A REVIEW AND EVALUATION OF CHINESE QUALITY COURSES OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE STUDIES: 2003—2016

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ABSTRACT

The National Quality Courseware Project has been a key strategy along the reform and development agenda for higher education in China since the beginning of the 21st century. With the implementation of the project, 240 quality courses of foreign language studies, most of which being English language courses, have been constructed by Chinese higher education institutions by 2016. The statistical data, together with the academic literature on the construction and development of these courses indicate that a wide range of foreign language studies have been covered by the project and a large number of teachers and institutions at different levels have been mobilized to participate in the project. On the other hand, the statistical and literature data also elicit three problems existing in the project. Therefore, a review and evaluation of the courses should provide some insights not only into the Quality Courseware Project, but also into the foreign language teaching, especially EFL teaching in China.

自21世纪以来，国家优质课件项目已经成为中国高等教育改革发展的重要战略之一。随着此项目的开展，到2016年，中国高校已经开设了240个外语研究尤其是英语的精品课程。统计数据以及对于这些课程的设立及发展的研究均表明，该项目已经涵盖了多个外语研究领域，众多教师和各级高校也都积极的参与了此项目。另一方面，数据和研究还指出了此项目存在的三个问题。所以，希望对此项目的回顾和评估能够对精品课件项目和外语教学，尤其是中国的英语教学提供一点意见。

INTRODUCTION

The National Quality Courseware Project (NQCP, Jin Pin Ke Chen) has been one of the key projects of the reform agenda in the Chinese higher education sector. The project aims to provide open and free educational resources via online platforms. Many Chinese higher education institutions (HEIs) have been mobilized by the project to create or adapt some of best courses for free use online. The sources of the courses include not only teaching syllabi, learning materials and assessment, but also classroom video recordings. Although the courses are not credit bearing, they have been widely used as supplementary teaching sources in many college classrooms and by self-study learners (Zhao, Wang, Meng, Xiao, & Wu, 2017). Therefore, a review and evaluation of the courses should provide some insights not only into the Quality Courseware Project, but also into the status quo and prospects of English language teaching in China.

By June of 2016, 8,040 national-level and over 20,000 provincial and institutional-level courses had been constructed and published by the Ministry of Education, covering almost all the disciplines in both undergraduate and vocational curricula. These courses are branded as quality courses (QCs, most of the materials are text-based), resource-sharing courses (RQCs, the materials are partly text-based and partly video-based), or video quality courses (VQCs, the materials are mostly video-based). Foreign language courses, especially English language courses, compose a significant part of this project. Although there have been a number of studies that review and evaluate the courses (e.g.: Luo, Cai & Liu, 2003; Wan & Zhang, 2008; Kong, Wang & Luo, 2010; Li, 2011; Sun & Gu, 2015), most of them are qualitative studies focused on specific courses. Therefore, in this study, we will try to review the courses on a macro scale by focusing on and evaluating the construction of the national-level quality courses of foreign language studies from a quantitative perspective.

We will first report the statistical data about the courses (updated before June 30th, 2016), including distribution of the courses in foreign language disciplines, the developmental phases of the project, the involvement of HEIs, the professional background of the keynote instructors of the courses, and the availability of the course resources via the internet. Afterwards, we will conduct content analyses of academic literature related to the project, that is, the published research studies about the construction of courses, to obtain in-depth data about the courses and their construction agenda, as well as reflections and feedback from course constructors and instructors. The statistical report and the content analyses of the literature underpin the evaluation of the program in terms of its achievements, problems and challenges. The report and the evaluation should provide reference for not only researchers of open educational resources and foreign language studies, but also educational administrations in terms of policy making for the further development of NQCP.

METHODOLOGY AND DATA COLLECTION

The evaluation of the construction of foreign language quality courses (hereafter referred as to QCs) is based on the statistical data of the courses and the academic literature related to the project. First, we collected related data which was available from public websites before June 30, 2016. Most of the data were directly collected from websites affiliated with the national project.1

The statistical data was processed in Microsoft Excel in order to sort the detailed information of the courses, including the name of the course, year of publication, course category, level of the institution, and the course instructors' academic background such as professional title, academic degree, executive position and publications. We also tested the availability of the online courses by visiting the websites individually.

Afterwards, in order to collect more data for evaluating the construction of courses, we conducted content analyses of the existing literature that takes the construction of the courses as the research subject. The literature was retrieved from CNKI (Chinese National Knowledge Infrastructure)2. We searched for academic journal articles with the keywords "quality course", "quality courseware", "resource-sharing quality course", "video quality course" as well as the name of different languages. A literature of 221 academic papers available on the CNKI website was retrieved and reviewed briefly as content analyses.

The analyses and findings from this existing literature, together with the statistical data, contribute to our evaluation of the construction of foreign language quality courses in China.

EVALUATION BASED ON THE STATISTICAL DATA

Distribution of courses
According to the data collected, 240 courses were published from the launch of NQCP in 2003 to the end of June 2016, accounting for 2.93% of the total number of national quality courses constructed. These 240 courses, including 132 QCs, 96 RQCs and 12 VQCs, cover both undergraduate curricula (195 courses) and the vocational curricula (45 courses). The majority of the courses were English language studies (189 courses), although nine other languages were also covered. The English courses can be classified into six types according to their syllabi: comprehensive courses such as College English, Integrated English, English Listening and Speaking, courses for special purposes such as Business English and Tourism English, courses of translational studies, courses of foreign literary studies, courses of foreign linguistics, and courses

of foreign cultural studies. These data indicate that the courses have provided a wide coverage of topics in foreign language studies at the higher educational level.

However, it is also noted that undergraduate courses for foreign language majors and vocational English majors are limited in number although such programs cover a much wider scope. For instance, 87 courses for English majors included over 20 topics, including linguistics, communication studies, contemporary literature, literary history, English thesis writing, Western ideology and thought, Western essays, Western drama, Western poetry, and translation. The other eight foreign languages are taught in 38 courses, covering all the necessary skills from reading and listening to writing and speaking. For vocational courses, 36 courses have been constructed to teach 13 topics including English for tourism, English for management, English for navigation, English for conference and exhibition, English for hotel management and English for automobile engineering.

Developmental phases

Through the analysis of the data collected, it was found that the development of foreign language quality courses was in accordance with the overall agenda of the NQCP project. In the first phase of the project (2003 – 2010),

3,834 national-level courses were constructed and published in total, among which 132 were foreign language courses. The second phase was launched in 2013 and the key focus has been on the construction of resource sharing QCs and video QCs; to the middle of 2016, 108 foreign language courses had been published.

Throughout the first phase, the number of the courses launched online was growing while its proportion in the total courseware decreased from 6% of the total at the very beginning to 3.45% in 2010, though the figure fluctuated slightly (Figure 1).

Since the beginning of the second phase, an increasing number of RQCs and VQCs have been published in different batches while the number of foreign language studies maintained at a relatively low rate. By the end of June 2016, 96 out of 3,104 RQCs and 12 out of 1,102 VQCs were contributed by foreign language courses. Foreign language RQCs contributed to no more than 4% of the total each year while VQCs claimed an even smaller share in the project—they only accounted for 1.09% of the total3.

The data in this section indicates that the construction of foreign language quality courses could not keep pace with the progress of the overall national project. Moreover, although the courses

showed relatively good starts in the construction of QCs and RQCs, the development was not maintained effectively, leading to decreasing shares every year.

Involvement of institutions and teachers

By the end of 2015, the number of Chinese vocational colleges reached 1,341 and universities increased to 1,2194, including 116 "Project 211" universities - these institutions offer programs for four-fifths of doctoral students, two-thirds of post-graduate students, and one-third of undergraduates in China and they receive around 70% of scientific research funding every year provided by the Chinese government (Gu, Li & Wang, 2009). After the launch of the National Quality Courseware Project, 92 Chinese HEIs have been involved in the construction of foreign language quality courses, including 46 "Project 211" universities, 28 non-211 universities and 18 vocational colleges. These HEIs can also be classified into comprehensive universities (36), foreign studies focused universities (10), teacher-training focused universities (11), science and technology focused universities (15), vocational colleges (18), and continuing education-focused colleges (2). In other words, each of these institutions has constructed 2-3 courses.

According to the data collected, 167 teachers from the 92 HEIs participated in constructing the courses as keynote instructors. In this team, 43% of the instructors hold doctoral degrees and 40% of them hold master's degrees. 138 of the keynote instructors holding professorship have instructed 199 courses; 25 instructors with associate professorship instruct 38 courses; two lecturers and one foreign teacher have instructed one course each. In other words, most of the teachers have instructed 1-2 courses on average. Moreover, by the time we finished our data collection in June 2016, these teachers had published 3,350 academic papers accessible at CNKI, among which 2,075 are

on "core journals"5. Around 70% of these instructors were holding executive positions in their departments and faculties and 68 of them were members of various academic boards under the Ministry Education, such as the National Foreign Language Teaching Advisory Board, the College English Teaching Advisory Board, and the Vocational English Teaching Advisory Board. Therefore, it is indicated that most of the instructors have a high-level professional capacity in foreign language teaching and research.

It is also demonstrated in the data that an increasing number of associate professors and lecturers started to join the project as instructors after 2007. Three quarters of these staff are from vocational colleges and the courses they instruct are featured with the specialties of their institutions, such as English for Automobile Manufacturing offered by Zhejiang Institute of Economics and Trade, and Secretary English by Guangdong Polytechnic of Water Resources and Electric Engineering.

The data in this section illustrates that the construction of foreign language quality courses in China has mobilized a large number of HEIs of various types as well as teachers at different levels. The extended involvement offers a platform for the teachers and institutions to show and share their teaching specialties and experiences.

Availability of the courses

In order to examine the availability of the quality courses, we conducted two rounds of tests. We first tested the accessibility of the webpages of all the 240 courses and the result showed that 13 of them were totally inaccessible; either the links to these course homepages

were severed or no course material was displayed on the pages (Table 1).

According to the quality course evaluation criteria issued by the Ministry of Education (2008, 2011, 2012), all the webpages of the quality courses should include the course materials, an interaction platform, a learners' self-assessment system, a feedback channel, and a course maintenance system; the five systems should work together to support the learners' use of the resources.

However, when reviewing the websites, we noted that several course websites had problems regarding the five systems. For the 227 courses whose websites were accessible, although all of them provide learning sources such as course video recordings, teaching syllabi, course overviews, audio and video materials, and references, the construction of the other four systems were problematic. To be more specific, 33 courses do not offer interaction platforms; 13 courses do not have after-class exercises; 51 courses do not give online assessment tools; 55 courses have no homework submission channels; and 58 courses have no learning process recording system. As far as the course maintenance system is concerned, 36 courses do not provide links to other websites, 45 courses do not have a bulletin board, and 57 courses are not facilitated with any study tools such as a search engine. Such failures in accessing the courses indicate that the availability of the courses is not satisfactory.

EVALUATION BASED ON THE CONTENT ANALYSES OF FLS-NQC LITERATURE

Due to the lack of firsthand data about the details of the courses and the limitation of the scale of this study, a review of the

existing literature was conducted as secondary data analyses. 221 articles published before June 30, 2016 were retrieved, the research focus of which include English courses and other foreign language courses for undergraduate and vocational curricula, which corresponds with the categories of quality courses.

Through an analysis of the research focus and research methodology of articles, we found that the literature can be divided into three categories. The first category consists of 28 articles that focus on the technological aspect of either internet/computer science technology issues (12 papers, for example: Zhou, 2004; Deng & Zhu, 2007; Ding & Chen, 2011) or pedagogical technology issues (16 papers, for example: Xu, 2006; Li, 2011; Wang, 2015). The second category is case studies: papers reviewing or examining a course from certain perspectives (91 papers, for example: Chen, 2006; Wan & Zhang, 2008; Li, 2011). The remainder (102 papers, for example: Luo et al, 2003; Kong et al, 2010; Zong, 2010) are more general and comprehensive; they focus on the impact of the quality course project in different respects of higher education such as the reform of foreign language teaching, development of foreign language teachers, disciplinary development, and students' learning capacity. It is worth mentioning that the research topic of all these papers are focused on but not limited to the three categories mentioned above.

Through the content analyses, two consensuses were identified to have been reached by the literature. First, more than 70% of the articles are positive about the effectiveness of the project in promoting the reform of foreign language teaching in China. 22 ▷
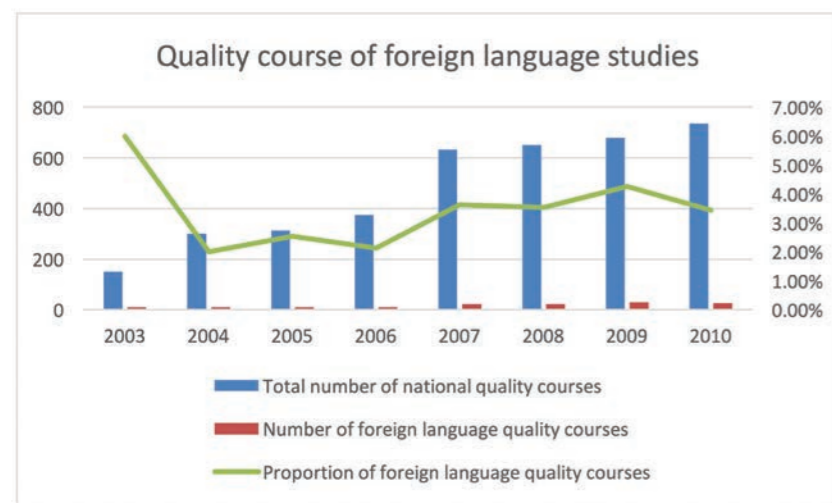
▲ Figure 1.: Quality course of foreign language studies (2003 – 2010).

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EMPLOYMENT GOAL	NQC 2003	NQC 2004	NQC 2005	NQC 2006	NQC 2007	NQC 2008	NQC 2009	NQC 2010	RQC 2013 -16	VQC 2013 -16	TOTAL
Accessible	8	4	8	8	20	20	27	26	96	12	227
Inaccessible	1	2	2	0	3	3	2	0	0	0	13

▲ Table 1.: Accessibility of National Quality Courseware Webpages

papers based on quantitative or qualitative methodologies have proved that the construction of quality courses has improved the sharing of educational resources. For example, Wan and Zhang (2008) state that when they were constructing the quality course of English Interpretation, they created new teaching modes and also applied the modes into other language courses, which improved the teaching efficiency and effectiveness of the whole curriculum. Luo and his colleagues (2003) acknowledge that after constructing the quality course of College English, their team changed their understanding of teaching and started to give more emphasis to the overall learning outcomes and the students' autonomy in class; they also reported on their achievements from the process of course construction, including the development of teaching materials, publication of research papers, and improvement of students' performance in exams, which evidenced the effect of the quality course project in foreign language teaching.

Another achievement highly appreciated by the researchers is teachers' professional development. Kong et al's study (2010) describes how their faculty integrated the teacher development with the teaching program development through the process of constructing a quality course. Li (2011) conducted her research based on the theories of educational philosophy and analyzed how teachers should be motivated to join the project and become more passionate about teaching. When reflecting on the ten-year experience of constructing their quality course, Sun and Gu (2015) state that the team developed through the process is the most valuable achievement for the faculty because the team members are now leading various programs of teaching and research.

The second consensus of the literature is the concerns about problems with the courses and the reasons behind them. It is stated that the internet platforms supporting the courses are not well-developed; some of the drawbacks commonly identified include the lack of self-assessment systems, slow update of materials, and lack of online self-test modules (e.g. Zhou, 2004; Deng & Zhu, 2007; Ding & Chen, 2011). Around 10% of the researchers elaborate on the overlap between different courses, stating directly that some courses have been repeating information while some topics have not been covered sufficiently (Kong et al, 2010; Zong, 2010; Li, 2011; Wang, 2015). A number of authors cited their own experience with course construction to illustrate problems such as a lack of training for teachers' computer management skills, which may be essential to the maintenance of the course websites. For example, in Qi's study (2009), it is identified that more effort has been given to the construction of the course instead of its management.

SUMMARY OF EVALUATION AND DISCUSSION

The statistical report and the content analyses of the literature demonstrate that the development of quality courses has achieved some success. The courses have a wide coverage of foreign language studies, with English courses taking dominance. Moreover, the courses have mobilized nearly half of the high-ranking institutions and many eminent professors and experts in foreign languages in the early years and involved more younger and junior teachers in vocational colleges later, which has offered opportunities for the institutions and the teachers to learn from each other and reflect on and reform their teaching. Therefore, it is not surprising that some of the research has verified that the quality course programs have initiated changes in teaching and learning in some institutions and that professional development of teachers has been enhanced through constructing quality courses.

However, there are also a few problems with the construction of the courses. First, compared to the development of the overall National Quality Courseware project, the statistical data has illustrated that the construction of foreign language quality courses is not fast enough, especially in terms of RQCs and VQCs. Second, the distribution of the courses in different disciplines is inequitable. For example, there is apparent repetition in the construction of the general English courses for non-English undergraduate majors. 65 of the courses are named College English, accounting for almost one third of the total number. Our review of these courses also demonstrates that the majority of them are similar in syllabus though course content and teaching method varies slightly.

The last problem, highlighted above, is that the availability of the online course platforms is not satisfactory; a number of the courses could not be accessed during our test and some of the learning or pro-learning systems were not working efficiently, which may impair the effectiveness of the project.

CONCLUSION

In summary, as a part of the national quality courseware project, the project of constructing quality courses of foreign language studies has made achievements and brought about positive effects to the teaching and learning of foreign languages, especially English, in a few aspects at the higher education level in China. However, for the further development of the project, it is advisable that the existing problems be solved, such as the low availability of some online platforms and the repetition of particular courses. Although our data could not illustrate the causes of the problems, it is likely that the slow development of FLS-NQCs is due to these facts. Finally, it should also be noted that our study is limited in that the data collected were for the quality courses at the national-level and may not represent the status at the provincial or institutional level; also, the rapid development of the project may have witnessed changes since our data collection in June 2016. ○

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