

# **An Investigation into the Contemporary Design, Subject Assessment and Technical Support in Teaching the University Oral Interpretation Course for English Majors in China**

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## **Abstract**

Our investigation reveals that immediate measures should be taken to reform the Oral Interpretation course teaching for the English majors in China. Existing problems are found in many aspects of the course teaching. As one of our reports on these problems, this paper primarily focuses on the design, the subject assessment and the technical support of the course. The conclusion of this paper also recommends what we critically need for reform in these areas.

**Key words:** China's higher education, English Oral Interpretation course, course design, subject assessment, technical support

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## I. Background

Since the ongoing economic reform in China deepens, there is a severe shortage of well-qualified English interpreters. To respond this, China's universities have rapidly established various training courses. Three types of Oral Interpretation teaching modules can be found in Chinese universities to meet different training needs, namely, 'a module for Interpretation Majors [...], a compulsory course for Foreign Language Majors [...], and a module for Translation Sub-major of Foreign Language Majors' (Zhong 2007, p. 52). Yet, reportedly, the overall quality of the interpreters currently working in various professional fields is believed to be very poor.

In particular, we are concerned with the fact that most of the interpreters are university graduates majored in English and obviously have successfully fulfilled all what has been required by their university degree courses. We began to observe one university in 2004 to understand how the relevant courses were designed and taught. Many serious problems were found as obstacles to improve the teaching and learning quality. We then felt that it was necessary to extend the inquiry into more universities. As a result, two more universities have been investigated between 2006 and 2008. Here we report our findings.

## II. Research Settings and Methodology

### 1. The settings

The investigation targets included 20 course teachers, three language lab assistants, six teaching management staffs and 489 course students. These targets were from three universities in China, which are an average university, a key university and a foreign language university respectively. These universities are representative enough to ensure convincing research findings.

J. Schwab (1978, p. 287) believes that the organization of a certain course includes aspects of learners, teacher, teaching material and course surrounding factors. With this concept in mind, we undertook the investigation from the following nine aspects:

- students,
- teaching staff,
- teaching materials,
- course design,
- technical support facilities,
- the adopted in-class teaching skills,
- the extracurricular learning,
- teaching effect,
- subject assessment.

### 2. The methodology

Both questionnaires and interviews were used. Questionnaires were designed and circulated for the investigated teaching staff and students. The questionnaire for teachers included two parts, with the first part focusing on personal information, and the second part on course teaching and learning. The questionnaire for students consisted of questions on course teaching and learning only. Interviews were organized to obtain information from the teaching management staff, lab assistants, and for some teachers and students when it was deemed necessary.

## III. Course Design

The design of a course, as we normally understand, includes two aspects: its teaching hours and sequence among its related courses. Consequently, we did investigation on these two aspects.

### 1. Teaching hours

The total teaching hours in the three universities were from 36 to 72 hours which were proportionally crossing from one to two teaching terms.

55% of teachers and 64% of students reported that the teaching hours were either short or too short. Consequently, these teachers and students felt either stressed or greatly stressed. Two deans, who were in charge of teaching and learning affairs, thought that increasing the teaching hours would be necessary, and should be the priority for the course reform.

The investigation on the self-evaluation of teaching and learning effect shows that only 40% of teachers agreed that their students, at the end of the course, would be able to be interpreters for 'ordinary foreign affair activities', which is the final aim of the course set by the *Teaching Syllabus for College English Majors*. 60% of teachers thought that students would be able to 'interpret on daily affairs for foreigners', an aim set by the *Teaching Syllabus* for English majors who have accomplished their third year's learning. The comparable figures on the part of students were 30% and 59% respectively. In addition, another 11% students said that they had acquired no significant interpretation competence after the course learning. The data suggests that the majority of teachers and students were lacking of confidence in reaching the course aims set by the *Teaching Syllabus*.

We then interviewed some teachers and students for the reasons. Some teachers pointed out that, apart from the teaching of interpretation skills, the promotion of language competence had been reluctantly taken as a task in class as well. On the one hand, as the result of insufficient training from previous related courses, students have not been well prepared, as for the matter of language competence, for the study of Oral Interpretation. On the other hand, there is no language courses set up to remove

language obstacles which students encounter in the Oral Interpretation course study.

To solve this problem, we suggest two measures to be adopted. Firstly, more efforts on the teaching of related courses should be made to help students acquire better language skills before the course. Our investigation shows that not all universities offered courses like Advanced Spoken English and Advanced English Listening. We suggest that these courses should be set up whilst possible to reinforce students' related competence. Secondly, the Oral Interpretation Language course can be set up in the same term or one term in advance of the Oral Interpretation course. The course should aim at removing language obstacles in the Oral Interpretation textbooks.

## 2. Sequence among related courses

The related course group of Oral Interpretation includes Chinese for College Students (a public compulsory course), English Listening, Spoken English, English Reading and English Grammar which are basic language training courses. Courses like Public Speaking in English, English-Chinese and Chinese-English Translation, and Shorthand etc. are also included, as they contain the training of skills needed for Oral Interpretation.

The related courses are numerous, which scatter around four academic years of undergraduate study. This suggests that interpretation course is better to be taught in the latter period, usually the fourth academic year, when students have been well equipped with related skills and knowledge for the course. This idea is proven by the *Teaching Syllabus*, which points out that the Oral Interpretation should be taught in the fourth academic year, or in both the second half of the third and the first half of the fourth year.

The layout of the course in all the three universities followed the guidance of the *Teaching Syllabus*. Our investigation reveals a slight difference between these two kinds of arrangements. 60% of the teachers reported that they believe the class opened in the fourth year is easier to teach than that in the second half of the third academic year. The other 40% reported that they don't believe there are any significant differences.

## IV. Subject Assessment

The investigation shows, problems existing in the present course examination include its methods, the level of difficulties, the standard for scoring and the reliability. Some of the problems are common ones, often seen in university examinations of major subjects, while the others are related to the features of the Oral Interpretation course itself.

### 1. Methods

First of all, we found out that examination methods in these universities were diverse. In some cases, diversity even existed within one university. 75% of teachers examined their students orally and in written form as well; the remaining 25% chose to use an oral exam only.

Interviews with teachers who used written examination show that it was used to test interpretation theories and language points in textbooks, as these teachers believed that the course has a task of improving students' language competence and subject knowledge. Interviews with the remaining 25% teachers indicate that they believed that the transmission of oral interpretation skills is the core part of course.

We believe, however, it is a positive way, at the moment, to hold written examination, as it helps to reinforce students' learning of language points. This is due to the fact that the present teaching hours are insufficient, and therefore students should be motivated to handle the language related tasks themselves more actively after class. We also advise the unification of the exam methods, because diversity in examination methods may lead to variations in teaching contents and methods, which are not readily fit for the standardization of the course teaching, which is also a demand of the *Teaching Syllabus*.

### 2. Level of difficulties

Oral examinations of interpretation can be carried out in the forms of phrase interpretation, sentence interpretation and paragraph interpretation. It is easy to understand that phrase interpretation is the easiest, and paragraph interpretation is the most difficult. The use of these forms in examination should depend on the students' mastery of related skills.

Our investigation shows that, in almost all the cases, the choice of these forms was in the hands of course teachers, since the oral exams were organized by themselves and were not unified. What actually worried us was the fact that, in some cases, teachers of different classes within the same university used different test forms, since this may lead to complaints of inequality from the course students. As students of the same university are supposed to be of the similar level of intelligence and learning competence, we suggest that teachers of the same university should choose the same forms, unless a particular class, in some extreme cases, is believed to be either exceedingly superior or vice versa.

### 3. Standard for scoring

Investigation shows that scoring standard was not unified, even within the same university. This led to the students' complaints that their teachers were unprofessional and irresponsible.

Frankly, we admit that the evaluation of interpretation competence is so far a new field of research. The element of evaluators' personal orientation can not be avoided completely in the evaluation process. We want to note that the unification of scoring standard is another matter. It not only helps to unify the components of scoring, but to give a description of the examinee's performance and its ranking as well. We suggest that a comparatively fixed scoring standard should be developed through discussion and negotiation by the teachers at the same university and such scoring standard should be used for the course exams.

#### 4. Reliability

Finally, the investigation results questioned the reliability of the course oral examination. Face to face interviews were commonly seen in most course oral examinations. As a result of a large number of students in one class, normally 25-35, over 50 in some extreme cases, the given interview time of one student was too short. Investigation reveals that a group of four students was normally interviewed for 10-15 minutes, which means 2.5-3.5 minutes for an individual. And in some extreme cases, only 1.5 minutes was given to an individual. Students' performance may not reveal their actual interpretation competence due to the shortage of time.

It is encouraging to have found that some course teachers, only 10% of them though, used a recording system in language labs for course examination. With the help of the labs, students were given the exact same exam tasks, and their interpretation performance was recorded. In this way, more exam tasks were possible for an individual student and teachers had more after-exam evaluating and marking time. In addition to this, the recorded tapes and teachers' later evaluating notes, as by-products of this technique, served as good archives for future references. As its shortcoming, this technique cannot reveal the interpretation competence in the mode of actual communication.

We therefore suggest the promotion of the lab examination technique to all and a combined use of face to face interview and lab examination technique, which is what we believe to be both efficient and reliable.

### V. Technical Support Facilities

Our investigation on the technical support facilities of the course focused on the use of language labs, which included two aspects: language labs available for the course and utility of the labs.

#### 1. Language labs available

Language labs in the investigated universities cover all five types of labs:

- 1) internet multimedia language lab,

- 2) multimedia language lab for the comparison of listening and speaking,
- 3) language lab for the comparison of listening and speaking,
- 4) multimedia language lab,
- 5) language lab for listening and speaking.

100% Oral Interpretation courses were taught in language labs, but the arrangements of labs was at random, which means teachers could not choose the kind of lab they wanted to use.

The teaching of interpretation course is of comprehensive trainings, demanding ordinary functions as well as special functions from language labs. These special functions include abundant ready-to-use original language materials, simultaneous recording, man-machine conversation, errors recognition and so on. We believe that an internet multimedia language lab is definitely the best choice for such demand. Yet, if it is not available, a multimedia language lab for the comparison of listening and speaking and language labs for comparison of listening and speaking are also acceptable.

#### 2. Utility of language labs

The guaranteed use of language labs makes the course teaching easy and convenient, yet a relevant problem emerges. The course teachers' competence of using the lab functions largely determines whether the facilities can be fully used and whether the expected teaching aims can be realized.

We figure out that only 30% of the interviewed teachers claimed that they could operate the lab functions well and were able to use them according to different teaching materials and teaching aims. 40% of teachers believed they knew some of the functions provided by the facilities and only used the functions they knew in class teaching. The remaining 30% claimed they knew only the basic operations of the machines, and therefore operated those limited functions in classes. As for lab assistants, only one of the three interviewed assistants, who was an experienced staff member, claimed that he fully understood language teaching techniques and their relation with the lab functions and that he was able to advise teaching staffs the use of these functions. The other two lab assistants reported limited knowledge of related teaching techniques and their relation with lab functions and their insufficient help to the teaching staff.

We advise that the following three measures should be taken. We believe that these measures are beneficial for both the teaching staff and the lab assistants, by which they can develop the skills they need for their work.

- 1) Teachers and lab assistants should work together to exploit the functions of lab facilities.

- 2) Relevant training courses on lab operations should be arranged for course teachers.
- 3) Course teachers should be organized to prepare multimedia teaching materials needed for the course.

## VI. Conclusion

Based on our investigation from three universities, we conclude that it is an imperative task to take measures to reform the Oral Interpretation course for English majors.

There is a conflict, at the moment, between the teaching hours of the course and the course goal set by the *Teaching Syllabus*. To solve this problem, it is advisable to reinforce the teaching of related courses and to increase the teaching hours of the course itself. As far as course examination is concerned, universities are supposed to unify the examination methods and its level of difficulties. They should also set a fixed standard of scoring and utilize language labs to maximize exam tasks so that both efficiency and reliability can be achieved. As for the technical support, language labs with better functions should be provided for the course teaching; trainings on lab operation are necessary for course teachers; lab assistants and teachers should be encouraged to cooperate to exploit more functions of lab facilities; and course teachers themselves should also work together to prepare multimedia teaching materials for the course.

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