Adopting Blended Learning to Teaching EAP in Chinese Higher Education: Challenges and Solutions

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Abstract. Teaching EAP in Chinese colleges and universities is being appealed for by many scholars. It is an obvious trend that teaching EAP will dominate the English teaching at tertiary level. Adopting blended learning to Chinese higher education promotes the teaching effectiveness; meanwhile certain challenges are emerging. This paper focuses on addressing the issues in the following aspects: students’ learning competence, content of and options for the online delivery considering the features of EAP course in Chinese colleges and universities, and availability and reliability of infrastructure. This paper also provides suggested solutions to improve the situation.

Introduction

With globalization and fast development of information technology, traditional college English course to non-English majors in China is being questioned for its effectiveness. For decades, the course has focused itself on teaching EGP (English for General Purposes); however, the modern society has driven it to the reform from EGP to EAP. The new concept of “blended learning” is showing its benefit of being applied to higher education.

The vague concept was formed as early as in 1960s, the ambiguity of which was unveiled in 2006 when Bonk and Graham’s The Handbook of Blended Learning [1] was published. It is not exactly an innovation in teaching since the pedagogical approaches and the teaching forms that may be employed already exist. In blended learning, these approaches and forms are in a way integrated so as to exert more time and cost effective learning outcome. The increasing implementation of blended learning in higher education worldwide [2] clearly reveals the growing attention paid to it.

Necessity of Teaching EAP in China

The EAP courses in Chinese higher education are gaining popularity in recent years as a result of urgent need of college students. Some scholars [3,4] did surveys to investigate the demand for teaching EAP in higher education. The purpose is to further verify the importance of integrating academic English into the college English course based on the student need analysis.

Previously the college English course was basically focusing on teaching EGP, but recently it has been exposed to wider criticism. It is pointed out that China's college English curriculum is disconnected from students’ needs in real life, failing to render the transition from the domestic college English classroom to the learning environment abroad where English is used as both the teaching and the communicative language. It is also the failure of college English teaching if students are incapable of using certain academic skills like searching and reading academic literature in English [5]. Thus, some colleges and universities started the reform of college English curriculum, incorporating teaching EAP. For example, in 2011, Tsinghua University began to implement the new college English curriculum, offering compulsory English courses centering around EAP to freshmen and sophomores, and optional English or bilingual specialized courses set up by the corresponding departments to juniors and seniors [6].
In addition, Zhang Shaojie [7] and Shu Dingfang [8] agreed that the goal of college English teaching and its assessment mechanisms be readjusted, in which the students’ academic and professional English proficiencies are the two main indicators.

**Adoption of Blended Learning in Higher Education in Recent Years**

The widespread use of the internet has brought serious challenges to the traditional way of teaching and learning in higher education. Indeed, in order to keep pace with the advancement of information and communication technologies, higher education institutions are gradually adopting online learning to meet the higher demands of students and teaching quality. Suggested reasons behind the prevalence of the online learning mode are: easy access to knowledge; cost effectiveness; flexibility in arranging time and others [9].

However, the traditional way of teaching and learning should not be eliminated owing to many advantages it contains: prompt response and guidance of the teacher; helpful environment of an interactive classroom; viable discussion and group work with other learners and so forth. Henceforth a solution appeared to tackle the problem: to blend the two ways of learning and make full use of them. This is called “blended learning”.

Blended learning features the fusion of myriad types of teaching methodology and formats in one course. Examples of teaching methods are cooperative learning [10], Just-in-Time Teaching [11], problem-based learning [12], and more. The formats comprise online learning (both synchronous and asynchronous) and physical classroom learning (basically synchronous) [1]. The learning environments of higher education in the past decade are showing the trend of being transformed from the live face-to-face setting to the combination of face-to-face and virtual computer-assisted Internet-based setting [13]. Since blended learning is a mix of heterogeneous delivery modes, the question of how to reasonably utilize them arises. Some argue that the focus of valuable research on blended learning in higher education should be on the relationships between different modes of delivery (e.g., face-to-face and online) and especially about their integration [14].

In recent years, numerous experiments have been done to evaluate the effectiveness of blended learning in higher education. Researchers have found that student perception accounts for the outcome prominently [15,16]. The relationship between students’ perception and their performance is strong and positively correlated [17].

In China, research on blended learning has also achieved fruitful results [18,19]. Wang Guohua et al. [20] conducted content analysis based on the academic papers about blended learning that are included in HowNet (CNKI) full text database and found that the study on blended learning showed significant growth in the past decade. But there are also shortcomings, such as the lack of systematic research on the current blended learning model used in English teaching [7].

**Challenges of Blended Learning in EAP Courses**

The implementation of blended learning requires the consideration of many factors as a whole [21]: students’ learning competence, content of and options for the online delivery, availability and reliability of infrastructure, and more. Among these, students’ learning competence directly determines the effectiveness of blended learning. One issue under heated discussion is students’ lacking autonomous self-disciplined learning capacity. This is owing to the status quo that most college students, including those in China, have been told everything by teachers in their primary and secondary education [22]. Once they are required to study independently, they feel at a loss or even resistant towards such a sudden shift of learning method.

Another challenge is faced by teachers in higher education institutions: the selection of best teaching material for students. This occurs especially in Chinese colleges and universities where the college English course targeting at non-English majors is taught only in the first one or two years of the undergraduate study. This poses confusion about what should be taught in the college English
course. For long, the college English course in China concentrates on teaching EGP, whereas it is stated in the new “Teaching Requirements for College English Course” (2007) that students should be equipped with academic English skills before graduation. This twist has left many a Chinese college teacher uncertain about the selection of the teaching material that works best for their students. Insufficient analysis of the teaching content more or less results in students’ performance in the blended learning environment not being prominently improved [18,23].

Recently in higher education, the blending of online and offline learning is unavoidably calling for higher requirement for technology. Online learning is asynchronous, mainly used before class when students study independently without teacher’s guidance or instruction. The limitations of asynchronous teaching are not oblivious. Therefore, the combination of modern online learning and traditional face-to-face teaching excels. However, well-maintained electronic equipment accessible to the internet are not provided for the college English course in a large number of colleges and universities in China, so live e-learning is deprived of the possibility to be put to use.

**Suggested Solutions**

Owing to the previous learning experience and habits, students’ lack of self-learning competence is the hardest problem to solve. Arduous task as it may be, teachers should spare no effort to improve the situation. Students studying online are unable to get the immediate assistance or instruction from the teacher, but are not restricted to the monotonous way of accumulating knowledge. On the contrary, traditional face-to-face classroom setting features the instant response from the teacher, which works better for students who have difficulty studying by themselves. Therefore, the teacher should be familiar with the learning capacity of the students and address the issue in the following ways.

Firstly, pay attention to the appropriate time allotment to online learning and face-to-face instruction. If more students have difficulty studying by themselves, then more time should be assigned to in-class face-to-face instruction and vice versa. Secondly, the content delivered online and required to be previewed before class should not be ranked based on its “accuracy”; rather, it should target at promoting the active learning in class which means to stimulate students’ initiative and arouse their interest in exploring more related knowledge in the classroom paradigm. Thirdly, emotion is important too, indicating that students’ self-recognition of learning a skill influences their performance [24]. So the student feedback should be solicited for teachers to assess the class and to positively influence students’ emotion towards learning.

In the EAP course, selection of best teaching content for students is a headache to teachers, over which a good amount of controversy was caused during its development. People hold doubts for the authenticity of texts used in the teaching. The key point here is the real meaning of “authenticity”. A complex and obscure “authentic text” has no advantage over a specially written “artificial text”, which usually occurs in textbooks tailored to fit students’ reading ability and may in fact be misleading [25]. “Authenticity” of the text means the one that reflects the real learning process, not necessarily the equivalence of texts written in English because in many countries where English is spoken as a foreign language (e.g., China), all higher education is taught in the national language whereas English only serves as an auxiliary language [26]. Therefore, deciding what the best teaching content is and how to deliver it should primarily take students’ needs into consideration. Learner analysis, mostly referring to their prior knowledge analysis, before designing the course is indispensable. It helps decide the best teaching content and effective activities conducted both in physical classroom and online.

What’s more, unsatisfying environment in reality, including inadequate accessibility to the internet on campus, shortage of electronic equipment provided for students in some faraway regions, etc., is a big issue for the large-scale implementation of blended learning in Chinese colleges and universities. Improving such situation calls upon the urgent institutional support in aspects of technology, finance and administration.
Conclusion

Blended learning is gaining popularity in many higher education institutions. Inevitably, there exist challenges in aspects of students’ learning competence, content of and options for the online delivery, and availability and reliability of infrastructure. At the same time, teaching EAP in the college English course in China is the trend in the following years, so utilizing the blended learning mode to facilitate the effectiveness of teaching EAP is of great significance.

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References


