

The Exploring Practice of Grading Model in College English Teaching

Liu Peng

School of Foreign Languages, Sichuan University of Science and Engineering, Zigong, China

Chunrong Wu

School of Foreign Languages, Sichuan University of Science and Engineering, Zigong, China

Fang Xie

School of Foreign Languages, Sichuan University of Science and Engineering, Zigong, China

Abstract—This article tries to explore the grading model in college English classrooms in a western university in China. As we know, teaching is an essential service for the society, and it is a regular but challenging task. Faced with new generation of students every year, educational institutions should get prepared and think out better strategies to meet every challenge ahead. The grading model is proved to be a better way out but not a best one. The wiser is to practice, revise, and practice. All done is to promote China college English teaching.

Index Terms—grading model, college English, CET-4

I. INTRODUCTION

Starting from 1999, China colleges and universities at all levels implemented the policy of increased enrollment. Since then, for more than a decade its average rate of admission is 60.81%, while between 1998 and 1977, its average acceptance rate is 23.51%. Concerning the level of English education in such a huge country like China, it has a great variety from region to region and from college to college. But in truth for quite a long time, most universities and colleges at all levels employ “one-size-cuts-all” system and teachers-center model in the actual teaching practice. In universities or colleges with more favorable conditions, English course can be conducted in networked-computer classrooms, where students enjoy great advantages of modern technology. Classroom teaching is more student-centered, teachers talk less, instead, more relevant learning materials in video or MV can be played, and thus related discussion can be carried out. However, most China universities or colleges don’t have such favorable sources. In those universities most English classes are given in traditional classrooms where chalk, blackboard and textbooks are greatly favored. In such a learning environment, usually two natural classes are combined into one English class (normally 60 students or so, this term I have one class with 98 students) because of lack of teachers’ and teaching resources. To make better use of class time, teachers are compelled to talk a lot as there will be a unitary teaching plan and final exam for all students. Besides, even given time for students’ class participation, few shows interest and most (more than two thirds I bet) are looking around and waiting shy. Things are getting worse with new generation of students who are born and grow up with advanced information technologies. Normally after one semester of college English, teachers and students complain lots and they even become “enemies” in class, really no exaggeration.

A. *Related Theories*

As early as 2,000 years ago, Confucius, a world-known ancient thinker and educator in China, pinpointed that every student is an unique identity, which cannot be overlooked for any reason. Hence various requirements should be laid down elaborately to meet different levels of students, based on which the great theory of “teaching students in accordance with their aptitude” came into being subsequently. Obviously such a wise man like Confucius introduced what we successors follow and well apply to teaching and education till now. In 1960s American educator Bloom Benjamin in his mastery learning methods proposed that “the focus of instruction should be the time required for different students to learn the same material and achieve the same level of mastery. This is very much in contrast with classic models of teaching, which focus more on differences in students’ ability and where all students are given approximately the same amount of time to learn and the same set of instructions.”(Bloom, 1981) Likewise, “If given proper study conditions, most students will become quite equal and close in learning ability, study efficiency, and further motivation.(Zhu, 1999) On basis of what’s introduced above, it is an essential move to make a necessary reformation in accordance to every generation of college students, namely college freshmen.

B. *China College English Guidelines*

It’s known to all, China college English has its nationwide emphasis starting from State (China) Education Commission. For greater efficiency in teaching and learning, since early 1980s, the Commission has issued and

rewritten China's College English Curriculum Requirements (henceforth the Requirements) six phases: 1980, 1985-1986, 1999, 2004, and 2007. In the latest version, the Requirements (2007) proposes that the teaching of College English should follow the principle of instructing students in accordance with their aptitude so as to meet the specific needs of individualized teaching. To improve classroom teaching efficiency, the Requirements highlight three objectives of assessment, namely, they are basic objective, intermediate objective and advanced objective, hence make a detailed list of listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translation, all of which are thought very important for any learner to master a foreign language. In addition, the Requirements put forth that college English course is one part of humanistic education in higher education, possessing the characteristics of being instrumental (a communicative tool) and being in spirit of humanity. In the aspect of being an instrument, college English course is an advancement and extension of basic stage in secondary education, of which aim is to improve students' comprehensive skills in reading, writing, listening, speaking and translating (interpreting). College English overall teaching goals, therefore, are raising students' practical ability in English, strengthening their cross-cultural awareness and fostering their communicative competence; in the meantime, training their self-learning, enhancing their artistic appreciation in order that they can use English effectively in their future life, study, social interaction and career as well.

Back to actual teaching activity, we must take notice of what's been learned before college, how much has been mastered and what will be learned at college. As an American psychologist, David P. Ausubel, put in the preface to his book *Educational Psychology: A Cognitive View*, that "If [he] had to reduce all of educational psychology to just one principle, [he] would say this: The most important single factor influencing learning is what the learner already knows. Ascertain this and teach him accordingly." (Ausubel, 1968) To achieve this end, the scheme grading teaching is aimed at those who have different needs or levels of English learners in China college English classrooms.

II. THE EXPLORATION PRACTICE IN COLLEGE ENGLISH CLASSROOMS

A. *Relevant Illustration for Researched College English Teaching*

As is stated in the Requirements, China college students have different levels of English proficiency as a result of geographical regions. It is also true that there is a wide gap for English learners in the same university. Take examples of two classes respectively majoring in arts like law and in science like maths. In law class the highest score in gaokao (College Entrance Exam, total score is 150) is 137, the lowest being 90; in the match class, whereas, the highest one is also approaching 130, and the lowest can be 70 below.

Before 2015 fall semester, our university adopted "one-size-cuts-all" teaching system, which specifically meant that all freshmen, regardless of arts, science or engineering, employed uniformed in-class textbooks and identical final exam papers. At that time there was no freshness, every class followed text books because teachers were supposed to finish the same number of teaching units for final exam at the end of each semester. Since teachers followed almost the same teaching plan and syllabus, some of them labored through the whole teaching if adding extra materials outside of textbooks. Despite trying very hard, both teachers and students failed to reach targets. Besides the close proportion of failure in passing final exam, the worse was that even some students who showed interest in English or were good at it started to hate it and stopped making any progress.

For Chinese college students whose English proficiency is high, their ultimate goal is to pass College English Test-band 6; for those who have an above-average level and keep up working hard at college, their great goal is to pass College Test-band 4, and for those who stay at a humble level, their goal is to pass final exam or second test smoothly in order to graduate successfully. Besides that, there are a few students who don't care about taking any nationwide tests though their English is good. What they want is to improve their practical use in English and reinforce their advantages in communicative competence. Regardless, there should be no problem to understand different testings require different techniques to prepare. When students with different goals were arranged in one class to follow textbooks, the results were imaginable. In all, to meet the needs of students' national test-taking, graduate study or future employment, the current system is in most need of some reformation.

B. *First Experimental Practice*

1. Grading Principle

Our English department proposed to our university education office the implementation of grading teaching model among grade 2015. In the first week when freshmen entered college, they were required to take an objectively-graded test. Based on their scores, students were graded into two levels, i.e. A and B. In 2015 fall, in our university there were 5678 undergraduates registered. The initial plan was to grade college freshmen in half, but the actual grading result was 2775 students were in level A, another 2903 in level B. Students of level A and B were divided into 86 and 85 classes respectively. Here again a harsh truth is mentioned as in my previous articles, English teachers in our university take heavy workload. Twenty-three English teachers undertook the teaching task of all the 171 classes in total.

2. Teaching practice

Referring to College English Test-4, teachers conduct classes for better strategies of test-taking. For every college freshman, upon entering university, it is a basic to know about what exercises are taken and how to prepare for it. The total score (for CET-4/6) is 710. Its testing emphasis is in listening (account for 35%), reading (30%), and writing & translation (35%). In class much importance is attached to preparation for this national test held in middle December.

Its types of test exercises are listed in the following table.

TYPES OF CET-4 EXERCISES AND DISTRIBUTION OF SCORES:				
Layout of Paper	Testing Contents	Forms	Ratio	Timing
Composition	Writing (No less than 120 Words)	Essay	15%	30mins
Listening Comprehension	Three News Items	Multiple Choice	7%	25mins
	Two Long Conversations	Multiple Choice	8%	
	Three Passages	Multiple Choice	20%	
Reading Comprehension	Vocabulary Comprehension	Banked Cloze	5%	40mins
	Length Reading	Matched Choice	10%	
	Depth Reading	Multiple Choice	20%	
Translation	Chinese into English	Paragraph Translation	15%	30mins

Note: Types of CET-6 exercises are identical to those of CET-4 but with much difficulty in every test exercise.

For this end, in class teachers adopt the concept of test-oriented training courses, introducing test exercises, teaching test-taking methods, and letting students do mountains of exercises in listening, reading, writing and translating, which are tested in CET-4(/-6). In level A class, textbooks act as an aid of reinforcement for basic knowledge. This kind of teaching method is boring and dull, it is very rewarding and students can easily feel a sense of accomplishment though accompanied by occasional failure, because they know what they have done daily is making a step closer to their fulfillment of goals.

Level B students are not allowed to take College English Test-4 in the first semester. In order to reinforce their basic knowledge, all teachers of level B obey traditional model of language teaching, adopt unitary textbooks and teaching plans, more teachers-oriented in class. Two textbooks supposed to be used. One is Reading and Writing book, the other being *Listening and Speaking* book. For the first book there are four modules in each unit: text, vocabulary, exercise and structured writing, and for the second, as its name implies, the listening part and the speaking part. Obviously *New Horizon College English* books are in precise accordance with China's College English Curriculum Requirements. If used scientifically, it will build up students' comprehensive skills in English language, and without doubt, train students in near future CET-4 taking from the angel of basic knowledge.

But it is not the case in actual teaching practice. Most probably due to this, more or less, in level B class, more than half students show little interest in English learning or is less accomplished at it. Teachers' emphasis is laid on basic knowledge like pronunciation, vocabulary, listening, translating and writing. In some cases movies or music are played to arouse students' learning interest. Usually in class teaching activities are as follows: pronunciation correction helped to memorize vocabulary, weekly dictation was to re-correct pronunciation, train their listening and supervise their vocabulary memorization, doing simple translation and composing short essays are for practical language use to build up their confidence. In the same way students feel satisfied after each class as their efforts are paid off and the progress is obvious.

The important thing is that both A and B don't need to worry much about final exam as different tests are designed for them respectively in accordance with their teaching syllabus.

3. The results

In December 19, students of level A took the national CET-4. Its ratio of students passing CET-4 (≥ 425) is 60.95%, much higher than former ratio of 22.58%, say in 2014. Here is what's done in fall semester. But what should be done in spring semester (2nd semester)? In level A class for most students who pass CET-4, they are happy to move on for CET-6 in the second semester. Sadly a few students have to do the whole preparation for CET-4 from the very beginning. If put in one class, what is the effective way of in-class instruction? For level B students, majority of students who pass final exam feel ready to take CET-4. In truth, most students succeed in passing the exam because their final scores are composed of test paper score (account for 70%) and class-performance score (30%, flexible and subjective). In order not to strike students' enthusiasm in English learning, students are selected to take CET-4 in June of second semester with test paper score over 62 (the total score for final exam is 100). As a result, about one-third meet the requirement. Again how do teachers instruct students more efficiently?

In 2016 spring semester, level A students, whether for those passing CET-4 and failing the test, are following unitary textbooks in class, while level B students are using materials for CET-4. In June 2016, its rate of students who pass CET-4 is 25.09%, far from satisfaction.

As is put in Bloom (1968), "there is a shift in responsibilities, so that student's failure is more due to the instruction and not necessarily lack of ability on his or her part". For the good of what's done for students, it is a must to try a new pattern of language teaching. To vividly practice a spirit of humanity, the new model should combine the principles of practicality, knowledge and interest, facilitate mobilizing the initiative of both teachers and students, and attach particular importance to the central position of students and the leading role of teachers in the teaching and learning process. American linguist Stephen Krashen illustrates in Input Hypothesis that learners progress in their knowledge of the language when they comprehend language input that is slightly more advanced than their current level. Krashen called this level of input "i+1", where "i" is the learner's interlanguage and "+1" is the next stage of language acquisition. (Krashen, 2003) Applying it to teaching practice, "1" can be overall language knowledge higher than students' current average level, i.e. learning goals in next stage.

4. Further exploration

In 2016 fall semester, teaching models are conducted quite similarly as in 2015 fall semester. In December 2016 the rate of students passing CET-4 is 63.03%, which is perfectly encouraging to both teachers and students. Before new terms start on Feb. 27, our English department implements a further grading scheme. Freshmen of Grade 2016 are graded into four: level A for students passing CET-4, level B for students who fail CET-4 and who meet the requirements taking CET-4 in June, and level C for those who are not allowed to take CET-4 in June 2017.

For level A, as all students succeed in passing CET-4 in December 2016, the teaching emphasis is placed on CET-6 preparation and comprehensive skills especially in listening and speaking mostly with the aid of *New Horizon College English* (coursebook). Ideally since there is no heavy load for a national test like CET-4 because CET-6 is an optional for undergraduates in our university, students are supposed to be very enthusiastic in class participation. So far as I observe in my level A class though new term started three weeks ago, i.e. Feb.27, most students put on an indifferent face in class, and don't try to participate in easy or hard activities in class.

Things in level B seem differently better than level A. This term I am assigned two classes of level B, which are those students who failed CET-4 in December 2016. On the first English class, I offered them lots of encouragements and strength. Most students are quite confident and working very hard in class and stay close to teachers' plan. For sure our learning methods are doing loads of test exercises in accordance to CET-4 types of exercises, and our aim is trying every means to pass CET-4 in June 2017.

Students of level C are the most difficult or easiest to handle. Majority of them have very low level of English. In written exercises, they may use he/she/they in place of him, her, or them; they may put down sentences like "The tree has a bird", "There is a girl study in the classroom", or "Not only he is my teacher, but also my friend." When reading those sentences, teachers feel grateful and relieved as they are trying. The worse is that some students hand in an empty exercise-book and even don't hand in anything besides frequent absence from English classes. There are a few students who have a modestly better mastery of English language. These students feel awfully unfair in such an environment filled with negativity when they really want to improve their English. In class teachers use *New Horizon College English* (coursebook) to such a rigid degree that they never involve any additional materials with some difficulty. From teachers' perspective, it is no good or use putting students into a difficult learning environment.

III. FOLLOW-UPS

A. Advantages of Grading Model

Concerning the advantages of this teaching model, so far better in this way. It helps to stimulate students' motivation and raise their awareness of active participation. Moreover, it can implement the principle of "teaching students in accordance with their aptitude".

1) This model is beneficial for students to make some progress in their own starting point. In grading teaching, the division line is set according to students' performance in a test. When set in a new class, students' level of English is closer than before. If proper teaching methods are employed, students can make progress, especially when their learning interests are maintained.

2) This model improves teachers' efficiency in planning teaching. Before the grading model is adopted in classrooms, students have very different levels of English. When given lessons in the same way, some take it easily while some feel it difficult, which puts teachers and students into a difficult situation. Teachers work hard but students learn little. Things change to better when teachers design class activities in the view of the majority. Thus, it is more effective and pleasant.

3) This model creates a positive environment for teaching and learning. In traditional class environment, students who are good at English before college find it a waste of time to listen to "easy" knowledge, what's worse, they may become lazy and never make any progress in English classrooms. However, what's easy for good students is considered too much for students whose English is bad. They may complain with teachers that they even cannot compose a complete correct simple sentence in English. In the new model of teaching, brilliant students' capacity have been activated, and know clearly what the goal of next stage is and try every means to accomplish them. Likewise students less accomplished in English gain their confidence and start working hard from the very beginning.

B. Drawbacks and Limitations

With regard to its drawbacks and limitations, like reformation or exploration, it is predictable and acceptable. What's the most important of all is to keep trying hard, reflecting objectively and amending with efficiency. After one grade of exploration and another ongoing, three lessons can be concluded as follows:

For one thing, it strikes students' confidence more than encouragement. No exaggeration to say that quite a number of students are put in a wrong level though three levels are set. The span is expected to be thinner. As far as is known, most universities set three levels of English classes which are rough. In the actual teaching practice, teachers can tell even within the same level of the same class, students' levels are quite different. Even if teachers employ the method of "teaching students according to their natural ability", its teaching effectiveness still has been restrained as a result of differences in regions, majors, interests and preferences.

For the second, the testing before grading is not quite scientific. On the first week of freshmen's enrollment, they are supposed to take an objectively-graded test which determines students' fate in the first semester of English course. The

test paper with total score 70 is composed of two exercises: one is multiple choice accounting for 20 points, and the other is reading comprehension. Multiple choice tests students' knowledge of vocabulary, e.g. The years Tom spent in the countryside is a _____ experience. A. reward; B. to reward; C. rewarding; D. rewarded. Altogether there are 40 sentences and each sentence is 0.5 points. In Reading Comprehension, as its name implies, it tests students' reading skills in mastering main idea and important information or details in passages. There are five passages, with five questions followed for each passage. Two points is for each question. In all the degree of testing difficulty is almost staying at the same level as College Entrance Examination. Maybe here the problem is not lying in the degree of testing difficulty, but in its testing exercises, as in my eyes objectively-graded tests test more in students' luck than English knowledge or ability. The 2007 version of Requirements point out, evaluation is a key component in College English teaching. In the process of teaching and learning, a comprehensive, objective, scientific and accurate evaluation system is of vital importance to the achievement of course goals. Among other things, formative assessment and summative assessment are suggested. The former refers to procedural and developmental assessment conducted in the teaching process, and the latter is conducted at the end of a teaching phase. Here the test before grading is classified as the former assessment which help to track the teaching process, provide feedback and promote an all-round development of the students, in accordance with the teaching objectives and by means of various evaluative methods.

For the third, this model is more exam-oriented. As an exploring practice, this exploring is worth the praise and support. But as is illustrated, its great efficiency and success is vividly shown in increased proportions of students who pass College English Test Band Four (CET-4), which is not satisfactory. For new generation of students, test-taking is not the ultimate goal. What matters most in college English classrooms is for the good of students' further development like future career or success while all-round mastery, especially in communicative competence, is of much significance. That exactly echoes the double qualities of being humanistic and instrumental mentioned in the Requirements. Before college, students are too busy with various entrance exams in English to think a second about for what. As a consequence, they are too much dependent of the teaching methodology: listen to teachers passively and take notes of every detail into their ears. When entering college, they complain lots, what's more, feel frustrated if college teachers let them participate and nothing much left in their notebook after class.

Last but not the least, the final exam is too "humanistic" (soft). At the end of each semester, our English department designs three kinds of test papers for three levels of students respectively. But on the whole, test papers are very easy to pass because teachers think students invest lots of time and energy into English study and their efforts have yielded good results in CET-4. The principle is, the easier the better like a gift for students. In this case tests are not designed to examine students' practical capacity in language use. Instead, repeat the mistakes of traditional model in emphasizing rigid memorization of language knowledge. Even so, the results are not quite satisfactory. The awful truth is: the easier the test is, the lazier students become.

IV. CONCLUSION

To promote China's overall quality education, for the time being, the grading model is a way out for current embarrassment in China college English education before better models are found. Its implementation and practice facilitate the transformation of traditional mode to modern mode with the support of computer-aid technologies. Because of this, an increasing number of universities and colleges have put it into practice, the division of teaching classes is far from satisfaction. Since it is an exploring practice in our university, it is inevitable and normal to encounter some difficulties and challenges which requires educators and teachers to bear the original intention in mind, keep up further exploration and perform duties well for China college English education. Only by this means of continual practice, down-to-earth improvement in actual teaching activity, can this teaching model be a win-win model, and in the end both teachers and students are happy and fruitful.

REFERENCES

- [1] Ausubel, D.P. (1968). *Educational Psychology: A Cognitive View*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
- [2] Benjamin S. Bloom (1981). *All Our Children Learning - A Primer for Parents, Teachers, and Other Educators*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- [3] Chun Zhu (1999). *Psychology in Foreign Language Teaching*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.
- [4] Higher Education Commission of China. (2007). *College English Curriculum Requirements*, Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.
- [5] Krashen, S. (2003). *Explorations in Language Acquisition and Use*. Portsmouth: Heinemann.

Liu Peng, was born in Chongqing, China in 1976. She received M.A. degree in applied linguistics from University of Electronic Science and Technology of Chengdu, China in 2012.

She is currently an English lecturer in School of Foreign Languages, Sichuan University of Science and Engineering, Zigong, China. Her research focuses on EFL teaching.

Chunrong Wu, was born in Yinbin, China in 1973. In June 2000 she graduated from Southwest University with M.A. Degree in applied linguistics. From Apr. 2014 to Dec. 2016 her research on “A Pragmatic-translation approach to research on applied translation” is financed by by Research Project of Education Department of Sichuan Province.

She is currently a professor of the English language in School of Foreign Languages, Sichuan University of Science and Engineering, Zigong, China. Her research specialization is in applied linguistics and translation.

Fang Xie, was born in Zhongxian, China in 1978. She received M.A. degree in applied linguistics from University of Electronic Science and Technology of Chengdu, China in 2012.

She is currently an English lecturer in School of Foreign Languages, Sichuan University of Science and Engineering, Zigong, China. Her research interest includes sociolinguistics.