ESP for College English in Agricultural Universities — with Yunnan Agricultural University as an Example

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Abstract. With the introduction and supplementation of ESP, especially with the publication and application of an ESP coursebook named Comprehensive English for Agriculture in the New Century, we have gradually revitalized College English in YAU, for ESP has effectively bridged students’ daily English learning and their desirable acquisition of special terms and knowledge pertinent to their respective majors. Through deepening reforms and renewing practices of College English teaching and learning, ESP has been becoming more and more popular with teachers and students in YAU. This paper discusses and analyzes how to make progressive teaching and learning with the book, how to stimulate and maintain students’ interest in learning and using English with hyperlinks attached to each unit, and how to integrate ESP teaching and learning with CET-4 and CET-6. Besides, this paper also depicts the difficulties like the shortage of qualified ESP teachers, the adaptation of teachers and students to the innovative and challenging practices, and comes up with some initiatory countermeasures to overcome the obstacles.

Introduction

As one of the first leading six universities in Yunnan Province in the reforms and renewing practices of College English teaching and learning, Yunnan Agricultural University (YAU) began to implement the redesigned syllabus of College English course in 2011. Based on College English Curriculum Requirements, the redesigned syllabus in YAU suggests that the non-English major undergraduates to learn College English be divided into three groups named as Class A, Class B or Class C according to their individual English scores gained in the National University Entrance Examination. Class A is treated as the upper or best group, while Class B as the middle or intermediate and Class C as the Lower or poorest. Although all the undergraduates are required to learn College English for four terms or two years, those in Class A are expected to meet the higher requirements stated in College English Curriculum Requirements, those in Class B to meet the intermediate requirements and those in Class C to meet the basic requirements. Additionally, those in Class A are allowed and advised to take their first CET-4 in their first term, those in Class B and Class C can take their first CET-4 in their second term, and those who have passed CET-4 are rearranged into new Class A with CET-6 as their next target. Over the past four years, about 300 to 500 students in Class A passed CET-4 in their first trial, and about 30 to 50 students passed CET-6 in their first trial. For those students who have passed CET-6 in either their second term or their third term, we initiated ESP for Agriculture as their post-CET-6 compulsory College English course, which has turned out to be remarkably effective and beneficial in the corresponding teaching and learning.
How to make progressive teaching and learning with the book


It can be seen from the titles of the ten units in the two volumes that the first volume is comparatively general in theme, information and vocabulary, though it is closely related to agriculture, while the second volume is more specific or narrower. The theoretical ideas for this arrangement are from the principle of progressive teaching and learning held by constructivism that “The process by which instruction is improved through the analysis of learning needs and systematic development of learning materials.” For the application of the textbook, it is suggested that the teachers and students concerned, especially those students who have a full year to learn College English as a compulsory course, go from the beginning to the end. It is also advised that the teachers with students who have only half a year or their fourth term to learn College English as a compulsory course, choose either Volume One or Volume Two as their textbook. In actual practices over the past two years, the teachers employed the ideas of jigsaw reading and assigned their students from different majors to learn the texts closely related to their own major as intensively and profoundly as possible. This innovative practice vitalized the textbook, for the major-related texts motivated students’ interest in studying the texts in detail for both the enlightening information and pragmatic vocabulary and expressions. Besides, students were always itchy to take the leading role as their teacher(s) in class, for they had made good preparation for their class presentation before class through their own deep learning, critical thinking and generalization, and had something interesting, meaningful and useful to share with their students and teachers. Moreover, students wanted to leave a good impression on their teachers with their active participation in class, and admirable presentation brought students desirable formative assessment (30% of the final and aggregated score), the best of which amounted to the full 30% of their comprehensive and total scores for the College English course of ESP for Agriculture. In this way, the College English class naturally became student-centered, learning-oriented, in which students came to learn from and compete against each other both in class and outside of class, as was reported by students in my random interviews with the students concerned. The progressively-arranged textbook with discipline-based content effectively helped students proceed with their College English learning gradually and readily from the general to the specific, from the easy to the difficult. Throughout the teaching, the teacher(s) served as a course designer, class organizer, activity facilitator, presentation coordinator and student helper, as was stated by the two teachers in my interviews with them. The role shift of teachers challenged most teachers in the beginning, for they were more accustomed to and good at teacher-dominated teaching. But gradually the teacher(s) felt greatly released from over-loaded and monotonous teaching in College English class.

How to stimulate and maintain students’ interest in learning and using English with hyperlinks attached to each unit

For fear of the students’ interest decline and to dissolve the limitation of the reading materials in the textbook, four websites are listed under “Part III Reading and Writing” in each unit. Of the four websites, the first one is for students to find out and read another target reading passage or article with the same or similar theme in the corresponding unit. To encourage students to deal with the work earnestly and to effectively supervise or assess their performance, students are required to
write a reading report in at least 160 words. To further activate students’ motivation to explore their focus, three websites are offered for their reference.

In practice over the past two years, a class public email box was created along with College English of ESP for Agriculture in YAU, according to my advice. The class email box has turned out to be very helpful and productive, for it served as a workshop for students to hand in their electronic reading reports, learn from and compete against each other by frequently checking and sharing what their peers had been reading and writing, and even thinking of. Based on the requirement for this course, students’ reading reports, composed of a summary of the main ideas, facts and findings of the reading passage, together with some critical reviews or remarks from the corresponding students, could gain 20 points as another ingredient of formative assessment in the final and aggregated score for the corresponding students. This positive leading requirement expectantly stimulated students to make further efforts to explore their focus, to better their understanding and report writing of the self-learning articles, and to gain more from the appealing 20% for their final score of this course. My random interviews with students concerned found that students tried their best to make their reading reports better and better by drawing on some good ideas from the previously delivered reading reports of their classmates in the class public email box. My interviews also found that doing so students had both consciously and unconsciously enhanced and maintained their interest in learning and using English, and even some of the students had been keeping on learning and improving their English in this way long after their successful fulfillment of the compulsory College English course.

How to integrate ESP teaching and learning with CET-4 and CET-6

For those who are not lucky enough to pass CET-4 and / or CET-6 during learning their compulsory College English course, an optional course with ESP for Agriculture has been offered during their third and fourth year in YAU. Although such students are entitled to only one chance of selecting and learning this course as one of their optional courses during their last two years in YAU, many a student has made such remarks as that they regained their diminishing interest, even confidence in learning and using English after taking this ESP for Agriculture, and that their English reading comprehension was improved unexpectedly and amazingly. With more efforts and better preparation, a number of these students have passed their CET-4 and / or CET-6 while taking the course.

In the first class of teaching ESP for Agriculture as an optional course, it is suggested that teachers concerned clarify the purpose and goal of students learning English in universities as that the purpose is to improve students’ English proficiency while the goal is to use English as a helpful instrument for their major study by making full use of abundant information related to their focus or major worldwide. As was explained by some teachers, CET-4 and CET-6 are only two forms of English achievement tests for undergraduates, so they may not fully or correctly evaluate every examinee’s English proficiency. Moreover, learning English only or mainly for examination is rather demanding and exhausting, though it may make one’s learning it target-specified and temporarily motivated. In reality, learning English language can be and should be pleasant and productive. As was expounded by teachers in charge of ESP for Agriculture in YAU, the course of ESP may help students gain new knowledge or information pertinent to their majors or disciplines, and improve their English, especially English reading comprehension at the same time. Syntactically, the English language in ESP may be more complicated than that in CET-4 and / or CET-6, while the English language in ESP may be, lexically speaking, easier than that in CET-4 and / or CET-6. ESP for Agriculture may incredibly help learners pass CET-4 and even CET-6.

To eliminate the misleading belief of useless English language in real work after graduation among undergraduates, and to encourage these students to learn English as well as they can, some teachers have ever cited the statistics that in the whole world, 45 countries use English as their official languages, a third population of people speaks English, 75% of television programs are broadcast in English, UN uses English as its work language in its activities, and 80% of information in websites are provided in English language [4].
With such patient and thought-provocative elucidation, quite a few students taking ESP for Agriculture as an optional course have gradually come to benefit from this course so much that they retake the responsibility for learning and using English as a multi-functional instrument, for the new practice of ESP for Agriculture with content-based or discipline-based learning materials makes students improve their English language skills, especially reading comprehension and translation, while enriching their general knowledge related to agriculture or their majors. As was recalled by students in my interview, ESP for Agriculture was much less difficult than they had expected, and it is much more enjoyable and beneficial than imagined. Such finding and feedback coincide with the constructivism learning theory in that one produces knowledge and forms meaning based upon his or her experiences, which involves accommodation and assimilation. “Assimilating causes an individual to incorporate new experiences into the old experiences. This causes the individual to develop new outlooks, rethink what were once misunderstandings, and evaluate what is important, ultimately altering their perceptions. Accommodation, on the other hand, is reframing the world and new experiences into the mental capacity already present. Individuals conceive a particular fashion in which the world operates. When things do not operate within that context, they must accommodate and reframing the expectations with the outcomes.” [5]

Major difficulties and initiatory countermeasures

In the innovative and preliminary practice of ESP for Agriculture in YAU over the past two years, we have come across various difficulties and overcome some of them. The major ones are lack of well-educated or well-prepared volunteer teachers, shortage of themes for content-based or discipline-based instructions, diversity of students’ majors and focuses, different aims of students’ learning English in YAU, lack of interest and confidence in learning ESP for Agriculture among many students.

For the first class of ESP for Agriculture as a compulsory course in YAU in late 2012, no volunteer teachers were available. The reasons must have been that no textbooks for the course could be found and there were only 41 students in that class, which would make it too challenging or time-consuming for the teacher to make essential preparation for the teaching, and which would reduce the teacher’s economic earnings due to smaller class. With patient encouragement and considerate regulation, we invited and even persuaded one extroverted, courageous, diligent and popular teacher to undertake the course. We provided the teacher with our roughly-compiled textbook materials for *Comprehensive English for Agriculture in the New Century*, and with the full equivalent payment calculation of sixty-student class for her teaching that small class.

In teaching and learning ESP for Agriculture in YAU, some students could hardly find any previously selected and compiled reading articles related to their major or discipline in the recommended textbook, for some students majored in architecture, engineering, humanities or social sciences rather than agriculture in YAU. To deal with this shortage of themes for content-based or discipline-based instructions, and the diversity of students’ majors and focuses, we advised the teacher(s) to encourage those students to find out their favorite articles by any means, especially by browsing websites via Internet, and study their selected materials in the same way as the other students with the textbook. This expedient has been popularly used for such students in the course of ESP for Agriculture since then.

In YAU, different undergraduates learn English with their own aims. Some students learn it for facilitating their further studies abroad, some for hunting for a desirable job in multinational enterprises, some for passing various examinations and getting their potential certificates. For example, some students, as was shown in my interview, were transferred to study their present major due to their failure to be matriculated by their favorite majors applied for, so that they were learning English mainly for passing CET-4, CET-6 and the forthcoming postgraduate entrance examination, which would change their present predicament for a better or brighter future as declared by some students in my interview. For those students in the course of ESP for Agriculture, teachers were suggested showing sincere respect and even admiration to students’ own preference.
first, then encouraging those students to spare no efforts to learn ESP for Agriculture as well as possible, meeting the minimum requirement of the course at least.

In YAU, a large number of students are aware of the usefulness and advantages of English language for university graduates and they intend to learn English well, but they feel their uncontrollable interest and confidence moving away from their good wishes and daily practice. For those students, our teachers urged them to integrate their English learning with their major or focus, and have a try in the course of ESP for Agriculture. With the similar practice in the optional course of ESP for Agriculture, some of those students felt it much easier for them to learn ESP for Agriculture than imagined, as declared by some students in my interview, for some new words could be accurately comprehended just by guess according to the context with the assistance of their prior knowledge related to their major.

Summary

ESP for Agriculture as both a compulsory course and an optional one has been practised for two years in YAU. In practice, the course has adopted the scaffolding ideas of constructivism learning theory and jigsaw reading, and the teaching strategies of making teaching and learning progressive, stimulating and maintaining students’ interest and confidence in learning and using English, and integrating ESP for Agriculture with CET-4 and CET-6. With mutual understanding and joint efforts of teachers and students taking the course, ESP for Agriculture has made some considerable achievements, such as a usable textbook published for content-based or discipline-based instruction, two relatively qualified teachers available, many students’ interest and confidence in learning English revitalized. Still, more themes or discipline-based materials are to be selected and compiled into that textbook or more categorized textbooks, so that many more students will readily find their own content-based reference materials and more efficiently benefit from the course of ESP for Agriculture in YAU and elsewhere. More qualified teachers for ESP for Agriculture are to be trained or prepared so that more classes of this course can be offered to meet the increasing needs of students, and more students can benefit from this course. Furthermore, the interrelationship between the course of ESP for Agriculture and normal College English, Specialized English and English-Chinese Bilingual Courses is to be coordinated and systematized so that the courses go around an interrelated and harmonious co-existent circle, and that students feel it comfortable to adapt themselves to the circular succession of the courses and gain most benefits from them in the end.

References


