



The Content-Based English Teaching for The Development of Graduate Students' Communicative Competence

Liu Xiaodan

Harbin Institute of Technology (R. of China)

liuxiodan1104@sina.com

Abstract

It is well known that the graduate English teaching is one of the most important and indispensable components of the graduate education. Whether the graduate English program is good or not directly affects the quality of the graduate students training. This paper, taking Harbin Institute of Technology, a science university in the northeast of China as an example, is mainly about how HIT has enhanced the construction of the graduate English program since 2009 and at the same time taken the innovative measures by introducing the feasible methods and the effective strategies in the teaching innovations of the graduate English program for non-English majors. First it analyzes the problems which existed in the graduate students' English learning, the textbooks, the English courses and the evaluation system at both the master level and the doctoral level. And it then presents the innovative measures that are taken to tackle the problems and are aimed to focus the teaching objectives on developing students' general English skills, presentation skills, communication skills and cultural awareness. In view of the special characteristics of the science graduate students and based on the surveys conducted by delivering questionnaires and interviewing graduate students, which aimed to know about their demands in academic studies, scientific research work and international communication. Finally, this paper demonstrates the practical effects that the graduate English teaching brought about and the graduate's students' achievements in their research fields. All of these not only further perfect the graduate education of HIT, but improve the graduate students' comprehensive qualities as well. (254 words)

Key words: graduate English; English teaching; innovative.

1. Introduction

The Syllabus for the Non-English Majors' Graduate English Teaching, issued by the Department of Education in China (1992), stipulates that graduate students should take English as a tool to do their research work and to make academic exchanges in their own fields. Now the Chinese scientists and researchers have more and more opportunities to be involved in the international academic exchanges. In the institutions of higher education of China graduate students have become the principal force of the international academic exchanges. To help the graduate student's better finish the task, the graduate English program is aimed to focus on cultivating the graduate students' academic communicative competence.

2. Problems

Generally speaking, the higher educational institutions in China have made great achievements in graduate English teaching innovation. Particularly in recent years, they have set about their commitment to the English teaching focus on the development of the students' practical English application abilities. However, thanks to the actual different situations in each university, the graduate English program is still faced with many problems. Here let's take HIT as an example. Although the graduate English program has been making great progress since 2000, with the recent increase in graduate recruiters and the great change of social demands, some problems deserve our reconsideration. First of all, the increasingly recruited graduate students in HIT are not uniform in their English level. Many have high scores in English examinations, but low in applied English competence. These students just got the examination-oriented English education before they entered HIT, which means that they are good at taking English examinations, but not at practical English application. Secondly, the previous textbooks both for master students and for PhD students are to some extent unsuited to the graduate students' demands, specifically referring to their professional demand, their academic demand and their job demand. For example, the textbook for master students is of too much interest and lacks practicability. And it totally has no content of the translation and writing of science and technology, which most science students in HIT need. The operability of textbook for PhD



students is not satisfactory, even though its content is concentrated on the academic oral exchange training. Thirdly, the course exam is divorced from what the graduate students learned in class. The subjective questions are more than the objective ones, which is hard to evaluate the students' actual English levels. The language practice platform is another place, where the students' practical English level can be evaluated. But in the past years it was almost neglected. In a word, if we didn't pay attention to all of these problems, they are bound to present an obstacle to the development of graduate students' applied English competence and even to the effect of graduate English teaching,

3. Methodology

Facing the problems and challenges, we take "to develop graduate students' English application ability" as the breakthrough point, to explore the way of cultivating high-quality foreign language talents with international vision and academic competence, through the graduate English education and teaching, so as to promote and enhance our international cooperation, academic exchanges, excellent (PhD, master's degree thesis, high-level papers and so on, We focus our research mainly on the following aspects:

In theory, we try to put such theories as linguistic, educational psychology, social linguistics, intercultural communication and English teaching theory into practice to investigate the comprehensive multidisciplinary research methods of theory, and direct our graduate English teaching and practice of foreign language education, in a multidimensional study. In practice, we centered around the graduate English courses – four courses (Reading, Writing and Translation, Listening and Speaking for master students and Academic English Writing and Academic Communication for PhD students.), to investigate and understand the teaching contents, curriculum, teaching modes, teaching methods, assessment methods and other aspects of the existing problems, combining with the teaching practice and the needs of students, to find out the solutions and countermeasures to solve the problem.

Through the questionnaire, investigation, lectures, seminars and other methods, we try to understand graduate students' English learning motivation, demand and psychology.

The focus of the study is on the training of the students' ability of using English, in order to develop the students' comprehensive ability to learn English.

4. Innovative Measures of Graduate English Teaching

From 2008, in pursuit of a stronger national reputation, the graduate English program of HIT announced a new project, which was second to none in ensuring promotion of the graduate students' all-round development in their English studies. Some creative initiatives were outlined in the project, ranging from the reconstruction of four core graduate English courses to the introduction of a new evaluation system. The concrete innovative measures of graduate English teaching are taken as follows:

4.1 Construction of graduate English courses

To optimize the graduate students' English learning in HIT, we created an integrative master – PhD English teaching module, which could ensure that the graduate English learning is consistent, continuous, systematic and pertinent. The curriculum setup is very important, as it not only makes graduate students motivated, but brings their learning potential into play as well. In HIT four core English courses are offered: English Reading, Writing and Translation and English Watching, Listening and Speaking for master students, and Academic English Exchanges and Academic English Writing for PhD students. The former two are intended to teach practical English and the latter two are focused on the academic English. At the same time, we introduced all the cultural elements and social etiquette into the English classroom, including Chinese culture, western culture, etc...

We exert ourselves to make the graduate English program a real-life English environment, in which they can experience the English application. In the English classroom English theoretical knowledge is balanced with applied and practical contents. Whenever English is needed and wanted, it can be easily transferable to a working tool for their research and academic studies.

4.2 Textbooks

In order to carry out content-based English teaching plan, we have also written a series of graduate English textbooks, four for master students and four for PhD students. They are all designed in terms of the teaching objectives: to develop the students' general English skills, presentation skills, communication skills and cultural awareness. Now we have published (1) *Language and*



Technology – Practical Reading, Writing and Translation Course for Postgraduates, based on the characteristics and needs of science and engineering students, (2) *Language and Culture – Practical Spoken and Listening English Course for Postgraduates*, which highlights the usefulness and relevance of teaching, focusing closely on graduates' research, job searching, education, daily life, etc., (3) *Academic Communication - Audiovisual Course for PhD Students*, focused on academic communication, (4) *The New Scientist English*, aiming at developing students' scientific papers writing skills, including writing and publishing papers in major journals, etc., (5) *English Reading, Writing and Translation Course for Master of Engineering* and, (6) *Watching, Listening and Speaking Course for Master of Engineering* to foster applied, development-oriented, interdisciplinary senior engineering and technical personnel, (7) *English Reading, Writing and Translation Course for MBA* and (8) *Watching, Listening and Speaking Course for MBA*

4.3 Evaluation System

Evaluation is an important and indispensable part in the process of teaching. To be fair, reasonable and effective when evaluating students' English proficiency, we conducted the following reforms and achieved the expected goal.

First, to implement the "Target + Process" assessment model and to fairly and reasonably assess the students' English learning levels and abilities. According to HIT Graduate English proficiency test, in accordance with students' test scores and placement, students can be divided and taught in different English levels. "Process Assessment" means all teachers have to make the assessment records during each student's learning process, including attendance, class reports, class participation, assignment quality, tests, extracurricular activities and graduation exams, etc. "Target + Process" assessment mode can not only help students test their English proficiency, meet training requirements, but can also track and follow students' learning process, so as to achieve a comprehensive, objective, and impartial evaluation of students' learning process. Second, as for test approaches, in accordance with the requirements of English language ability, different forms of oral and writing test should be conducted. The masters' examination should mainly focus on speaking, listening, reading, translation and practical writing, while attention must be paid to the join of teaching content. Exams for PhD students include giving technical reports, summaries and essay writing in order to feature the two different stages of the training objectives and teaching requirements. Third, we first established HIT Graduate English proficiency evaluation system and proceed to the test database construction, clearly setting that the postgraduate course examinations- 50% and proficiency tests- 50% as the scholarship assessment standards.

4.4 Language Practice Platform

In recent years, we strive to combine teaching and practicing and set a variety of English learning platforms for the graduate students. Every year we hold the graduate English Drama Festival, the Graduate English Choral Competition, the Graduate English Speech Contest, the Simulated International Academic Conferences, the English National Culture Lecture Series, English Culture Salon, English Corner and other activities, which are popular among the graduate students.

In the past few years, HIT Sino-foreign joint study program and China government-sponsored studying abroad program won remarkable achievements. Currently, HIT is actively promoting cooperation with well-known foreign universities in training postgraduate students. In 2008 and 2009, China government-sponsored graduates of HIT's numbers were 166 and 186, over fulfilling the targets that the Ministry of Education had issued to HIT. In 2010 and 2011, the average number is up to 253 people, which makes HIT rank first in the country for three consecutive years that sends the largest number of personnel joining the exchange program already, and the number of PhD that went to world-class universities has increased significantly.

5. Innovations

5.1 Teaching Orientation

We have set up the objective, which is to train talents with international vision and innovative mind, to serve the postgraduate training system, to create classified training teaching mode for academic research and applied research talents, to optimize foreign language education resources, to rationally construct knowledge of foreign languages, to enhance students' language integrated application capabilities and to foster the graduate students to become internationally competitive and innovative talents.



5.2 Teaching Mode

Within the education objective framework of training highly qualified personnel with international perspectives, a content-based, teaching materials-oriented, using modern technology as tools, with excellent teaching resources, classroom lead courses under self-learning to expand the graduate and post-graduate integrated teaching mode has been formed.

5.3 Textbook Compilation

To construct English textbooks with science and technological features, the postgraduate's textbook encourages students to use English with emphasis on improving their specified learning, research and international communicating and practical skills.

5.4 Teaching Methods

To combine the traditional cognitive approach and the most advanced communicative and task-based teaching method, during teaching activities, for different levels and types of students, teachers can provide them with various assist. In this way, the graduate teaching quality can be improved.

5.5 Teaching Effectiveness

To optimize graduate/doctorial curriculum, we have made the teaching content based textbooks more reasonable, organized class and independent study after class more orderly, and made language practice atmosphere more intense. HIT graduates' papers should be published both in quality and quantity. The number of students attending research cooperation, international exchange program and other aspects has been increasing, to further promote the process of internationalization and enhance graduates' English education training ability.

6. Results

So far, the study has made a good practical effect:

First, the Graduate English course construction has been further optimized; teaching excellence rate in teaching evaluation and expert assessment has reached more than 95%.

Second, the graduate English textbook series has received good evaluation. Students' satisfaction feedback percent reaches 92%. Currently there are many universities ordering the textbook series.

Third, several language practice activities for graduate students – the English Drama Festival, the English Speech Contest, the Doctoral Simulated International Academic Conferences, the English Corner, English Salon, etc., also create a harmonious school campus atmosphere, playing an important role in creating cultural and academic atmosphere.

Fourth, members of this research published more than 10 papers, 8 textbooks, and participated in teaching and 10 research projects, among which 3 projects have already been completed. In addition, HIT Graduate English Teaching Requirements and Management, HIT PhD English Teaching Requirements and Management, HIT Graduate English Proficiency Examination Outline and other teaching documents have been laid down.

Fifth, our graduates have made outstanding achievements in academic research. In 2007, the number of HIT students sent abroad was only 22. In 2008 and 2009, China government-sponsored graduates of HIT's numbers were 166 and 186, over fulfilling the targets that the Ministry of Education had issued to HIT. In 2010 and 2011, the average number is up to 253 people, which makes HIT rank first in the country for three consecutive years that sends the largest number of personnel joining the exchange program already. The number of graduates' academic paper that published in English were respectively 2679, 3443, 4165, 6225 and 4726 in 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010 and 2011. All these achievements are of great concern with graduate English teaching.

Sixth, the achievement was discussed during the "Content- based" English teaching seminars held in Dalian and the National Graduate English Teaching Seminar in Beijing, which has been thought highly of by the scholars and experts. The teaching model provides a feasible approach for China's science and engineering graduates' English teaching.

References

- [1] LU Changxing. ISO9001 Quality Management System and Research on College English Teaching management Standardization processes. Guangxi University Journal (Philosophy and Social Sciences). June, 2009.



- [2] ZHAN Xiuzhen. College English Teaching Management Exploration. Guilin Normal College Journal. Volume 22, No. 2.
- [3] REN Xiaofei, XIE Xingxing. Postgraduate English Teaching Management and Curriculum System Reform. Crazy English. Jan, 2006.