

Reflections on Graded Teaching of College English in Application-oriented Universities: a Case Study of Zhaotong University

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ABSTRACT

The English ability of application-oriented college students is generally weak and there is great difference in their English proficiency. Graded College English teaching enables teaching students based on their English proficiency, improving the teaching and learning efficiency and facilitating students' individual development. In order to improve the quality of College English teaching, the students' current English ability and prospective English ability should be taken into full consideration when developing the teaching programs, and the grading standard should be reasonable and scientific. Only in this way can the quality of College English teaching be effectively improved.

Keywords: *College English, graded teaching, English ability, teaching objectives*

I. INTRODUCTION

In 2017, the Ministry of Education issued a new version of *Guidelines on College English Teaching* (hereinafter referred to as the *Guidelines*), which clarified the value of college English course, teaching objectives, curriculum system, teaching assessment, teaching methods and means, etc. The *Guidelines* pointed out that "College English teaching is oriented by the actual use of English, focusing on the cultivation of students' English application ability", which are the overall teaching objectives of College English.

In 2018, China's Standards of English Language Ability (CSELA) was officially issued by the Ministry of Education and the National Language and Writing Commission in April, 2004. It is the first English proficiency standard for Chinese learners. It has been developed by more than 200 experts and scholars from more than 50 universities in China and it takes more than three years to accomplish the work. Based on China's national conditions, CSELA comprehensively describes the English competence of Chinese English learners and users, covering all the stages from primary to advanced English learners and users. Among them, level 1 and level 2 roughly correspond to primary school level, level 3 to junior high school, level 4 to

senior high school, level 5 and level 6 to university, level 7 to English majors, level 8 and level 9 to high-end foreign language talents. Each level has different requirements in listening, speaking, reading, writing, translation and knowledge strategy. As far as college English teaching is concerned, CSELA has strong pertinence and guidance for the formulation of College English syllabus.

II. ANALYSIS OF ENGLISH ABILITY OF UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS IN ZHAOTONG UNIVERSITY

Zhaotong University is a newly-built application-oriented higher education institution. The majority of its students come from Yunnan Province. Yunnan Province is located in the southwest of China. With mountainous area and plateaus accounting for 88.64% of the total area, Yunnan Province is fallen behind in the development of its economy, politics and education, and English education is no exception.

As a newly-built undergraduate university, the English proficiency of its students is generally low when they enter the University, which can be reflected by the students' scores in their college entrance examination. The average scores of 2017, 2018 and 2019 freshmen in the college entrance examination are 85.74, 85.12 and 90.89 respectively (out of 150 points), which is equivalent to about 60 out of 100 points. This average English score reflects that most freshmen are weak in English language knowledge and English application ability.

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There is great difference in the students' proficiency of English. According to the statistics of English scores in the college entrance examination, the lowest score of 2017 freshmen is 18 points, the highest 135 points; the lowest of 2018 freshmen is 20 points, the highest 139 points; the lowest score of 2019 freshmen is 23 points, the highest 133 points. The great disparity of English scores bring great trouble to teaching. It is difficult for teachers to cover different teaching demands and teach students according to their English ability. Therefore, it is demanded to carry out graded teaching of College English.

The improvement of students' English ability is slow. After two years of College English learning and four years of undergraduate course learning, there is some improvement in students' English ability, but the improvement is not satisfactory, which can be shown from the statistics of the undergraduates' passing rates of College English Tests (CET-4 and CET-6) in recent three years. Among the 1272 non-English majors in Grade 2016, 165 students passed CET-4 and the grade pass rate is 12.97%; Among the 1441 non-English majors in Grade 2017, 182 students passed CET-4 and the grade pass rate is 12.63%; Among the 1681 non-English majors in Grade 2018, after three semesters of study, 179 students passed CET-4, and the grade pass rate was 10.64%. Up to June 2020, the passing rate of CET-6 of each grade is less than 2%. Although the grade pass rate of CET-4 and CET-6 cannot fully reflect the students' English application ability, it can reflect the overall English proficiency of the students in these three grades.

III. GRADING STANDARDS FOR GRADED TEACHING OF COLLEGE ENGLISH

The grading of English teaching in Zhaotong University is carried out on the basis of the students' English score in their college entrance examination. In the process of formulating the College English teaching reform plan, the College English teaching staff argued whether it is necessary to carry out another grading English examination among the freshmen and whether it is reasonable to only take the score of college entrance examination as the grading basis. If the standard of grading is not reasonable or scientific, it will directly lead to the failure of the teaching reform. The advantage of giving another grading English examination among the freshmen is that the test content, difficulty, scoring and grading standard can be unified, which can make the ranking of students' cores more reasonable and objective. However, it involves a series of work such as test paper making, invigilation, marking and recording will consume a lot of manpower and material resources, and impose much burden on the teaching staff. Therefore, we use the experience of other universities for reference. Zhejiang Normal

University, in the process of implementing graded teaching reform, makes a correlation analysis between the grading examination results and their English scores in the college entrance examination of 2,700 freshmen. The results show that the Pearson correlation probability between the grading test scores and the college entrance examination English scores of these students is less than 0.01 ($r = .392^{**}$, $SIG = .000$), indicating that there is a very significant correlation between them. Those who did well in the college entrance examination tend to get good results in the grading test. However, as a large number of the students of Zhejiang Normal University come from different parts of the country, where they have different English papers in the college entrance examination, it is not reasonable to use the students' English score of college entrance examination as the sole basis of grading. Zhaotong University is quite different from Zhejiang Normal University in this regard. Only a small proportion of students of Zhaotong University come from other provinces. Most of its students come from Yunnan Province and have the same test paper in their college entrance examination. The test content and difficulty are the same. Moreover, the reform of English test of the college entrance examination has permitted candidates to take the English listening tests twice, and the better result is recorded as the final. This can avoid the situation that students accidentally perform not so well as usual and get unsatisfactory results. Even if some students do have this situation, they can also change the situation through upgrading process in the second semester. Therefore, it is reasonable and feasible for Zhaotong University to take the students' English score in their college entrance examination as the grading standard.

Zhaotong University has implemented College English graded teaching since September, 2019. The undergraduate students of Grade 2019 are divided into four levels: A, B, C and D. In principle, apart from the undergraduate majoring in art and sports, the top 15% of the non-English majors will enter College English Level A, the top 45% will enter Level B, the last 40% will enter Level C, and Level D is for undergraduates majoring in art and sports. The average score of Level A students is higher than 110, with an average of 118.30; the average score of Level B is 102.20, the average of Level C is 79.39, and the average of Level D is 67.16. This grading of students is conducive to more accurate positioning of teaching objectives and long-term development of students.

IV. THE TEACHING OBJECTIVES OF GRADED TEACHING OF COLLEGE ENGLISH

According to the current situation of basic education, higher education and social development of the nation, the *Guidelines* divides the objectives of College English

teaching into three levels: foundation, improvement and development. It stipulates that colleges and universities can determine the starting level according to the actual needs and situation of their own, and choose the teaching objectives accordingly. The arrangement of hierarchical objectives makes room for the flexibility and openness of curriculum, which is conducive to the implementation of College English teaching to meet the personalized needs of schools, departments and students. The graded teaching objectives of College English of Zhaotong University are determined in accordance to the *Guidelines* and CSELA by taking into account the statistics of English proficiency of freshmen and the English proficiency of previous senior students.

CSELA divides English proficiency into nine levels, and fully meets the teaching requirements of each stage in terms of key language abilities. CSELA Bands 4 to 6 are requirements for college English learners and junior English majors in colleges and universities. According to Professor Wang Shouren, chairman of the College Foreign Language Teaching Guiding Committee of the Ministry of Education, CET-4 is equivalent to CSELA Band 5, and CET-6 is equivalent to CSELA Band 6.

The grade pass rate of CET-4 and CET-6 reflects the overall English ability of students. By June 2020, the passing rates of CET-4 and CET-6 in Zhaotong University are about 13% and less than 2% respectively. The results of CET-4 and CET-6 show that more than 85% of non-English majors in Zhaotong University cannot pass CET-4 after four years of undergraduate course learning. In other words, only 13% of non-English majors can meet the requirements of CSELA Band 5, and less than 2% can meet the requirements of CSELA Band 6. The standards of CSELA Band 5 and Band 6 correspond to the teaching requirements of "improvement objectives" and "development objectives" in the *Guidelines* (Wang Shouren 2016: 5). Taking all these factors into account, Zhaotong University formulates the graded objectives for its College English syllabus.

Levels A students are expected to achieve the "development objectives" of the *Guidelines* and meet the requirements of CSELA Band 6; Level B students are expected to achieve the "improvement objectives" of the *Guidelines* and meet the requirements of CSELA Band 5; and Levels C students are expected to achieve the "development objectives" of the *Guidelines* and meet the requirements of CSELA Band 4. The teaching requirements for Level D students are in accordance with the "basic objectives" in the *Guidelines* and mainly based on "promoting the balanced development of students' language skills, but also encouraging college English Teaching to focus on specific language skills and highlight the characteristics to meet the different

needs of colleges, departments and students", focusing on their listening and speaking ability.

V. THE IMPROVEMENT OF STUDENTS' LEARNING ASSESSMENT MECHANISM

In the process of graded teaching of College English, the teaching staff perused the *Guidelines* and its description on evaluation and assessment. The assessment should be made up of formative assessment and summative assessment, integrating the actual situation of the students' English ability and students' needs. The formative assessment includes classroom performance, assignment results, attendance, mid-term test and "reading, writing and speaking" activities. "Reading, writing and speaking" is a special activity launched by Zhaotong University. It aims at encouraging students to broaden their horizons, to learn to think, to combine the knowledge they have learned with real life, to solve problems creatively, and express their thoughts boldly. Formative assessment accounts for 50% of the students' final results. The summative assessment of Levels A, B and C students is their result of the final test paper, accounting for 50% of the the students' final results. The final test paper is designed to test the students' language skills in grammar and vocabulary, reading comprehension, translation and writing. The summative assessment of Level D is different from that of other levels. Since Level D focuses on the cultivation of English application ability, especially listening and speaking ability, its summative assessment is divided into four sections: listening and speaking, reading, writing and comprehensive skill. The assessment promotes the integration of English learning with the characteristics of major, aiming to establish a bond between English learning and professional knowledge, to give full play to students' personality and professional expertise.

Dynamic adjustment is planned at all levels according to the results of assessment. It is prescribed in the teaching syllabus that students of Level B and C whose assessment result reaches 90 points can voluntarily apply to a class higher than their original level. The mode is: D→C→B→A. However, according to the actual implementation of graded teaching and analysis of students' learning quality in the previous two semesters of Grade 2019, there is no adjustment of students' learning level, which is mainly due to the fact that few students' assessment result reaches 90 points. A small number of students do reach 90 points but most of them have also passed CET-4. According to the teaching syllabus, they can apply for exemption of College English course from the second academic year. Therefore, they don't want to bother to apply for adjustment of the study level for only one semester. This reflects that there is deficiency in the assessment mechanism and the teaching reform program, which

needs to be supplemented and improved to provide incentive to promote the students' English learning motivation.

VI. CONCLUSION

The graded teaching of College English in Zhaotong University is in line with the actual needs of the students in terms of grading standards and teaching objectives. According to the students' feedback of the College English graded teaching of Grade 2019, the vast majority of students think that graded teaching enables teachers to arrange teaching contents and carry out teaching activities in accordance with their acquired English ability, which is very helpful to the improvement of English application ability. This positively affirms the teaching effect of College English grading teaching, and provides impetus for the further deepening of teaching reform. The practice of teaching reform in these two semesters also show some deficiency of the teaching syllabus. The assessment mechanism and adjustment of levels are not conducive to promoting students' learning enthusiasm and motivation. We should comprehensively consider various factors and formulate a more reasonable learning assessment mechanism. We should bear in mind that College English teaching should be guided by the actual use of English, focusing on the cultivation of students' English application ability.

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