An Action Research on English Teaching in Vocational and Technical College

Xiao-chen XU*, Jing-bo REN, Lei ZHU, Liang LEI, Shu-yi ZHAO, Chao GAO, Qin-yuan MA, Yu-hong ZHU and Qing-fa ZHUANG

Comprehensive Training Department, Shandong Electric Power College, Taian, Shandong, China, 271000

*Corresponding author

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Abstract. In order to transform technical college English teaching towards more directly to the future use of students, and help the graduates apply their English knowledge to their job, we abstract English for Specific Purposes teaching methodology, follow action research requirements and conduct the research from the following aspects: the accumulation of basic knowledge, the training of comprehensive skills, the infiltration of corporate culture and the integrity between general English teaching and English teaching for Electric Power Industry. The paper aims at improving English teaching quality in vocational college. However, there are some hindrances which exist in current College English teaching. First, the quality and orientation has been questioned by many English educators and reforms have been taken place continuously. Second, large class size make it very difficult for teachers to focus on students’ individual need and implement the ESP methodology. Third, the teacher team tends to be old and lack young force.

Introduction

Nowadays higher vocational education focuses more on the future professional training of the students. Technical college teaching should transform towards a more applied teaching approach. It should aim at training technical talents that can immediately contribute to the local economy and cultivating entrepreneurship among students[1].

To ensure this, Methods for Promoting Cooperation between Vocational Schools and Enterprises was recently published in China[1]. Therefore, technical college English teaching should also focus on the future use of its students.

ESP (English for Specific Purposes) refers to English language that is commonly used in a particular occupation, subject, or working scenario[2]. As future electricians or electrical engineers, electric power vocational college students should receive ESP classes as an important part of their English study[2].

Chinese scholars' research on ESP began in the late 1970s. Scholars believes that ESP teaching consists of two different phases: basic language knowledge teaching phase, such as vocabulary and grammar, and improvement in scientific English reading and speaking.

Research on ESP teaching has been a focused topic since 1980s in China. Liu[3] points out that ESP teaching would become a main trend in English teaching in China, and integrity of general English and professional English will be shown.

At the same time, research has been done on ESP teaching in vocational college. Cai[4] believes general English teaching and ESP teaching both play a vital part in English teaching in vocational college but the teaching effect needs improving from the aspect of teaching materials, teaching methods, and teaching staff, etc.

Current English Teaching in Vocational College

As to improve the teaching quality, teaching reforms have been taken all the time. We examine the reformed English teaching syllabus in an electric technical vocational college in Northeast China.
Students here would receive a 3-semester general English instruction and after that, 4-week electric English training, which is ESP training is provided.

However, after the whole learning process, about 86% of the students find it quite difficult to understand the specifications of the power equipment, communicate with foreigners who come to handle power supply business, or introduce the advanced Ultra High Voltage project to foreigners in their future work. In short, the graduates cannot apply their limited English knowledge to their job.

They are going to learn English culture, for example, American music, western table manners, western celebrities, etc. But none of these would help them gain understanding about their future workplace. They lack basic knowledge about corporate culture in electric corporation.

Methods

Requirements of ESP Teaching

ESP teaching should focus on the future use of learners either in workplace or academically. So ESP teaching should be based on survey. Meanwhile, ESP practitioners should be aware of the practical use of the language in workplace, which means they should not only be a qualified English teacher but also be a researcher. We educators are concerned about future development of the student [5].

Action Research

After the application of English for Specific Purpose, we carry out this action research. This action research follows plan, action and feedback and would combine action with research to test theory in teaching activity [6].

Results

A Focus on the Accumulation of English for Electric Power Industry

We take excerpts from the annual Social Responsibility Report issued by the State Grid Corporation [7] of China as our teaching material and explain the new words first. For example, the important topics in 2016 are the following: electricity replacement, safe and reliable power supply, Ultra High Voltage construction, urban-rural power supply integration, clean energy development and consumption, and smart grid, etc. We try to explain the terms briefly and have students read the report. In the Ultra High Voltage Module, Ultra High Voltage AC/DC Grids [8] written by Liu Zhenya, is introduced. There is both an English version and Chinese version for the book, so it is easier for them to read.

Comprehensive Training during the Teaching Process

Students would have listening, speaking, reading, writing and translation practice during teaching. Let’s take Ultra High Voltage Module as an example. After the students are familiar with the terms, a CRI News Report [9] from the Internet is applied in their listening class. They are asked to write down the news, summarize in their own words and translate into Chinese.

Corporate Cultural Guide and Role Models in the Power Industry as Inspiration

After corporation core values [7] as Customer-oriented, Professional and dedicated, Ever-improving, have been explained to students, we find some role models from first-line workers. The students are asked to collect information online, and then try to translate the material into English. This practice can enlarge their vocabulary as well as inspire them, make them more dedicated to our power career later.

English News on the Official Website as Extensive Reading Material

News on the official website of the State Grid Corporation of China (http://www.sgcc.com.cn/) has been updated from time to time. If students keep on reading them, they can be aware of the latest
developments in the industry and learn a lot of technical terms. If they read classic professional works, or even part of them, they can be familiar with the use of English for electric power industry in terms of word formation, tense, and style.

Discussion

College English is a required course across mainland China. However, many educators have questioned its quality and orientation so reforms have been taken place continuously. College English has been described as “deaf and dumb English”[10]. Cai[11] summarizes the major debates over teaching orientations that Chinese college English teaching has experienced and states the debate now is “English for liberal education vs. English for Academic Purposes”. There are some hindrances existing in current college English teaching. In order to describe the state of current, we do the statistic on parameters of teaching as follows by the tables.

Table 1. Number of students in Grade 2017.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>class</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
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<th>10</th>
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<th>12</th>
<th>13</th>
<th>14</th>
<th>15</th>
<th>16</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>students number</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>43</td>
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<td>44</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Number of college students in Grade 2018.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>class</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
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<th>7</th>
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<th>9</th>
<th>10</th>
<th>11</th>
<th>12</th>
<th>13</th>
<th>14</th>
<th>15</th>
<th>16</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>students number</td>
<td>47</td>
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<td>46</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>43</td>
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<td>class</td>
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<td>12</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>students number</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>43</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Teacher-student ratio.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Overall Students</th>
<th>Teachers</th>
<th>TETs*</th>
<th>Teacher-student ratios</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2017&amp;2018</td>
<td>1584</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1:226</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*TETs= temporarily-employed teachers

Table 4. Teachers’ workloads.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Academic ranks</th>
<th>Assigned teaching periods/week</th>
<th>Actual teaching periods/week*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher 1</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>male</td>
<td>Advanced lecturer</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher 2</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>Advanced Lecturer</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher 3</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>male</td>
<td>Advanced Lecturer</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8-10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher 4</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>Advanced Lecturer</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8-10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher 5</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>Lecturer</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10-14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher 6</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>male</td>
<td>Assistant</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10-14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher 7</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>Assistant</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10-14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From the tables we can point that the class size is big. The average class size in the college is 44 (Total 727 in 2017, Average 45.4 students in one class; Total 857 in 2018, Average 42.8 students in one class), which is far beyond the official requirements. 5/7 of the teachers are overworked and all of them have to face large class size which ranged between 40 and 90 students. It is impossible for the teachers to pay attention to the individual need of the students if they are forced to teach such a big class especially when it is language class. And different student definitely has different plans about their future work. They cannot be well trained if they accept language teaching in such a big class[12]. 3/7 of the teachers are around 50 years old, while 2 are around 30. However, these young teachers are temporarily-employed teachers. So the whole teacher team is lack of young teachers, which possibly results in lack of progress in later teaching.

Summary

After applying electric English and basic corporate culture knowledge in the English teaching, we find that learning motivation of the students have been stronger than before. They spend more time in learning the new words and doing related listening, reading, writing and translation exercise as
they find that English learning has more connection with their future work than before and would help them know their future workplace better.

ESP training is a vital part in electric power college English teaching. We try to explore effective teaching model under the guidance of ESP teaching theory and after the surveys on students’ need. We would progress from this basis and hope to provide useful reference for teaching reform in vocational college English teaching.

Acknowledgements
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References