

The influence of graded English teaching reform on students' cognition of classroom environment

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Abstract: Curriculum reform is not only the change of teaching content and teaching methods, but also the change of people. This study uses quantitative research methods to analyze the graded teaching and students' cognition of the classroom environment. It is found that graded teaching has a certain impact on learners with different English proficiency. Among them, the higher the level of English, the higher the perception of the classroom environment. The teacher's response to different levels of classroom will affect students' classroom cognition and English learning effect. In order to further promote the development of graded English teaching reform, this study puts forward suggestions from three aspects: Learners' learning needs, learning motivation and learning support.

Keywords: Graded English Teaching, Classroom environment, Teaching reform

1. Introduction

Graded English teaching refers to a teaching mode, whose classes are divided into different levels according to students' English ability instead of using natural classes. Graded English teaching in college level was first formally put forward by the Ministry of Education in 1985 in the College English syllabus and mentioned in the 2015 revised College English Teaching Guide^[1]. Due to the imbalance between urban and rural areas in the basic stage of English education in China, the graded teaching mode plays an important role in dealing with the differences of students' English level and implementing personalized teaching.

As the main channel of school education, the effectiveness of classroom is related to the smooth progress of the whole school teaching activities. When the concept of environment is applied to class or classroom field, academia tends to equate it with many concepts such as classroom climate, classroom psychological environment, learning environment and so on, which refers to students' or teachers' perception or feeling of the classroom, and has an important impact on students' cognition, emotion and behavior. Therefore, the quality of classroom environment has become a hot issue for teachers, administrators and relevant theoretical workers.

Therefore, from the perspective of learners, this paper scientifically demonstrates and investigates the impact of graded teaching mode on classroom environment, aiming to provide different perspectives for exploring and solving new problems in the graded English teaching reform.

2. Literature review

Graded teaching is a kind of teaching activity which divides students into different levels according to their actual knowledge level and acceptance potential, formulates corresponding teaching objectives and adopts different teaching methods^[2]. It fully embodies the principle of teaching students in accordance with their aptitude, so that students can make progress at different starting points. However, the graded teaching mode is a double-edged sword. Many researchers have found that graded teaching causes some students' psychological adaptation difficulties^[3], the fluctuation of students' emotion and motivation, such as low-level students' sense of inferiority^[4], tense teacher-student relationship^[5], and learning pressure^[6]. In the process of promoting graded teaching, due to the lack of professional guidance, the graded standards have also been questioned^[7].

Classroom environment, known as classroom atmosphere, refers to the perception of students or teachers to their classroom^[8], which is a potential factor determined the development of students. In 1936, Lewin put forward the concept of "B=f(P·E)", which laid a theoretical foundation for the study of classroom environment, that is, human behavior (B) changes with the changes of environment (E) and

human (P). The environment here is not the geographical or social environment, but a person's psychological environment^[9]. In recent 30 years, empirical research show that the quality of classroom environment has a direct impact on students' learning effect^[10]. However, most of the research on the influence of classroom environment focus on the development of Classroom Environment Scale^{[11][12]}, the positive and negative factors in the classroom environment^[13], and try to put forward the ideal model of classroom environment^[14].

The relationship between graded teaching and classroom environment has also been studied, but due to the diversity of graded teaching mode, the relationship between the two is not clear. How to create a good classroom environment under the graded teaching practice is a message that must be understood on the way of education reform. Therefore, this paper is on purpose to fill this gap and focus on the relationship between graded English teaching and classroom environment.

To conclude, this paper aims to answer following questions:

RQ1: How do college English learners perceive the classroom environment of graded College English teaching?

RQ2: How to build a better classroom environment for students under the background of graded teaching reform?

3. Method

140 freshmen (first semester) of one University are selected as the research objects ($N=140$). The average age is 18. The students are designated into three different levels of English classes by a placement test at the beginning of the semester. According to the results of the English proficiency test at the beginning of the semester, the first 25% of the 140 students were identified as the challenge class, the last 5% as the leap class, and the rest of the intermediate ability students formed a number of parallel classes.

Referring to the College English Classroom Environment Assessment Scale designed by Sun^[15] and What Happened in the Classroom (WHIC) questionnaire designed by Fraser^[16], the author has compiled the Basic English classroom environment questionnaire. Two experts who have more than a decade of psycholinguistic research experience subjected the questionnaire to both face and content validation.

The questionnaire contains 9 dimensions, a total of 68 items. The α coefficient of each dimension of the questionnaire ranged from 0.870 to 0.877, indicating that the students' answers were reliable.

In December 2020, 148 questionnaires were distributed in a final summary meeting, and 140 valid questionnaires were collected. All data were analyzed by SPSS13.0.

4. Results

4.1 Students' perception of English learning environment

According to the Average score (M) of nine dimensions of English learning environment, students' perception of English learning environment is generally high, ranging from 3.84 to 4.58 (see Table 1).

Table 1 Students' perception of college English classroom learning environment

Dimension	Number (N)	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
Classmate Affinity	140	4.07	0.79246
Teacher Support	140	4.14	0.85958
Classroom Participation	140	3.84	0.87446
Task Orientation	140	4.43	0.60013
Cooperative Learning	140	4.32	0.70221
Fairness	140	4.55	0.63489
Student Responsibility	140	4.03	0.82253
Teacher Leadership	140	4.58	0.55012
Teacher Innovation	140	4.41	0.66986

Relatively speaking, students' perception of classroom participation ($M=3.84$) and student responsibility ($M=4.03$) is low. At the same time, students' participation in the classroom is not high, but

students' perception of task orientation ($M=4.43$) is high. In addition, the results of standard deviation show that students' perceptions of teacher support ($SD = 0.85958$), classroom participation ($SD = 0.87446$) and student responsibility ($SD = 0.83353$) are quite different, which indicates that teachers do not give equal attention and support to students, and students' classroom participation is also quite different.

Table 2 English classroom learning environment item ($M < 4$)

Item	Number (N)	Mean (M)
I will ask questions to teacher.	140	3.51
All the students in the class are my friends.		3.61
I help students in need in English class.		3.72
The teacher will ask me to explain how I solve the problem.		3.76
The teacher will ask me to evaluate my homework and study myself.		3.76
I explain my ideas to other students.		3.84
When I have a problem, the teacher will stop to help me.		3.86
The teacher will ask me questions.		3.87
My classmates like me.		3.89
The teacher will adopt my ideas or suggestions.		3.89
The teacher chat with me.		3.91
The teacher will come to my seat and talk to me.		3.91
I actively participate in various classroom activities.		3.91
I give my opinion in class discussion.		3.96

Among the 68 items, 14 items (20.59%) scored lower than 4 points (see Table 2). Among them, "I will ask questions to teacher" ($M=3.51$) and "All the students in the class are my friends" ($M=3.61$) scored the lowest.

4.2 Students' perception of English learning environment among different levels

Table 3 shows that the higher the students' English level is, the higher their perception of English learning environment is, but with one exception: Teacher Support.

Table 3 Students' perception of English learning environment in different classes

Dimension	Challenge class (n=32)		Parallel class (n=101)		Leap class (n=7)		Pearson	p
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD		
Classmate Affinity	4.12	0.78814	4.06	0.79042	3.96	0.66647	0.058	0.498
Teacher Support	4.12	0.84433	4.13	0.86535	4.41	0.66260	-0.055	0.517
Classroom Participation	4.00	0.85730	3.83	0.85413	3.36	0.97638	0.179*	0.035*
Task Orientation	4.51	0.53918	4.41	0.60734	4.38	0.58722	0.102	0.230
Cooperative Learning	4.37	0.68493	4.32	0.69036	4.07	0.80509	0.090	0.290
Fairness	4.57	0.58060	4.56	0.61648	4.38	0.87767	0.050	0.599
Student Responsibility	4.21	0.75923	3.99	0.81241	3.69	0.99903	0.208*	0.013*
Teacher Leadership	4.62	0.54191	4.59	0.53458	4.38	0.62036	0.088	0.300
Teacher Innovation	4.47	0.62792	4.40	0.68455	4.36	0.57704	0.057	0.504

(n=140, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$)

There are significant differences in the dimensions of Classroom Participation and Students'

Responsibility. The higher the level of English ability, the clearer and more definite the learning goal, the more positive the response to the teacher's behavior, and the more harmonious the relationship within the classroom. The standard deviation shows that the perceived values of Fairness and Students Responsibility with different English abilities are quite diverse, which shows that while there is little difference in the cognition and fairness of learning among the students in the high ability class, there is a big difference among the low ability class.

The 68 items and class factors were analyzed by ANOVA, and the results showed that there were significant differences between 4 items and graded class (see Table 4). It can be seen that the higher the level of English ability, the more students will take the initiative to ask questions, listen more carefully, be more responsible for their own learning, and be more willing to provide help for classmates.

Table 4 The relationship between questions 4&21 and different classes

	English Class (Mean \pm Standard Deviation)			<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
	Leap Class (<i>n</i> =7)	Parallel Class (<i>n</i> =101)	Challenge Class (<i>n</i> =32)		
I help students in need in English class.	3.43 \pm 1.13	3.61 \pm 0.99	4.13 \pm 0.75	3.883	0.023*
I will ask questions to teacher.	2.71 \pm 1.11	3.49 \pm 1.02	3.78 \pm 0.94	3.395	0.036*
I am absorbed in the lecture.	3.86 \pm 0.69	4.27 \pm 0.60	4.50 \pm 0.57	3.888	0.023*
The teacher makes me responsible for my English study.	3.71 \pm 0.76	4.19 \pm 0.88	4.56 \pm 0.62	4.078	0.019*

* $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$

5. Discussion

5.1 Improving Students' cognition of task orientation: the need analysis

Curriculum reform needs to be based on needs analysis, investigating learners' subjective and objective needs in foreign language learning, and carrying out the compilation of teaching materials and syllabus, the arrangement and adjustment of curriculum and the implementation of teaching plan^[17]. This paper applies the theory of needs analysis to the curriculum design and teaching mode, which fully reflects the original intention of the construction of graded teaching – teaching students in accordance with their aptitude.

Therefore, as Dewey and Rogers put it – teachers should always take “student-centered” as the starting point when assigning tasks, and explaining the objectives, requirements and relevant rules of the tasks, so as to help students understand and complete the tasks. The core of curriculum is not about the subject content, the social problems, but student development; curriculum content is not fixed, but changes with the changes of students in the teaching process^[18]. In the process of teaching, it is also necessary to constantly understand the students' views on the course, integrate the teaching objectives and students' needs, adjust the teaching plan and teaching activities, and let the students become one of the protagonists of the course, so as to achieve better teaching effect in the reform.

5.2 Strive to promote students' participation in class: the active learner

Classroom participation is an influencing factor of classroom effect which requires teachers, whether designing individual tasks or group tasks, should give students full encouragement and support to ensure that each student can actively participate. The research shows that there is a significant correlation between students' classroom participation and their English learning ability.

Chinese College enrollment breaks the regional limitations. The English level of students from coastal areas and first tier cities is much higher than that of students from second and third tier cities. As a result, the English level of undergraduates from the same school, the same major and the same class is uneven, so it is difficult to carry out effective language input for the whole class. The same language input maybe $i+2$ for low-level students and $i-1$ for high-level students. Such language input is difficult

to have a positive effect on English learning. Tyler put forward three principles about the organization of curriculum content: continuity, sequence and integration^[19]; among them, sequence requires that the teaching content should be based on the prior knowledge, while increasing the breadth and depth.

Therefore, the tasks designed by teachers should be in line with students' cognitive level, individual differences and personal experience, and should be slightly higher than students' own English ability, so as to stimulate students' interest in learning, achieve the effective input of $i+1$, and promote students to actively integrate into English classroom activities.

5.3 Provide positive teacher support: the psychological motivation

In the course implementation, psychology is usually considered to be the most useful theory. According to Albert Bandura, people's behavior is influenced by their expectation of results and self-efficacy^[20]. Many studies have shown that self-efficacy has a direct impact on academic performance. For example, Wang^[21] found that students' self-efficacy has a direct and positive impact on English reading performance. The graded teaching mode of Basic English for undergraduates must meet the different needs of learners, stimulate learners' learning motivation, and promote learners' self-efficacy.

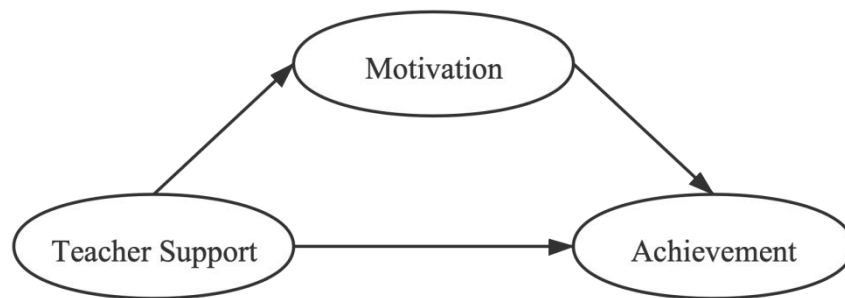


Figure 1 Teacher support, motivation and achievement

Teacher support is a kind of predictive cognition of students' behavior results based on Teachers' perception of students (see Figure 1). Teachers' expectations will affect the way teachers teach students, and make students perceive teachers' supportive behavior variedly^[22]. Many studies have shown that students' perceived teacher support behavior will affect their academic motivation, and then have a lasting impact on learning^[23]. This study shows that there is a negative correlation between teacher support and students' English ability. Therefore, teachers should be aware of the positive effect of their support behavior on increasing students' self-confidence. If teachers can provide positive feedback and create conditions for students to experience successful, the effect will be better.

6. Conclusion

The reform of curriculum is not only the change of teaching contents and methods, but also the change of people. This research show that graded teaching has a certain impact on learners with different English proficiency. The higher the proficiency of English ability, the higher the perception of the classroom environment. Graded teaching affects the learning enthusiasm of middle and low-level learners and has a negative impact on their psychological feelings and emotion. Therefore, in graded English teaching, many factors should be considered to avoid the disadvantages.

First of all, curriculum reformers should carefully investigate and analyze the Basic English classroom environment. While helping teachers understand the reform, they should also let students have a basic understanding of the reform, have good communication with students, and provide correct guidance and help. In this process, teachers should pay special attention to the feelings of the two extreme classes, challenge class and leap class, and give equal support to meet students' expectations, so that students can improve their English ability in a warmer environment.

In addition, as the 140 subjects in this study are only a small part of the freshmen of grade 2020 in one college, and the sample size of leap class is only 7. In the future research, with the increase of sample size and abundant time, researchers can carry out a comparative study on gender, major, source of students and other factors in the context of graded teaching, in order to have a more comprehensive understanding of students' perception of English classroom environment, as well as other educational

roles, such as teachers.

Curriculum is a “bottom-up” process. How to let the front-line educators directly participate in the process of curriculum designing is a problem worthy of thinking. An appropriate language learning environment should promote real communication between students and between teachers and students and help to cultivate students’ self-confidence and self-esteem^[24]. Therefore, the reform of curriculum is inseparable from the main characters of teaching – teachers and students. In the past, curriculum reform were mainly the affairs of researchers and decision-makers; teachers and students were on the stage only in the process of implementation, which is not conducive to the formulation of curriculum and the achievement of curriculum objectives. Therefore, there is still a long way to go for the reform of graded English teaching.

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