

# **Innovative Practice of Graduation Thesis for English Majors in Applied Undergraduate Universities**

## **-- A Case Study of Foreign Languages School in TaiShan University**

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### **Abstract**

Graduation thesis is an important part of undergraduate talent training and an important aspect that reflects the innovative and practical ability of undergraduate talents. However, the single and traditional model of graduation thesis has largely affected the quality of talent training in applied undergraduate colleges, and failed to improve students' comprehensive application ability and achieve the goal of talent training. This article takes the graduation thesis of the English major of Foreign Languages School in Tai Shan University as an example, mainly discusses the innovative practice model of graduation thesis and its specific implementation, in order to attract others, hope to provide a useful reference for the reform of the graduation thesis model of applied undergraduate universities.

### **Keywords**

**Application-Oriented; Translation Practice; Educational Practice; Innovative Model.**

### **1. Introduction**

Graduation thesis (design) is an important practical link to cultivate students' innovation, practical ability and entrepreneurship. It is an assessment of students' knowledge, ability to combine theory with practical problem solving, written and oral expression, etc. It is also a comprehensive test of the effect of students' comprehensive quality education and practical ability.

The Guidance Manual of Graduation Thesis (design) for Higher Education Schools (Foreign Language Volume) clearly points out: "Graduation thesis writing for foreign language majors in colleges and universities is an important stage to complete the undergraduate teaching plan and achieve the undergraduate training objectives, and it is an important and indispensable link in the cultivation of foreign language talents..... an important process to deepen and sublimate foreign language teaching. It is an important process of measuring and assessing the quality and level of teaching of foreign language majors in colleges and universities." [1] In documents such as Several Opinions of the Ministry of Education on Comprehensively Improving the Quality of Higher Education and Several Opinions of the Ministry of Education and Other Departments on Further Strengthening the Work of Practical Education in Colleges and Universities, the Ministry of Education proposes to combine the characteristics of majors with talent cultivation, constantly strengthen the management of practical teaching, improve the quality of thesis (design), and further improve the quality of undergraduate teaching in higher education. It can be seen that the undergraduate thesis is not only an important basis for measuring the teaching level of higher education universities, but also an important step for implementing the teaching plan of majors and realizing the training objectives of majors, and an important basis for awarding bachelor's degree.

English major, as a major with large undergraduate enrollment, is found in almost all undergraduate colleges and universities in China. The quality of training talents of applied foreign language major can be seen through students' graduation thesis. Practice shows that the undergraduate thesis (design) of English major, which is implemented in the form of the formal thesis, has many problems such as single form, requirements not in line with the reality, passive participation of students, negative attitude of teachers, low quality of thesis and serious plagiarism. Many teachers and experts have expressed deep concern about the quality of writing thesis for English majors[2].

The undergraduate English major in Taishan College's School of Foreign Languages has a relatively short history, and the writing of English undergraduate theses faces the same problems and challenges. In view of this, its Foreign Languages School has attempted to carry out innovative thesis practice and diversified the undergraduate thesis for the Grade 2014, adding one more new form which is translation practice, while retaining the traditional academic thesis form. This paper is to analyze the results of the innovative practice of the 2014-2020 session, to summarize the effect of the innovative practice of translation thesis on undergraduate teaching, and then to analyze how to improve the quality of talent cultivation according to the goal of undergraduate professional training, and to explore the role of the innovative mode on the thesis of English majors in applied undergraduate institutions.

## **2. Problems of Traditional Thesis for English Majors**

In view of the specific limitations of the English Major Syllabus on the thesis work of English majors, most English faculties in Chinese universities have made efforts to implement the requirements of the syllabus on thesis work. However, a series of outstanding problems have been exposed in the process of implementing the thesis work of English majors.

### **2.1. Serious Formalism**

Due to the high attention paid to the graduation thesis (design) in the professional assessment of the Ministry of Education, English majors in all universities generally attach importance to the work of the graduation thesis. However, the current status quo of the various assessments faced by colleges and universities pays too much attention to the form of the thesis work and is obsessed with the standardization of the thesis documentation work, while paying insufficient attention to the content of the thesis, the process, quality, plagiarism in writing and other tricky issues. There is not enough research on whether English majors should require students to write thesis, whether students have achieved the expected results in writing thesis, students' feedback on thesis work, and teachers' reflection on thesis work. The mandatory requirement for all English majors to write a thesis ignores the reality that in our context English majors help students with academic preparation and carry out inadequate academic training. In addition, the current thesis evaluation lacks a scientific and objective quality evaluation system, and is arbitrary in the assessment of the thesis grades, with the grades assessed hardly reflecting fully the requirements of the English Major Syllabus.

### **2.2. Out-of-Touch with Realistic Needs**

The current thesis topics for English majors are mostly required to focus on the analysis of literary works or theoretical explanations of English language phenomena. Many of the topics chosen are detached from the realistic needs of modern society for English language diversity, ignoring students' desire to improve their practical English language skills and better serve society, and neglecting students' personal interests, abilities and future development needs. It also reflects the fact that today's theses are characterized by their singularity, narrowness and lack of effectiveness, and that they are increasingly out of step with society, and that "the appreciation of literature and obscure linguistic discussions are a waste of human and material

resources and time for students who are no longer pursuing further education or teaching”[3]. The thesis of English majors is seriously detached from the real needs, lacks the consciousness of serving the society and does not meet the students’ personal needs well.

### **2.3. Out-of-Touch with Professional Reality**

For many years, English major education in China’s colleges and universities has taken the road of “emphasizing language skills training, but not professional knowledge teaching”. In the four years of English major education, about 65% of the credit hours are devoted to language skills training in listening, speaking, reading, writing and translation, about 15% of the credit hours are devoted to the teaching of general linguistics, introduction to English and American literature and general information about English countries, and about 20% of the credit hours are devoted to the teaching of diplomacy, foreign trade and other related professional knowledge.[4] Although the extensive language skills training helps students to improve their language skills, it also inevitably affects the construction of their professional knowledge structure and the improvement of their academic abilities. English majors know very little about the richness of the English language, literature, culture and area studies, and the fragmented professional knowledge and related expertise they have acquired can hardly support students in writing academic research papers. The time spent on listening, speaking, reading, writing and translating cannot be fully reflected in the thesis. In fact, the requirements for undergraduate theses in English are seriously out of step with the reality of English professional education and beyond the ability of most students, which to a certain extent leads to students’ perfunctory attitude towards thesis.

### **2.4. Affecting Student Participation.**

At present, the English Major Syllabus and most English faculties only focus on the evaluation function of the thesis, while neglecting the role of this work in cultivating students’ practical language skills, innovative abilities and comprehensive quality. As senior students are about to graduate, apart from those who have the opportunity to further their studies and are concerned with their academic abilities, students are generally concerned with effectively serving society with the language skills they have acquired and the knowledge they have learned in listening, speaking, reading, writing and translating, effectively meeting the challenges of employment on students’ professional skills, expertise, comprehensive ability and overall quality, and being fully prepared for their future development. The current requirement for students to write linguistic and literary research theses in English faculties clearly ignores the real needs of students and makes it difficult to fully motivate and encourage students to apply their knowledge and skills to jobs that are urgently needed in society. In addition, the thesis that students are currently required to write does not pay enough attention to students’ practical skills in listening, speaking, reading, writing and translating, leaving insufficient space for students to apply their language skills and professional knowledge to creative tasks, thus making it difficult to mobilise students’ creativity. The requirement of writing the thesis as the graduation thesis (design) for English majors is too single, ignoring the needs of students, neglecting the cultivation of practical ability, fettering the play of students’ creative ability, and frustrating students’ enthusiasm and initiative, resulting in the role of the graduation thesis (design) being overlooked in improving the comprehensive ability and practical ability of English majors.

## **3. Thesis Innovation Mode of English Majors: Translation Practice and Teaching Practice**

The College of Foreign Languages has two undergraduate English majors, English and English Teacher Training, which are committed to cultivating high-quality applied foreign language

talents, insisting on the combination of applying learning to practice and using it to promote learning, focusing on strengthening practical teaching, guiding students to join social practice and serving local development. As a result, the College's discipline construction and even talent cultivation are developing in the direction of emphasizing practical ability. In order to improve this important aspect of the graduation assessment, since 2014, in line with the teaching philosophy of being teaching-oriented and practice-oriented, when setting up the overall framework of the graduation thesis, the School has not only covered the conventional directions of literature, culture, linguistics, English teaching and translation, but also added two new directions of translation practice and teaching practice to try to carry out innovative practice of the graduation thesis. Translation practice is open to English and English teacher training students, and teaching practice is mainly open to English teacher training students.

**Table 1.** Statistics of Selected Topics in Foreign Languages School from 2014 to 2020

Range of topics	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Translation Practice	13	38	37	42	57	56	77
Educational Practice	7	43	58	73	44	51	89
English Language Teaching	45	20	25	17	12	10	0
Literature	24	23	24	11	9	9	27
Linguistics	45	12	13	14	12	5	11
Translation Studies	46	25	21	17	9	18	0
Intercultural	34	32	15	16	6	7	0
Total	214	193	193	190	149	156	205

### 3.1. Innovation in Translation Practice

Graduates who choose translation practice are required to complete two tasks, one of which is the translation of a text and the other is a translation commentary based on a summary of the process of translating the text. The School sets out specific requirements for translation practice: "Innovation begins with the selection of a thesis topic for the translation direction. Graduates select an original English novel or newspaper and internet article of about 4,000 words within the scope of the topic specified by the supervisor, translate the text on the basis of careful study of the original text, and write a translation paper with a certain theoretical depth in conjunction with translation practice. The instructor is responsible for providing the original text, which is based on criteria such as being written in native English, moderately difficult language, new subject matter and unavailable to students in translation."

**Table 2** Marking Requirements for Translation Practice

Evaluation category	Evaluation quality	Evaluation score
Original text	Difficulty; Subject matter	25%
Translation	Language quality	50%
Translation commentary	Theoretical application; language; documentation	25%

The evaluation system for translation practice is also required (see Table 2). Each of the evaluation indicators in this assessment framework system is clearly specified in the template, for example, the specific evaluation criteria for the linguistic quality of the text translation, including whether there are any errors or omissions in understanding the original text, whether there are lexical and grammatical problems in the expression of the translation, whether the expression of the translation conforms to Chinese language conventions, whether the style of the translation and the original text agrees with each other. As shown in Table 1, since setting

up of the two practice directions, the number of students choosing these two directions was 20 in 2014, accounting for 9.3%, 81 in 2015, accounting for nearly 42%, and since 2015, each year, accounting for more than 40%, with an increasing trend; at the same time, the passing rate of the graduation thesis check also showed an increasing trend, with the first check passing rate of 65% in 2018, among which the translation, the passing rate of the direction of educational practice reached 95%, and the passing rate of this direction reached 100% in 2019 and 2020. The number of supervisors guiding the translation practice direction is also increasing year by year, and the school is actively involved in supervising dissertations in this direction from lecturers, associate professors, to professors. The students mostly welcome the new thesis direction and think that the thesis writing in the translation practice direction is very helpful to the improvement of their translation ability. The combination of translation practice and translation criticism not only tests the theory with practice, but also teaches them how to better use the theory to guide practice in the future.

### **3.2. Innovation in Teaching Practice**

According to the knowledge, ability and quality requirements of English teacher-training students, the graduation design is positioned in a five-in-one model of “attending a class and survey plus teaching design plus simulative teaching plus teaching practice plus on-site defense” (as shown in Figure 2), making full use of the educational internship in the seventh semester of the Foreign Languages School. During the internship, English normal students attend to lessons and develop the ability to observe and reflect on teaching; they conduct research on the current situation of English teaching in primary and secondary schools to develop the ability to conduct preliminary teaching research; after gaining a comprehensive understanding of English teaching in primary and secondary schools, they select appropriate content for teaching design, write lesson plans and produce courseware based on the English teaching materials obtained from current primary and secondary school, which will examine the ability to analyse teaching materials and design teaching. The final part of the course is an on-site defense, which examines English subject knowledge, teaching reflection and teaching adaptability. Through the training in the four aspects of the final project, English normal students can become English teachers who can “teach well and be effective” in primary and secondary schools.

The specific implementation of the graduation design for English normal students includes: (i) A teaching practice in a designated primary or secondary school in the fifth or sixth semester, with specific requirements to attend at least 20 lectures, study teaching design, and take notes of the lectures; (ii) Focus on a real-life problem in English teaching in primary and secondary schools, conduct in-depth research, and write a standardized and complete educational research report; (iii) Under the guidance of the supervisor, determine the current English teaching content in primary and secondary schools, carry out teaching design, complete no less than 3 units of lesson plans; (iv) According to the content of the teaching design, submit 2 hours of lecture notes and courseware, and the assessment panel will determine 1 of the hours for lecture presentation; (v) The assessment panel will take 2 hours for mock lectures; (vi) The assessment panel will simulate lectures and ask questions on the spot according to the lecture presentation of teacher trainees, and students will defend themselves.

## **4. Effects of the Innovative Model**

### **4.1. Innovative Practice Promotes Students' Learning in School**

Setting the direction of translation practice and educational practice for the thesis at the undergraduate level helps students to test and further hone the English skills they have learnt in their four-year university study, laying a more solid foundation for graduates to enter the workplace.

Firstly, the innovative practice is an extension of the undergraduate English course. In addition to the compulsory English major foundation courses in listening, speaking, reading and writing, students in the two different directions will have different choices in their elective courses. Students interested in translation practice take more courses in interpretation and translation; while students involved in educational practice take more courses in skills or theories of educational teaching.

Secondly, creative practice facilitates the integration of theory and practice. Taking translation practice as an example, the requirements for students in our translation practice direction are: firstly, to choose a 5,000-word English manuscript confirmed to be untranslated to translate it into Chinese; secondly, to summarise the lessons learned from translation practice and write a translation commentary of about 4,000 words in English with reference to the translation theories and techniques they have learnt. In his book *A Course in Translation*, Newmark points out that the specific steps of a translation commentary are: firstly, to study the purpose of the original text, the most prominent linguistic function of the original text, the theme, the language domain, the problem, the readership of the original text, the background of the original text, etc., so as to propose a more suitable translation method; secondly, to make a more detailed comparison between the original text and the translated text. The comparison should be selective and focused, and representative problems can be selected for comparison and analysis, such as word sense gaps, adjustment of language order, cultural differences and gaps, etc., and the methods to solve the problems can be discussed one by one; finally, the original text and the translated text are evaluated separately to judge whether the translation is functionally identical and meaningful to the original text[5]. Our School basically follows the steps proposed by Newmark to guide students' dissertations. Students select appropriate original texts with the help of their supervisors, translate them into Chinese, and finally write about their experiences and reflections on translation by combining theory with practice, which not only exercises students' practical translation skills but also improves their theory in practice, making up for the lack of theory while exercising their practical skills.

#### **4.2. Creative Practice Helps Students' Internship and Employment.**

In addition to enhancing students' practical skills, the course also takes into account the large and urgent demand for translation talents in society. In the era of globalisation, as the country grows stronger, China needs translators to play an indispensable role as a medium of communication, both in terms of "importing" and "going-out". According to the Analysis Report on China's Translation Service Industry 2014 jointly released by the China Translation Institute and the China Translation Association, from 2012 to 2013, there were 18,778 new translation service and related enterprises in operation nationwide, with an average annual increase of 25%. According to the report, with the further increase of China's "going-out strategy", China has shifted from mainly translating and interpreting Western culture and civilisation internally to mainly translating and interpreting Chinese culture and civilisation externally, and the translation industry is playing an increasingly important role in promoting China's political, economic, cultural, scientific and technological development to the world. However, at the same time, the quality of talents graduated from English majors and translation majors in universities is not satisfactory[6]. Many other calls for the quality and standard of translation talents to be inadequate, and cases of declining translation quality and lack of senior translation talents are often reported in the press. The practice of translation provides a useful attempt to improve the level of training of translation talents at the Foreign Language Institute.

The teaching practice is a timely response to the urgent need for English teachers in primary and secondary schools in Shandong Province. According to data from the "2020 One-Stop Job Search for College Students" platform, the demand for education professionals in China's campus recruitment market is current. According to the survey, the top ten industries with the

highest demand in the 2020 China campus recruitment are education, among which high school English teachers are the most in demand, with 15.66% of the positions in demand; followed by junior high school English teachers, with 10.19% of the positions in demand[7]. This is both an opportunity and a challenge for our English normal students. The demand for English teachers is high, and the opportunities for English teacher training graduates to take up jobs have increased, but teaching positions are subject to examination, and non-teaching graduates are eligible to apply, which has become a challenge for teacher training students who lack teaching practice. Teaching practice can help students to apply theories of education and teaching to their teaching practice, connect to their future teaching positions, build a sense of reflection on teaching, enhance their teaching practice and strengthen their English teacher discipline.

### **4.3. Innovative Practice Feeds into the Advisors**

The concept of innovation applied to the field of education requires students to become the main subject of the educational process, with teachers focusing on playing a guiding role. Therefore, the teacher himself should first have such quality in the process of requiring students to carry out innovative practice in their graduation thesis. The thesis supervisor of English majors should not only have a solid basic knowledge of English, related knowledge of linguistic, literary and other interdisciplinary disciplines, but more importantly, a sense of innovation. The supervisor incorporates his or her own creative thinking and innovative experience into the training and cultivation of students' translation practice and teaching practice. The mentoring of students' creative practice is not simply a process of "teaching and solving problems", but also a process of spiritual guidance for students. In the process of guidance, teachers should strengthen communication with students, fully respect their individuality and enthusiasm for creativity, listen to their opinions and give full play to their initiative; at the same time, they should strengthen their own scientific research and teaching research to enhance their own teaching and research abilities. Since the implementation of innovative practice in 2014, the Foreign Languages School has published 123 papers, including 35 on translation practice, accounting for 28%, and 54 on teaching practice, accounting for 43%; published 7 translations; applied for 117 projects of various levels, including 38 on translation practice, accounting for 32%, and 22 on teaching practice, accounting for 18%.

## **5. Conclusion**

After six sessions of innovative practice of English thesis, the innovative model of foreign language has been affirmed by experts inside and outside the university. In 2016, the leaders of the Academic Affairs Office of the university visited the defense site of the translation practice and fully affirmed this innovative model, pointing out that this model has the function of "reaching forward and leading backward". The English graduates who participated in the practice all expressed that their personal translation and teaching abilities had been significantly enhanced under the guidance of the dual tutors inside and outside the university for more than a semester, and they were confident about their future employment. Some of the students who have been studying for graduate school have also taken the initiative to share their experiences of innovative practice in their universities which they are studying, which has attracted the attention of relevant experts and professors. In conclusion, the thesis plays a pivotal role in the cultivation of applied English talents. The innovative mode of the thesis breaks the traditional situation of a single academic thesis and effectively alleviates many disadvantages of the current thesis, which is of far-reaching significance for students to apply their innovative practical experience in the process of translation and teaching practice, and to improve their practical ability and enhance their English literacy.

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