

A Survey of Students' Attitudes Toward English Graded Teaching in China: A Case Study of North China Electric Power University

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Abstract

The present study investigates students' attitudes toward English graded teaching in North China Electric Power University (NCEPU for short). In essence, differences between learners of different grades and achievement groups were examined with regard to five constructs, namely, their perception of English graded teaching, the impact of English graded teaching on their learning, their attitudes toward teaching materials, their attitudes toward teaching content and their expectations for college English instructions. The study also aims to put forth proposals to alter the undesirable aspects of college English graded teaching. Sixty-six students from ten departments participated in the survey. Questionnaire containing both questions with best choices and open-ended questions was the main instrument. Analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data shows that students from different achievement groups tend to hold neutral attitude toward our teaching practice, the teaching materials, and the teaching content. Despite this tendency, students from high achievement group tend to take positive attitude toward the undesirable aspects of this teaching practice. Finding from the questions with best choices indicates that our teaching practice may have lost its appeal to the language learners due to its failure to stimulate their motivation and meet their demand and interest. In addition, results of open-ended questions reveal that alterations are needed in teaching contents, teaching focus and assessment system if it were to regain students' interest. The results of the study contribute to a good understanding of current English teaching situation in NCEPU. Proposals to alter this undesirable situation are put forward.

Keywords: graded teaching, college English, attitudes, achievement groups, proposals

1. Introduction

College English is a required course for at least freshmen and sophomores in most Chinese universities. To conduct college English instruction effectively, educational institutions have launched various English teaching reforms in mainland China, among which the college English graded teaching is one of the most influential. This reform of EFL teaching features a noticeable shift of focus of attention from language instructors to language learners. In order to ensure that a vast majority of English learners, if not all, could tap their potentials in English study, students are classified into different achievement groups according to their English proficiency levels. The instructors are expected to have their teaching objectives, teaching approaches and methods as well as assessment tailored to the students' English abilities with the expectation that instructors could conduct effective teaching and learners, whichever groups they fall into, could thereby enhance their English proficiency.

This teaching practice is currently receiving an increasing amount of attention in the literature on second language teaching. The literature provides different perspectives for college English graded teaching. These include, but not limited to, its theoretical basis (Li & Dai, 2001; Chen, 2009), its merits and demerits (Zhu, 2006; Kuang, 2013) and its effectiveness in improving college students' English abilities (Wu, Deng, & Huang, 2008; Huang, 2009). These studies tend to focus on the theoretical and empirical aspects of this nationwide teaching practice.

Many of my colleagues' experiences of English graded instruction frequently fill them with disappointment and frustration. They make it explicit that some students do not seem to give due credit to graded teaching. They skip classes, or play online games when supposed to listen attentively in class. Nor could they be perceived of any obvious improvement in their English study, which is especially the case of students from low-achievement groups.

In light of this, the primary purpose of this survey is to investigate students' attitudes toward college English

graded teaching in North China Electric Power University (NCEPU). The study also aims to put forth proposals to alter the undesirable dimensions of English graded teaching so that the vast majority of language learners could benefit from our English classes.

This article continues with an overview of theoretical and empirical dimensions of College English graded teaching in China. The following section introduces the methodological approach adopted in the study. Key findings from an analysis of the research data and a detailed account and interpretation of the findings of the study with regard to each of the research questions are then presented. The last section provides some places where proposals could be provided to alter the undesirable facets of this teaching practice.

2. Literature Review

The past few years has witnessed an explosion in the study of college English graded teaching in educational and psychological disciplines. In general, their research centers on the theoretical basis and empirical studies of this teaching practice.

2.1 Theoretical Basis

Theoretical exploration into college English graded teaching was mainly represented from input hypothesis and Constructionism. Different theories may they fall into, they both address the importance of students' interest and English level.

Li and Dai (2001) and Chen (2009) interpreted this teaching practice from the perspective of the input hypothesis. According to Krashen (1985), language acquisition takes place only when the learners has acquired the comprehensible input "i+1" where "i" and "+1" refer to the learner's language input and the next stage of language acquisition respectively. The learner benefits most if he/she progresses along the 'natural order' and receives second language input that is slightly advanced than his/her current level of linguistic competence. They argued that by classifying students of different levels of linguistic competence into their corresponding groups and designing syllabuses in accordance with their current level, the language instructors could ensure that the learners would receive some "i+1" that is a step beyond their current level of linguistic competence so that they may feel motivated and self-confident on their way to improving English study.

Wu et al. (2008) probed into the theoretical basis of graded teaching from the perspective of *Constructionism*. Constructionist learning advocates student-centered classrooms where students acquire new knowledge by putting what they have already known into practical use (Alesandrini & Larson, 2002). They maintained that as a student-oriented teaching practice, graded teaching gives full respect to individual characteristics and highlights the learners' initiatives in language learning.

2.2 Empirical Studies

Empirical studies concerning English graded teaching have been conducted mainly to examine its effectiveness in promoting English teaching. These studies have indicated that college English graded teaching can, to a certain extent, enhance students' English proficiency. On the other hand, however, it is not without its drawbacks.

Wu et al. (2008) made exploration into college English graded teaching in Zhongshan University, China. 816 students, including first-year and second-year students, filled out a questionnaire. The questionnaire was designed to investigate students' attitude toward graded teaching practice, self-study materials and their expectations for extended courses. Their study indicated that a vast majority of students held favorable attitude toward this teaching practice, the teaching materials and teaching methods despite the disparity between the first-year students and second-year students in terms of its motivating power. In addition, students called for a variety of optional courses. Possible solutions to the problems revealed from the survey were put forth.

Huang (2009) investigated current English graded teaching in 26 universities from dimensions of its categories, classification standards, teaching contents and aims, and assessments. She analyzed the advantages and problems in English graded teaching practice, maintaining that this teaching practice could stimulate students' learning motivation and contribute to the improvement of students' language proficiency while at the same time may reinforce psychological inhibition in language learning. Moreover, grade-based classification and rolling mechanism may give rise to problems like shortage of excellent teachers for low achievers and difficulty in management.

There is no doubt that both the theoretical and empirical studies have enriched our understanding of the current EFL teaching in China. It is seemingly based on plausible hypotheses and withstands the test of practice. Yet since each university has its own problems due to differences in teaching objectives, course arrangement, etc.,

taking into account the problems we are now facing, it seems necessary to investigate students' attitudes towards this teaching practice in NCEPU, with the expectation that this teaching practice could be better understood and that the undesirable facets of our teaching practice could be altered in the foreseeing future.

3. A Survey on College English Graded Teaching in NCEPU

English graded teaching has been conducted for more than ten years in NCEPU. To get college English graded teaching implemented, the newly admitted students are required to take the placement test. They are afterwards grouped into different classes according to their scores. Roughly speaking, about 20 percent of the whole admitted population is grouped into high achievement classes, the remaining 80 percent into intermediate-level achievement classes. Different teaching materials are introduced to the students in accordance with their levels. Different teaching approaches are taken to different groups of students in an effort that these methods could benefit as many students as possible.

It is a common belief that college English graded teaching should benefit students rather than mercilessly kill their interest in English and motivation to learn. Taking into consideration the undesirable responses of many students in English classes, this study aims to develop a better understanding of students' attitudes toward college English graded teaching in NCEPU. It is expected that through this study, the instructors could be better informed of the unfavorable aspects of college English graded teaching and take measures to alter these undesirable aspect accordingly.

3.1 Participants

The participants were students recruited from North China Electric Power University. A total of sixty-six students filled out the questionnaire. Of all the participants recruited, 47 and 19 were in their first and second year of study respectively, and altogether 28 participants were from high-achievement classes and the remaining 38 students were from low-achievement classes. They represented ten different discipline areas of electrical engineering, power engineering and mechanical engineering, to name a few, in North China Electric Power University. The participants came from different English classes and brought a diversity of backgrounds to the survey.

3.2 Research Questions

The four main research questions addressed in this study are the following:

- (1) Are there any differences between students from high-achievement groups and intermediate-level achievement groups with regard to perceptions of the aims of college English graded teaching?
- (2) Are there any differences between students from high-achievement groups and intermediate-level achievement groups with regard to attitude toward this teaching practice?
- (3) Are there any differences between students from high-achievement groups and intermediate-level achievement groups with regard to attitude toward teaching materials?
- (4) What aspects of college English graded teaching need to be improved?

3.3 Instrument

In this study, participants were asked to complete, during the regular class time, a questionnaire on students' attitude toward college English graded teaching. The questionnaire consisted of two sections. The first section requested information about the biographic details of the participants, including their gender, major, class and grade. The second section covered questions on college graded teaching. In order to obtain both quantitative and qualitative data, the questionnaire was designed to include both questions with best choices and open-ended questions. Altogether it was composed of 13 items, the first ten of which were statements incorporated into five options ranging from A=strongly agree, B=agree, C=neutral, D=disagree, to E=strongly disagree. Respondents were required to choose the alternatives suitable for their own condition. These statements were designed to investigate students' attitudes toward college English graded teaching from five constructs. The remaining three open-ended questions were related to aspects that need to be improved in college English graded teaching. In order not to cause misunderstanding, the questionnaire was written in Chinese and later translated into English.

3.4 Procedure

The researcher handed out the questionnaire to the participants. Before answering the questions, the researcher informed the students of the purpose of the study and conveyed the expectation that everyone would contribute and that all contributions would be valued. In order to reduce possible power dynamics so that the students could respond to the questionnaire conscientiously, the researcher explained that the choices had nothing to do with

their grade and true thoughts were needed. The researcher was there to clarify doubts if there was any. The students finished answering the questionnaire independently. The questionnaire took about 12 minutes.

3.5 Data Analysis

The quantitative data collected from the questionnaire were entered into Excel and the results were described in the light of the percentage of students' choices in answering the 10 items since the percentage of each option can give us a hint on students' attitudes toward college English graded teaching. Also used were some figures in bar charts to present the results of each construct in the hope that students' ideas on college English graded teaching could be better displayed. The qualitative data from the open-ended questions were collected to examine students' ideas on problems of and solutions to current English graded teaching. The quantitative and qualitative data offered some useful insights into how to improve College English graded teaching in NCEPU.

4. Result Analysis

This study intended to explore the three research questions from five constructs: students' perception of English graded teaching; their attitudes toward teaching materials; the impact of English graded teaching on students' learning; their attitudes toward teaching content and their expectations for English graded teaching.

4.1 Students' Perception of English Graded Teaching

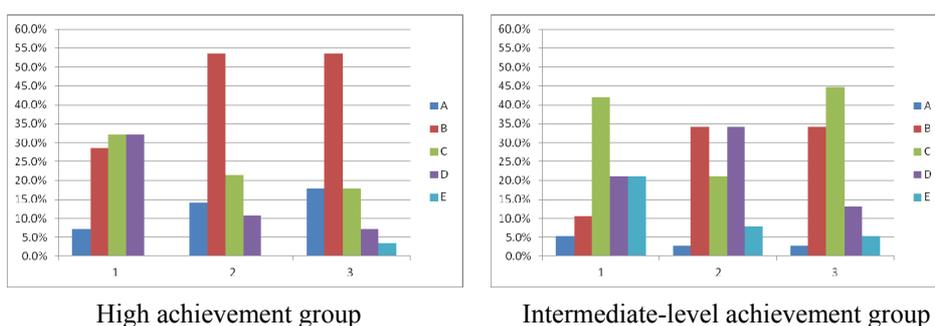


Figure 1. Students' perception of English graded teaching

Figure 1 indicates possible differences between different achievement groups in terms of perception of English graded teaching. As could be suggested from the graphs, students from high-achievement group tended to be better informed of the purpose of this teaching practice. In addition, a majority of high-achievement students tended to identify with the necessity of English graded teaching and found it easier to get used to this teaching practice than those from intermediate-level achievement group. While there was no significant differences between the two groups in claims of thorough understanding of the purpose of this teaching practice, those who believed to be quite familiar with its purpose was about 30% among high-achievement students, much higher than that among students from intermediate-level achievement group (10%). Furthermore, while approximately 15 percent of students from high-achievement group deemed it was of great necessity to implement graded teaching, only 2 percent of students from intermediate-level achievement group harbored the same idea. The discrepancy seemed to be also true among those who reckoned it fairly necessary to carry out graded teaching, with about 53% and 33% for high-achievement groups and intermediate-level achievement group respectively. In addition, while a majority of high-achievement students (about 70%) agreed that they had got used to this teaching practice; only less than 40% of intermediate-level achievement students held similar view.

4.2 Students' Attitude Toward Teaching Materials

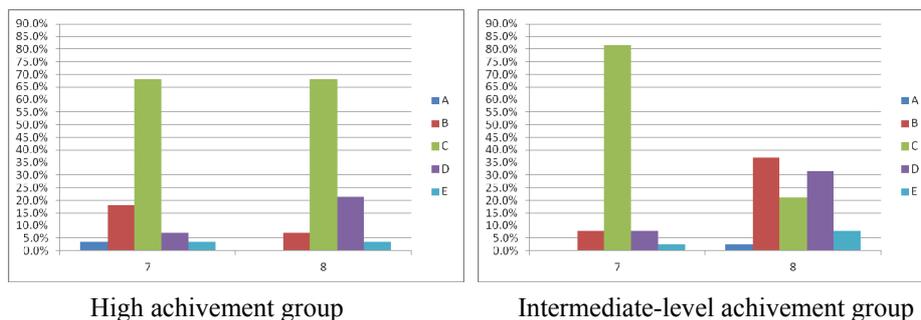


Figure 2. Students' attitude toward teaching materials

Figure 2 is presented to explore the attitude of different achievement groups toward our teaching materials. From the charts we could clearly see that a vast majority of students from both groups tended to take a neutral stance on whether the teaching courses were suitable for their English level. Furthermore, there seemed to be a large disparity on whether the teaching materials met their learning demands or interest. While over a third of students from intermediate-level achievement group viewed the teaching materials to meet their demands and interest, the percentage of those who held the same view was as low as 6% among high-achievement students. On the contrary, about 70% of students from high-achievement group adopted a neutral attitude. The figures from the above charts lead us to the conclusion that our teaching materials may not be the best choice for most students due to its failure to take into account the language learners' demand and interest.

4.3 Impact of English Graded Teaching

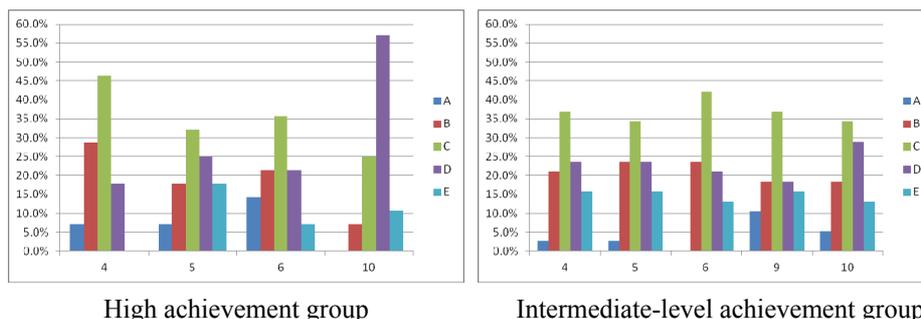


Figure 3. Students' attitude toward the impact of English graded teaching

Note. Item 9 is designed to measure whether or not college English graded teaching has brought about frustration among class B students.

Figure 3 investigates the impact of English graded teaching on students' learning among different achievement groups. As can be seen from the graphs, most students from both groups did not see much influence of graded teaching on their motivation to learn English nor could they perceive any use on the improvement of their English. Although graded teaching had not brought about much pressure and frustration on students, it failed to appeal to the learners as well.

4.4 Students' Attitude Toward Teaching Content

Table 1. What aspects of English teaching should college graded teaching place emphasis on?

Category of aspects	Frequency				
	Total n=66	High-achievement group n=28	Intermediate-level achievement group n=38	First-year group n=47	Second-year group n=19
Listening and speaking	47	61	37	55	21
Reading and writing	21	29	16	19	16
Western culture	38	43	34	45	26
English tests	39	29	47	34	53

Note. The figures in the columns labeled "Frequency" indicates the percentage of students who mentioned an aspect of English teaching to be given more emphasis to in a particular category; these percentages sum to more than 100% because students could mention more than one category in their questionnaires.

Item 11 is designed to investigate students' attitude toward teaching content. As could be seen from Table 1, desires to place emphasis on reading and writing were at the lowest, while primary emphasis was given to listening and speaking skill training, followed by the introduction of western culture and English tests. While 61% of high-achievement group longed for improvement in listening and speaking, about half of the intermediate-level achievement students (47%) desired to receive test-related training.

Table 2. What do you think our English teaching currently places emphasis on?

Category of aspects	Frequency				
	Total n=66	High-achievement group n=28	Intermediate-level achievement group n=38	First-year group n=47	Second-year group n=19
Improvement of language abilities	42	64	26	51	21
English test-related training	42	21	58	34	63
Unclear	15	15	16	15	16

Item 12 points to students' attitude toward the emphases of our current English teaching practice. From Table 2, it may not be difficult to notice students' belief that equal attention had been given to both improvement of language abilities and test-related training. However, while 64% percent of high-achievement students thought that our English instruction placed stress on language abilities, only 26% of intermediate-level students shared this view. On the contrary, 58% students from intermediate-level group maintained that our current language instruction was test-oriented.

To sum up, as could be indicated from the two tables, over 60 percent of high-achievement students considered that our current English teaching placed emphasis on English language abilities and expected that their listening and speaking could be improved in the future. On the contrary, over half of intermediate-level achievement students regarded our English instruction to be test-oriented and most of them (47% of the total number of intermediate-level achievement group) expressed their expectation that teachers offer them more test-related

training courses.

4.5 Aspects to Be Improved

When it comes to Item 13, thirty-two students expressed their concern over college graded teaching. While two of them did not see any point in level-based English teaching, most of them provided constructive ideas on how to improve College English instruction. Some of the ideas were listed as below:

Students who gain high grade in intermediate-level classes should be allowed to skip to high achievement classes.

Test-oriented English instruction should give way to cultivation of English competence among language learners.

CET4 should no longer be part of their curriculum.

More attention should be paid to oral and listening practice.

More care should be given to students from low achievement classes.

Language instructors should design various activities to create a relaxed and lively classroom atmosphere in an effort to enhance interactions between teachers and students and stimulate students' motivation in language study.

One thing has to be mentioned, however. Despite English instruction reforms in recent years and emphasis on the foster of English competence, some students still hold strong belief that the purpose of college English study was to pass sorts of English tests. As a result, they expect teachers to drill them in test-related skills.

5. Discussion

The primary purpose of this survey was to investigate, by means of a questionnaire, whether attitudes toward college English teaching differ among students of different achievement groups and grades in NECPU. From their responses to the ten statements, it appears that a vast majority of the participants, whichever group they belong to, are not fully informed of its purpose. Furthermore, most of them hold that it is incapable of enhancing their learning initiative and improving their academic performance. Nor could its teaching materials meet their demands and interests. But it did point to the seeming fact that students from high achievement group found it easier to get used to this teaching practice and tended to positively respond to the undesirable facets of this teaching practice, while those from intermediate-level achievement groups tended to negatively view this teaching practice.

A secondary aim of the present paper is to explore the facets to be improved in college English graded teaching. In this section, concerns over teaching focus, teaching contents and assessment are illustrated. The results of this section seem to conform to the findings of the quantitative data that our graded teaching indeed fails to motivate the language learners.

From the results of this survey, it seems apparent that students need to be well informed of the purpose of our teaching practice and that immediate actions should be taken to alter this undesirable situation. First, we have to make sure that students are classified in a scientific manner. We may gain insight into English graded teaching from a new teaching mode put forward by Liu, Zhu and Chang (2009), which proposes that grading tests should be designed in a way that the two skills of English learning, namely listening and reading, would be tested and scored in a well-designed test paper in which not only the students' basic knowledge and but also their linguistic competence should be well examined. In addition, it is necessary that students should be allowed to skip grades when, after a period of time of learning (usually one semester), their language abilities have greatly improved.

Second, we have to ensure that our curriculum and teaching materials suit the students' levels, and that graded teaching would not do harm to the self-confidence and interest in learning of those who come from intermediate-level achievement classes. It is strongly recommended that teachers invite students in designing teaching objectives and teaching content. The major merit of this attempt is that it meets students' academic and psychological requirements. Students know better their strengths and weaknesses in English study than the teachers do. By inviting students to design teaching objectives and content, it is hoped that students would highlight the improvement of their weak points. In that case, teachers could not only conduct teaching in accordance with the aptitude of their students, but more importantly, stimulate students' motivation to acquire new knowledge when students are aware that the teaching target is approachable.

Third, a reasonable assessment system is a must. A reasonable assessment system should take into consideration students' in-class performance, mid-term exams, final exams, oral English test result, etc.

Fourth, it is essential that changes should be made in teaching approaches. Teachers have to take an active part in English graded teaching, exploring different teaching methods in accordance with their students' aptitude.

Fifth, learning takes place only when learners are willing to take actions to optimize their knowledge structure. To conduct graded teaching effectively, language instructors have to inform the students of their role in English learning and take measures to encourage autonomous learning.

Though the results do provide a further understanding of college English graded teaching; it would be too imprudent to generate findings too broadly due to the survey's explanatory nature and its relatively small sample. But the study does point to some generalizations for English graded teaching in NCEPU.

Hopefully these undesirable aspects would be altered as we launch the teaching reform under the hypothesis of "output-driven, input-enabled" hypothesis put forth by Wen (2013). Under this hypothesis, as a response to the present survey, alterations in teaching objectives, teaching contents, teaching materials, teaching methods and assessment will be made. This provides an orientation for our upcoming teaching reform project.

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Appendix

A questionnaire on college English graded teaching

The following questions are about how you feel about college English graded teaching, choose what you think is the proper answer.

Your major: _____

Please circle the background information

Grade (1. 1st year 2. 2nd year)

Gender (1. male 2. female)

Class: (1. High achievement class 2. Intermediate-level achievement class)

- 1) I know the purpose of college English graded teaching.
A. strongly agree B. agree C. neutral D. disagree E. strongly disagree
- 2) It is necessary to conduct college English graded teaching.
A. strongly agree B. agree C. neutral D. disagree E. strongly disagree
- 3) I have got used to college English graded teaching.
A. strongly agree B. agree C. neutral D. disagree E. strongly disagree
- 4) Graded teaching has positive effects in arousing my interest in English study.
A. strongly agree B. agree C. neutral D. disagree E. strongly disagree
- 5) Graded teaching has helped improved my English level.
A. strongly agree B. agree C. neutral D. disagree E. strongly disagree
- 6) College graded teaching classroom appeals to me.
A. strongly agree B. agree C. neutral D. disagree E. strongly disagree
- 7) The teaching materials fit my English level.
A. strongly agree B. agree C. neutral D. disagree E. strongly disagree
- 8) The teaching materials suit my learning demands and learning interest?
A. strongly agree B. agree C. neutral D. disagree E. strongly disagree
- 9) I feel frustrated when grouped into intermediate-level achievement classes?
(For intermediate-level achievers)
A. strongly agree B. agree C. neutral D. disagree E. strongly disagree
- 10) I am under pressure in college graded teaching.
A. strongly agree B. agree C. agree D. disagree E. strongly disagree
- 11) What do you think should be given more emphasis in college English graded teaching?
- 12) What do you think our English teaching pays more attention to, language competence or test training?
- 13) What do you think should be improved in college graded teaching?

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