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The Investigation on the Graduation Benchmark of General English Language Proficiency in Universities of Technologies in the Southern Taiwan

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Abstract

This research project primarily explores the attributes of graduation benchmark of general English language proficiency levels in the universities of technology in the southern Taiwan, ranging from Great Tainan to Pintung County. Three major issues were detected as follows: types of core professionalism included in the graduation benchmark, the impacts of the descending birthrates upon the adjustment of the graduation benchmark, and the degree of incorporation of the task-based MOE policy into the graduation benchmark. The regulations of the graduation benchmark act as the major references for this project investigation, and the attributes of the graduation benchmark are classified into three major categories: (1) levels of general English languages proficiency, (2) types of professionalism, and (3) types of task-based regulations. The results of this research project are revealed as follows. Comparatively, higher ranks of general English language proficiency levels are demanded in the state-run universities, reaching the upper-intermediate level. Nevertheless, wider ranges of professionalism are spanned in the private universities of technology, particularly the correlations between the professionalism and the curricular design. Insofar, the task-based regulations have not captured the foci in the graduation benchmark.

Key words: graduation benchmark, task-based instruction, professionalism

I. Introduction

This project aims at exploring the benchmark of English competency, students' degree of support, and the distinguishing features in the Department of Applied Foreign Languages (hereafter DAFL) in the Universities of Technology in southern Taiwan. Here, *the universities of technology in southern Taiwan* are specifically referred to universities which are located in Great Tainan City, Pingtung County, Great Kaohsiung City, and Penghu County. Besides, based on the attributes of project (i.e. the English language benchmark solely), the benchmark concerning other foreign languages be excluded from the discussion. The English graduation benchmark primarily bolsters university students' workplace competitiveness. （Wang

Chin-huang *et al.*, 2016.）. Particularly, the formulation of English language graduation benchmark is contingent upon the curricular features as well as English majors' current English language proficiency levels.（Chen Shujiao *et al*, 2014） Currently, the English language proficiency tests have become the juggernaut to the regulation of the English language graduation benchmark.（Wang Chin-huang *et al.*, 2016.）. Such a design may be biased in mapping out the "Test-first" curriculum of English language instruction.（Ho, Wan-shun *et al.*, 2014）. For example, the *General English Language* Course supposedly spans wider ranges of topics (e.g. tourism, daily realities, recreation) in the curricular design. Yet, owing to the overwhelming powers of the English language graduation benchmark, the overall curricular design in the *General English Language* Course virtually acts as the backdrop for the exam-based classroom instruction (e.g. the intensive training course of TOEIC or GEPT), narrowing the scope in students' English language study （Ho, Wan-shun *et al.*, 2014）. By the same token, the test-oriented instructional attributes distorted the regular curricular management, moving toward to the test-first English language education for learners. Consequently, it is not uncommon to see that language teachers change their roles from counselors to "certificate makers."

Despite the English graduation benchmark is fallaciously believed as the test-only regulation, more than seventy percent of professors and students consent with the advantages of test-only regulation in competitive edges. Interestingly, the test-only English language benchmark will yield less washback effects to English majors since English majors concentrate on their academic study. The English language proficiency test loses its impartiality in evaluation when it commits the administrative faults in the overall test item design (e.g. more than one plausible answers in one test item (Chen Yan-xin, 2016；Huang Tai-xiang , 2012；Zhong Jia-yu, 2012；Zheng Ya-ling, 2009; He Wen-jun, 2017）. Moreover, there raised a question: Is it feasible for DAFL in the Universities of Technology in southern Taiwan to treat the English language proficiency tests as the dominating indicator of students' core competency of profession to confront with the trend of fewer children, disciplinary academic major, and the problem-based instructional objectives? This becomes the main course of this project. Three research questions are sketched as follows:

1. Which types of competencies of core profession are included in the DAFL graduation benchmark in the Universities of Technology in the southern Taiwan? Which competencies are related to the application of the workplace English or the curricular modules?

2. Which impacts or directions does the variable of fewer children bring about upon the adjustment of the DAFL graduation benchmark in the Universities of Technology in the southern Taiwan?

3. Is the task-based educational policy by MOE affective to the DAFL graduation benchmark in the Universities of Technology in the southern Taiwan?

II. Literature Review

The English competency of vocational school students has been the focal point from the Ministry of Education (hereafter MOE). Yet, students of technical universities/ institutions have presented the downgrading performances in their overall English language proficiency（Liu Dong-yuan, 2011）. Thus, it undoubtedly becomes the focal point for universities of technology to proctor the advantages of graduation benchmark on students' English language proficiency improvement. Surely, in Taiwan, a great deal of research studies explore this issue in different orientations as follow: (1) the attitudes toward the graduation benchmark of English language proficiency from professors and students in universities of technology and industry experts （Wang Qing-huang, 2016；Peng Yu-shu, 2012；Liao Ying-hong, 2010；Liao Ying-hong, 2011；Chen Yan-xin, 2015；Chen Yan-xin, 2016；Su Shao-wen, 2005, 2009）, (2) the influences of the graduation benchmark of English competency on technical university students' learning strategies (Tang Jia-rong, 2011；Xu Yan-na *et al.*, 2006；Troy, 2013), (3) the legality in the benchmark of English competency and orientation in the English education in Taiwan （He Wan-shun et al, 2013, 2014；Cai Yu-ning et al, 2011；Chen Shu-jiao, 2014）, (4) the washnack effects of the benchmark of English competency on the curriculum design.

As mentioned above, the test-focused benchmark of English competency is criticized to predominate the English language education. Further, the English language proficiency test administration is severely lamented to authorize the off-campus institutions of foreign language tests. Conversely, on the grounds of related research studies, more than 70 percent of university professors and students express their positive responses to the benchmark of English competency, stimulating their motivation in learning English as well as mapping out their study schemes （Wang Qing-huang et al, 2016；Peng Zhen Shu *et al*, 2012；Liao Ying-hong, 2010；Liao Ying-hong et al, 2011；Chen Yan-xin et al, 2015；Chen Shu-jiao, 2014；Su Shao-wen, 2005, 2009；Chen & Liu, 2007）Yet, the washback effects of the benchmark of English competency hinges upon types of English language proficiency tests. For instance, if the benchmark of English competency places its emphasis on the tests of listening and reading, the lower washback effects would be expected for

the oral and writing skills（Peng Zhen-shu *et al*, 2012）。 Moreover, higher grade students will be well-prepared earlier for the benchmark of English competency. Ironically, the success in the English language proficiency tests is not necessarily tantamount to the transfer to achievement in the general English language performance behaviors (e.g. the composition of projects in English) （Peng Zhen-shu *et al.*, 2012）。Evidently, the exam-oriented benchmark of English competency fails to act as the reliable indicator of students' achievement in their English language performances in varying fields of employment. Therefore, it is feasible to propose the application-oriented English competency as the alternative for the benchmark of English competency （Liao Ying-hong, 2010； Liao Ying-hong et al, 2011）.

Although the multiple assessment is called for in the benchmark of English competency, yet the test-targeted English evaluation is the foci on the grounds of related research contributions. A paucity of research papers summarizes the panorama of the English competency benchmark in technical universities around the island. As a matter of fact, some DAFLs in Universities of Technology are moving toward the multiple assessment in their regulations of the overall general English competency. This can be evidenced by *Directions in the benchmark in the DAFL of Tainan University of Technology*. Students reach their benchmark through the credit accumulation of the designated items, including the test participation, specialized certificates (e.g. the officially-recognized Tour Guide Examination), the award for the nationwide contests, and publication of journal papers. Besides, other than the English language tests, the DAFL in Chia-Nan University regulates the bachelor program in interdisciplinary studies is also eligible for the consideration in the graduation benchmark DAFLs in universities of technology are advised to incorporate the career competency and the curricular models into the graduation benchmark of general English language proficiency. Particularly, in the trend of fewer children and the task-based educational policy, our research paper, selecting the DAFEs in the southern universities of technology, explores how technical universities adjust the English competency benchmark.

III. Methodology
III. 1 Research method in this project
III.1.1. Research Objects
This project primarily targets at surveying the benchmark in DAFL of the technical Universities in southern Taiwan. Especially, owing to the competitive university enrollment in the trend of fewer children, which disparities yield in the benchmark of English competency among DAFLs in universities of technology in the southern Taiwan? On the grounds of three research questions above (e.g. types of

imbedded professional core competency, the relations among module curriculum, and the degrees of adjustments in the benchmark of English competency in concert with the trend of fewer children), we mainly summarize and then analyze the related research studies on information the benchmark of English competency. Also, through the analysis of data, we may realize the correlation between the regulations in the benchmark of English competency and the rates of student university enrollment.

III.1.2 Research Tool

This project primarily consolidates the attributes of English competency benchmark, and the expected application in the workforces in the southern Taiwan. The overall guidance in the literature review includes: (1) types of general English language proficiency tests and its expected CEFR level or test scores, (2) the correlation between the professional English certificates and the module curriculum, and (3) the fields of English language application or types of other professional competency development (e.g. the results of university student MOST projects, the degree program in the interdisciplinary studies, and so forth).

IV   Findings

IV.1 The common features of graduation bench mark in University of Technology in southern Taiwan

The first subsection sets out to explore Departments of Applied Foreign Languages (hereafter DAFL) and their pertained colleges. The major purpose is to detect the possible directions of development of DAFLs in southern Taiwan. Then, we primarily illustrates the common features of graduation benchmarks in universities of technology in southern Taiwan (hereafter UTST). Table 1 presented DAFLs and their pertained colleges in the following.

Table 1 Common features of graduation benchmarks inUTST

Types of Colleges	Numbers		Brief Description
	Private	State	
Humanities and Society	50% (N=6)	75% (N=3)	[State] NKUST、NPUST、NPU [Private] STU、FYU、TJU、UKN、STUST、CNU
Business	16.67% (N=2)	0	KYU、FIT
Hospitality / Tourism	16.67% (N=2)	0	FEU、TUT
Life and	8.33%	0	CSU

Creativity	(N=1)		
Education	8.33% (N=1)	0	TSU
International	0	25% (N=1)	[State] NKUHT
Total	12	4	

In view of Table 1, DAFLs in the southern Taiwan pertain to six major types of colleges as follows:

(1) Humanities and Society,

(2) Business

(3) Hospitality / Tourism

(4) Life and Creativity

(5) Education

(6) International

Obviously, most of DAFLs are categorized into College of Humanities and Society (state-run: 75%, private: 50%). Evidently, most of DAFLs target at nurturing students' general communication competency and furthering their civic literacy through the general English study. To put it concisely, DAFLs in UTST span wider ranges of colleges in its overall development. This can be further envisioned in DAFLs in private universities of technology. Except for the College of Humanities (50%), the remaining half of DAFLs are subordinated to the college of business (16.67%), hospitality(16.67%), Life and Creativity (8.3%), and Education (8.3%). This indicates that the developments of DAFLs are tailored to their pertained colleges, focusing exclusively on the specific expertise, especially business management and hospitality. For state-run universities, only DAFLs in NUKHT have a strong bearing on the global mobility (i.e. International School), implying that English majors have international perspectives in their English study.

What follows, we turn our different lens in sorting out types of common benchmarks regulated in state and private universities of technology. Table 2 presents the finding in the following.

Table 2　types of common benchmarks in state and private universities of technology

Types of Benchmarks	State	Private
General English Language Proficiency (CEFR B1)	25.00% (N=1)	83.33% (N=10)
General English Language Proficiency (CEFR B2)	75.00% (N=3)	16.67% (N=2)

Note: There is devoid of written regulations in specifying levels of general English language proficiency in STU and UKN.

On the grounds of Table 2, the test-oriented English language proficiency acts as the sole common benchmark in both state and private universities of technology. Distinctively, in the regulated English language proficiency levels, 75 percent of DAFLs in state university of technology set the CEFR B2 (i.e. upper-intermediate level) as the requirement.　This runs counter to most of the DAFLs in private universities of technology, which lower down to CEFR B1 (i.e. intermediate level) as the demand for English majors.　To put it differently, English majors are expected to move forward to the upper-intermediate socioeconomic rank in the general English language proficiency.

IV.2　The distinctive features specified in state-run and private universities of technology

This subsection primarily describes types of professionalism regulated in the graduation benchmark.　The purpose is to detect if the regulated professionalism incorporated with the curricular design in universities of technology.　To put it shortly, the graduation benchmark may act as the alternative role in guiding English majors to develop their expertise through the regulations.　Table 3 presents the findings as follows:

Table 3 The distinctive features in public and private universities of technology

School / Item		Private												Public			
		STU	KYU	FEU	CSU	FYU	FIT	TJU	TSU	TUT	STUST	CNU	UKU	NKUST	NKUHT	NPUST	NPU
Certificate of Expertise	Teaching		V								V	V					
	Information processing	V	V	V	V	V		V		V	V	V	V	V			
	Business	V			V						V						
	Airline	V							V								
	Tourism		V	V	V			V	V	V	V			V			
	Gambling		V											V			
	Hospitality		V											V			
	Media										V						
	Second Language	V	V		V	V					V			V			
	Hotel													V			
Practicant	Internship	V		V	V												
	Project Research	V								V	V	V					

In view of Table 3, most of public universities of technology are devoid of certificates other than general English language proficiency tests. Only APFL in National Kaohsiung University of Hopitality and Tourism incorporates the hospitality and second foreign language tests as their graduation benchmark. Distinctively, there encompasses wider ranges of certificates in tailoring students' specific directions of their expertise. Based on Table 3, the mostly regulated professional certificates include: technology, hospitality, and the second foreign languages. This implies that English majors are guided to move toward the fields of hospitality in their career management.

We turn our different lens in exploring this issue: the consistency of the regulated professional certificates with the pertained colleges. The findings are summarized as follows. To begin with, in the category of business management, we have discovered that Kao Yuan University and Fortune Institute of Technology pertained to College of Business Management. Yet, on the grounds of Table 3, there is a paucity of professional certificates in the business management. This goes wry of the curricular attributes.

We keep track of professional certificates in APFLs under the College of Hospitality. According to Table 3, Far East University and Tainan University of Technology guided English majors to move toward the field of hospitality in their career pursuit. Indeed, their regulated certificates are in tandem with their curricular management and their pertained college.

Finally, we explore the attributes of APFLs in College of Humanities and Social Science. Evidently, based on Table 3, five APFLs pertained to College of Humanities and Social Science in their overall curricular development. Here, we endeavored to explore how *Humanities and Social Science* is defined based on the professional certificates. Table 4 concisely presented the results as follows.

Table 4 The attributes of APFLs in College of Humanities and Social Science

	Business	Airline	SFL	Hospitality	Teaching
Shu-Te University	V	V			
Fooyin University			V		
Tajen University				V	
Southern Taiwan University of Science and Technology	V			V	V
Chia Nan University of Pharmacy and Science	V		V	V	
Total	3	1	2	3	1

Evidently, based on Table 4, APFLs in College of Humanities and Social Science are defined as hospitality- or business- oriented directions in their curricular development as well as career management. In short, the attributes of Humanities and Social Science are defined clearly to be interpersonally communicative in EFL in varying fields of career, especially in hospitality- or business- managed fields.

IV.3   The Degrees of Consistency between Graduation benchmarks and English majors' careers management

Here, we turn our attention to detect the degree of the career-based regulations in the graduation benchmark.   Table 5 presents the results in the following.

Table 5   Types of career-based regulation in the graduation benchmark

Universities	STU	KYU	FEU	CSU	FYU	FIT	TJU	TSU	STUSST	CNU	UKU	NKUST	NKUHT	NPUST	NPU
Internship		V		V	V						V				
Project Research	V									V	V				

In view of Table 5, APFLs in public universities of technology are devoid of regulations concerning students' career management as the benchmark.   Even APFLs in NKUHT fail to demand all of English majors applying for the internship in their university study.   This finding is congruent with the aforementioned statement, in which the state-run universities focus exclusively upon English majors' general English language proficiency levels (i.e. CEFR B2).   To put it alternatively, English majors in state run universities have to map out their career management themselves. This runs counter to the benchmarks in the private universities, in which *Internship Programs* and *Application of the Project Research* are treated as demanding regulations in four private universities (i.e. STU, FEU, CSU, CNU), accounting for 41.67 percent, respectively.   In the battle of the trend of fewer children, private universities would care much for English majors' career management in the graduation benchmark.   In so doing, private university English would be tailored to manage their career plans through the curricular guidance.   This is best envisioned in the summer-focused or the semester-based internship program in the Course *APFL Overseas Internship*.   Similarly, English majors (especially juniors) are motivated to applying for the MOST-sponsored research project through the Course *APFL Project Composition*.   In other words, APFL in private universities endeavor to build up the cooperation between industries and schooling.

V. Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications

This section primarily summarizes the findings as follows. At the outset, the state-run universities lays its lopsided values in the general English language proficiency levels in the graduation benchmark, reaching at least the upper-intermediate level. Apart from the English language proficiency levels, there leaves a paucity of regulations in the professionalism in the state-run universities. To put it alternatively, the state-run universities treat the general English language proficiency levels as the sole indicator. Comparatively, the private universities would not highly demand English majors' general English language proficiency levels, setting the intermediate level as the basic requirement. Yet, due to the consideration of the descending birthrates, private universities would establish the professionalism as the main indicator to bolster English majors' competitive edges, such as the business certificate test participation, the MOST project application, and so forth. Particularly, three private universities of technology regulate the internship program in the graduation benchmark. This would lead to the washback effects upon the curricular design, incorporating the expected expertise from the industry viewpoint to the curriculum.

This research project provides the panorama in the graduation benchmark of English language proficiency in the southern Taiwan. The results of analysis may not be plausible to other universities of technology in the mid- or north Taiwan. Therefore, we may continue to keep track of the attributes of the graduation benchmark of English language proficiency around the island. Additionally, are the graduation benchmark highly instrumental to English majors' career performances? This is worthy of our in-depth investigation in the future study.

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