progress in arrangement, only improved by 3.7%. This may be explained from two aspects: 1) Due to the limited class hour of the thesis writing course, teacher's instruction could not cover every aspect in discourse. 2) The competence of discourse arrangement needs a long-term training, and a short term could not get satisfied effect. Secondly, although students made progress in choosing topic, their scores were still not high, which suggests that students' competence of originality can be improved through thesis writing course, but it was only improved to a limited degree, because it takes a long period for students' awareness and competence of originality to be raised.

#### V. THOUGHT AND SUGGESTION

From the above analysis, we can draw a conclusion that a thesis of high quality needs not only students' solid specialized knowledge and excellent writing skills, but also teacher's instruction and training in writing norms, originality awareness and research competence. Graduate thesis is an important form to assess students' comprehensive ability, the quality of which needs co-efforts of teachers, students and various departments of school. Reform can be carried out in the following aspects:

Firstly, strengthen the instruction of thesis writing, work out effective ways to solve the problems in students' theses, attach importance to scientific research method, encourage teachers to put into more energy. Besides, encourage students to do empirical research, which can not only add originality to the thesis but also foster students' research ability.

Secondly, university and department should take appropriate measures, clearly define the requirements for thesis quality and inform students of the proportions of different links of thesis writing in its final assessment. Moreover, strict rules should be formulated that students whose theses do not meet the demands, should postpone their thesis defense or even deprive them of the opportunity to defend their theses.

Thirdly, in some theoretical courses such as linguistics, lexicology, stylistics, etc., teachers should foster students' interest in scientific research, lead students to do some minor research, so that they can form scientific research awareness and make good preparation for graduate thesis.

Graduate thesis involves various factors, including administrative management, teachers' instruction and students' writing, in which scientific management is the prerequisite for the high quality of graduate thesis, effective instruction is

the guarantee to improve its quality and students are the subject to compose it.

Graduate thesis is a long-term work, which plays a significant role in cultivating students' creativity, practical ability, rigorous style of work and serious attitude to science. Only by consistent strengthening and perfecting the management system, renewing teaching concept, reforming teaching contents, methods and pattern, improving teachers' and students' comprehensive quality, can the quality of graduate thesis be improved.

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