REFLECTIONS ON SYLLABUS FOR ENGLISH TEACHING OF NON-ENGLISH MAJOR GRADUATES IN CHINA

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Abstract
This paper first reviews the background with the formulation of the first national syllabus for graduate English teaching in China and presents a general picture about the progress in this field since the implementation of this syllabus. At the same time some special features of the syllabus are manifested and some serious problems are discussed. On the basis of the research and analysis of the present syllabus for non-English major graduates is out of date and cannot meet the learners' needs and the needs of society today. Therefore it is necessary to revise it as soon as possible.

Key words
syllabus graduate English teaching

1. Introduction

English teaching for non-English major graduates is a significant part of today's graduate education in China. Since the beginning of the nineteen-eighties a graduate program has developed at a rapid rate and the number of graduates has greatly increased. According to the statistics issued in 2004 the total enrollment of graduates including Ph.D candidates increased from 10,000 in 1978 to about 300,000 in 2004. As all the graduates at universities are required to take one year or half a year English course as compulsory the program has drawn a great concern from the English teachers in this circle.

As the graduate degree system was restored in late 1978 in China there was no nation-wide syllabus for graduate English teaching before 1992. But the rapid growth since 1978 called for a unified syllabus in the field. Then in 1990 a conference was organized in Xi'an, Shaanxi province at which a decision was made that a draft of the syllabus for graduate English teaching would be worked out under the direct leadership of the Education Commission. New Education Ministry. In October 1992 the syllabus was examined and approved for trial implementation by experts committee appointed by the Education Commission. Following 1992 a fairly wide implementation of the syllabus was carried out at various universities and colleges in China and remarkable achievements have been made in this field since then. The achievements can be summarized as follows:

1. The implementation of the syllabus has helped to standardize the graduate English teaching program all over the country. The standards at three levels for language skills have made it easy and obvious to conduct and evaluate teaching and the fixed requirements have enforced the graduate degree examination system.

2. On the basis of the syllabus several series of textbooks for graduates have been published which has brought about the best situation for material development in this field ever since. These textbooks contain some new ideas and theory as a guiding principle and can basically meet the needs of the graduate language pedagogy.
In accordance with the syllabus, local tests have started to be administered by various provinces and cities. This kind of test offers a standard to all the universities in that area and can also avoid some negative effects of a large test in China.

In the course of the implementation of the syllabus, some reform and research projects in graduate English teaching have been carried out in many universities and colleges. From theory to practice, the English teachers have been probing into the establishment of a teaching system with special characters, teaching model, testing system, and teaching methodology. Some achievements have been attained in this field.

With the syllabus as a core, a typical graduate English teaching system is taking shape, which will play an important role in China's graduate education.

Young and middle-aged teachers have become the main force in graduate English teaching, and have brought in vigor and enthusiasm, and have begun to play their part now.

Special Features of Syllabus for Graduate English Teaching

Since the publication of the syllabus in 1992, it has played a significant role in the guidance and promotion of the graduate English teaching program. The syllabus contains the following special features.

1. The guiding principle and goal set for English teaching in the syllabus are practical and realistic, which are well reflected in the evaluation of the graduates. English knowledge when graduates first enter universities, and the requirements for the language when they have completed the English course. On the basis of the real conditions at that time, the syllabus stipulates. The purpose of the graduate English teaching is to enable graduates to master the language as a useful tool for their academic learning and research, and for international communication. Therefore, in the English teaching we should proceed from actual conditions and enable the students to foster their ability to learn the language for the purpose of application. This purpose is set in the consideration of the graduates' needs for academic study and research, and the needs for their future work as well.

2. In accordance with the graduates' English proficiency and various needs for the five kills—reading, writing, speaking, listening, and translation—the purpose for teaching has been determined at three levels: good ability in reading, fairly good ability in writing and translation, and basic ability in listening and speaking. The purpose of teaching at three levels has basically reflected the needs of the learners and the society at that time. Thus, the interrelation among the language skills at graduate levels is relatively well balanced. In addition to the five language skills, the syllabus also stresses the communicative competence for the graduate English teaching, which involves interaction among grammatical, psycholinguistic, sociocultural, and probabilistic subsystems. In addition, culture is also placed in a fairly important position.

Emphasis is placed on the feasibility, advancement, and flexibility in the syllabus. First, it can be noted that the requirements set in the syllabus can be met by the most graduates at various universities with some efforts. For example, reading speed is required to reach 60 to 70 words per minute. Through the reading test, most graduates can come up to this requirement. Second, the syllabus is formulated on the basis of some language learning theory, syllabus development theory, teaching and testing theories. It points out that adequate attention should be paid to both subconscious language acquisition outside the classroom and conscious language learning within the teaching program. Third, enough consideration is also given to the development of language teaching and learning in the future.

The syllabus has offered teachers a right to choose their own teaching approach. As each approach has its own advantages, the teachers in China should try to accept as many strong points as they can from the approaches they have known. For example, the theory of communication helps the teachers to realize that language can be considered in two contexts: on the one hand, human system of conceptualization and perception, and on the other, the actual use of language in society. Yalden 1983. So in graduate English teaching, some efforts should be spent on teaching structural competence, and the main efforts should be on enabling the students to express themselves in a real communicative situation. The syllabus encourages the teachers to conform with the principle of learning widely from
other strong points as far as a teaching approach is concerned.

25 The syllabus has emphasized the connection between the basic English and specialized English. The latter one is the English which is closely related to a student's academic field at graduate level. The graduates are expected to be able to read the literature in their own area and specialized English offers them a chance to be in contact with this kind of literature. As the two are taken care of by two different groups of teachers in China, sometimes in the past there was no connection and overlapping in the language teaching occurred. The syllabus has clearly identified each task and the link between the two parts of teaching.

3 Some Questions for the Syllabus of Graduate English Teaching

Since 1992 over thirteen years has passed and no revision has been made in the syllabus for graduate English teaching. Some serious problems can be obviously seen as follows.

31 In a review of the syllabus it can be found that a contradiction exists between the goal of graduate English teaching and the needs of the learners and the society. Although the syllabus was formulated on the survey a great change has taken place in the learners' and society's demand for the language. In the present syllabus emphasis is put mainly on training the reading skill, but the many graduates are not satisfied with that. What they need and the society needs is that they should be able to communicate effectively both in written and oral forms.

32 There is a contradiction between the purpose of graduate English teaching and that of testing. The general purpose of the teaching is to enable graduates to master the language as a useful tool for their academic learning and research and for international communication while the testing items mainly focus on multiple-choice. Testing is a part of the syllabus and should serve the purpose of the syllabus. The English testing items for graduates such as vocabulary, cloze, reading, listening, etc. are mainly subjective. That is, multiple-choice questions. Over the past twenty years it has been recognized that most graduates in China are rather weak in language communication mainly because they spent too much time on the multiple-choice test training. They could achieve rather high score but could not acquire the ability in using the language. What more teaching and learning will be affected by overuse of the subjective testing items.

33 The evaluation of the syllabus has not well been put into effect. The syllabus has pointed out that the evaluation can be carried out locally in terms of examination. But who is responsible for the evaluation and how it should be organized are not clearly identified and so far no local organizers like to take the evaluation on the implementation of the syllabus. As a result in some areas the national syllabus is overlooked or not well carried out. White 1988 discussed the situational model of curriculum in the following way:

[] White 1988 points out evaluation a feedback will also form a component of the construction systems model since quality control will be an important element of any production system. It is through feedback that planned and actual outcomes can be compared and appropriate remedial action taken to repair failures or deficits. In the graduate English syllabus evaluation is not given a proper position to play its part in this system.

34 In regard to teaching content one impression is that the syllabus has fixed its main content for
the purpose of training the students to recognize the language form and structure and impart the language knowledge to them. In Littlewood's view, 1981 language teaching should not only focus on the language forms but also on what people do with these forms when they want to communicate with each other. Littlewood’s 1981 went on to say, it is not enough to teach learners how to manipulate the structures of the foreign language. They must also develop strategies for relating these structures to their communicative functions in real situations and real-time. Therefore, from the viewpoint of the language function, the syllabus should shift its stress from the language form to the use of the language.

4 Suggestions in Revision of the Syllabus

As a big change has taken place in the graduates' language proficiency and the social needs for the language skills, revision of the syllabus is timely necessary. The following suggestions may be some help to the modification of the syllabus which might be conducted soon in China.

4.1 The revision of the syllabus should be based on the social survey and actual conditions in China. The goal for graduate English teaching should be readjusted and new requirements for five kills should be set which must be higher than the present ones but should not be so high that graduates in most universities cannot meet. The purpose of teaching should also be clearly shifted to training the graduates' ability to use the language in various situations.

4.2 New language learning and language teaching theories should be accepted for the syllabus revision and development such as contextual factors in language learning and teaching, communicative competence for language learners, second language acquisition, etc. Yalden, 1983 prefers to take some theories of both sociolinguistics and psycholinguistics into consideration in syllabus designing. Anyhow, no matter what theory is going to be accepted, it should be combined with the Chinese context.

4.3 A complete system with the syllabus as a core should be established for graduate English teaching in China. This system should include a syllabus, textbooks, testing, evaluation, and management. In Taba’s outline of syllabus development, 1962 determination of what to evaluate and the means to evaluate are put in an important position which are thought of as a part of the completion of the system. Yalden, 1983 thinks that in this system the final phase is evaluation which has two broad aspects: “First, one would wish to evaluate or test the students in the program next, the teaching as well as the overall design of the course should be assessed.” The current graduate English teaching syllabus in China has not clearly identified the means to evaluate the syllabus. So in the revision of the syllabus, enough consideration should be given to it in order to make the system more complete.

4.4 The testing for graduate English should conform to the general principles and requirements of the syllabus. For instance, the syllabus requires the students to gain the ability in using the language in various situations, the test should concentrate on this aspect and testing items should be designed to evaluate this ability of the learners properly. Therefore, in the revision of the syllabus, the focus of testing should be reconsidered and some testing items should be changed to more subjective ones.

4.5 The syllabus should be more flexible in that it can be modified at certain intervals. White, 1988 points out a syllabus is a document of administrative convenience and will only be partly justified on theoretical grounds and is negotiable and adjustable. The changes in social needs and learners’ needs for the language will require planning and the effective use of systems in order to realize new objectives. Therefore the syllabus to be modified should be left adequate room for the further revision and improvement.

5 Conclusion

Based on the data research and analysis, it is believed that the syllabus for non-English major graduates to some extent can not well meet the learners’ needs and the needs of a society today in that it emphasizes the knowledge learning rather than skill and competence training. With the development of the society and increasing demands for learners’ ability in using English and due to the outcome of newly published College English Curriculum Requirements for Trial Implementation in 2004, the Graduate English teaching syllabus has to be revised immediately.

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