

Research on the Reform of College English Teaching

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Abstract. This essay analyzes the current situation in college English teaching by evaluating objectively the achievement made in recent years and also the problems that need to be solved. By referring to the teaching reform carried out in Jilin Agricultural University, the author discusses the theoretical foundation, the necessity and the urgency of deepening the teaching reform in terms of teaching concept, teaching management, course design and teaching techniques. This teaching reform aims to improve the students' practicable ability of using English.

Introduction

After entering into the WTO, all walks of life in China have to adapt themselves in line with the international lives. As a result, a large number of people possessing both expert knowledge and enough competence to communicate in English are in urgent need. But on the contrary, many undergraduates, due to their poor ability to use English in practical life, cannot find satisfactory jobs even if they passed College English Test Band 4 or Band 6. Many employers are not satisfied with the employees' comprehensive abilities in using English. They claim that only a few students are skillful in applied English, while a large number of students can hardly communicate in English. All these show that college English teaching reform which has undergone for many years still cannot catch up with the rapidly developing situation, and hence has to be furthered in many aspects. The aim of English teaching is to help students build on what has been achieved in college English teaching and learning, to consolidate and extend the rudimentary language knowledge, to develop the basic skills (speaking, listening, reading and writing and translating), to foster primary communicative efficiency in both spoken and written mode, to cultivate the ability to study independently.

Based on such understanding, we are trying to grade teaching in our university, attempting to further college English teaching reform under the credit hour system.

Reflections on the Syllabus

According to the Syllabus, college English teaching aims to enable the students to undertake profound reading and to conduct ordinary listening, speaking, writing and translating so as to exchange information in English. Under this requirement, college English teaching has been aiming at improving the students' reading abilities, and the teaching of grammar and vocabulary keeps the main content in the lecturing. It must be admitted that college English teaching under this guideline has actually achieved a lot. According to the statistics, most of the undergraduates have attained the teaching aim specified by the Syllabus.

With the rapid development of the society and economy, education has advanced greatly. Most primary schools begin to offer English courses and the teaching of English in high schools has improved a lot. Most students graduated from high schools have acquired some basic knowledge in grammar, vocabulary and preliminary skills in listening, reading and writing after 6 to 9 years of learning. The National Standards for English Course in Elementary Education stipulates that high school graduates are supposed to have a command of 3,000 words and 400 to 500 idiomatic expression or collocations, read up to 36,000 words, comprehend the main ideas of news broadcasts, express opinions, and write coherent and smooth passages.

To be in line with such rapid advances, college English teaching has to adapt itself to form a streamlined education system. Starting from a higher level, it must make better use of the results of modern education theories and focus itself on improving the students' practical abilities to use English, so that a balance between the input of knowledge and the output of competence may be attained. In such circumstances, the teaching ideology must be changed from "teacher-centered" and "knowledge-focused" to "student-centered" and "competence-focused", and due emphasis should be laid on the training of the students' practical output abilities to listen, speak, read, write and translate. In the case of second-language learning in non-English environment, reading skills are basic competence and primary means for most learners to absorb language materials. Furthermore a large input of language materials can provide the students with rich knowledge about the language and its culture. Without systematic acquisition of language knowledge, the students would not be able to express themselves profoundly and complicatedly, and it would become more difficult to improve other language abilities. But on the contrary, if too much attention were paid to the input of knowledge and too little to the output of abilities, it would be like putting the cart before the horse, because the input of knowledge aims at the output of practical abilities. If what is learned could not be put into practice and knowledge could not be turned into abilities, it would become useless to learn the language.

Based on such understanding, we are trying to attain a balance in our teaching by designing a series of activities such as making up passages by using a list of words, performing short plays about the text, reporting news at issue, discussing information related to the text, etc. to encourage the students to practice English in and out of the classrooms. The result is gratifying. Many students no longer feel shy when speaking English in front of the others; volunteers to take part in classroom activities are increasing; and English are frequently used in the students' daily communications. We're also reforming our examination system by adding 10 scores on the students' daily performances.

Reforming the Teaching Management System

In a large country like China, divergences in the development of economy are bound to cause divergences in the development of education. As a result, the students' English levels vary a lot when they were admitted by the universities. According to the original teaching program, the students begin their college English learning from the same starting point in classes divided by their specialties. A teaching management system which pays little attention to the wide differences of the students' level will fail to fire the students with enthusiasm for learning English. Lectures lose their challenge to the students with higher levels and are too difficult for students with lower levels. As a result, most of the students are bored with English learning and are escaping away from classes. Many students spend much money buying reference materials and spend much time learning English by themselves just for the purpose of passing the examination. The students spend twice the effort but only get half the result.

In order to solve this problem, we began our reform by changing the teaching management system. Referring to the principles of classified requirement and teaching in accordance with the students' aptitudes. In this new teaching program, the freshmen were graded according to their English scores attained in the entrance examination. 20-30% of the students with higher scores are graded into advanced classes to begin their study from Band 3. These students were supposed to attain the basic requirement stipulated by the Syllabus and pass College English Test Band 4 in the end of the first year. In the second year some practicable training courses are offered for the students to attain a higher level specified by the Syllabus. Those medium-level students learn the course according to the original teaching program to attain the basic requirement in two years.

In this new teaching program, we provided the advanced students with many preferences such as taking part in College English Test Band 4 in the end of the first year, choosing practicable courses according to their interests and abilities and so on to motive the students' initiative. Experienced and highly responsible teachers are also assigned to advanced classes. On the other hand, the students in advanced classes are managed in a dynamical way. At the end of each term all the students used a

one-level test paper to take part in the final examination. The students in the ordinary classes could apply to attend advanced classes if their scores reached the specified line, while those advanced class students who failed the exam would be descended to ordinary classed. After half-year study, more than 10% students were reassigned according to their scores. This kind of competitive mechanism urges the students to study hard to meet the requirement of the course.

Optimizing the Courses

It is necessary to evaluate objectively the acute criticism of “time costing and low effects” on college English teaching. “Low effect” mainly concerns the students’ output of language abilities, especially in their oral and writing abilities. But it must be admitted that college English teaching has achieved much in recent years. According to a statistics made by the National Committee of College English Test Band 4 and Band 6, about 20,000 thousand students take part in the oral test of College English Test Band 4 and Band 6, and about 45% of the examinees reaches A or B, suggesting that they can undertake oral communications on familiar topics at ease, while another 45% gets C, indicating that they can engage in simple oral communications on familiar topics. Most non-English majors can read medium-level newspapers and magazines and engage in simple conversations; some students can even read difficult English newspapers and engage in complicated communications smoothly.

On the other hand we need to have a clear picture of the whole situation. According to the statistics published in 2014 by the Ministry of Education, there are more than 65,700,000 full-time students in universities, and each year about 6,000,000 students take part in the examination. Only those students whose scores are higher than 500 in College English Test Band 4 are qualified to take part in the oral test. The statistics shows that in the College English Test Band 4 in Dec. 2014, only 4.2% of the students passed the specified line. In other words, only about 2% of the students can fluently undertake ordinary communications in English. There is still a long way to go if most students become capable of communicating in English. Furthermore, most students are still not competent enough in writing and translating.

College English teaching reforms in the past years were mostly conducted in terms of teaching concepts and methods. Little was done in the reform of course. In our graded teaching, we optimized the original program by adding new curricula. While offering comprehensive English as is regulated by the Syllabus, we provided the students who passed College English Test Band 4 with some practicable courses like Advanced Listening, Practical Translation and Writing, Advanced Listening, Oral Business English, Watching-listening-speaking, and Fundamental Course of English and American Culture, etc. these courses aim to create a supportive environment to excite the students’ motivation so that they could exert their internal learning mechanisms to study actively and independently. The questionnaire shows that most students welcome these courses, and many students made more than two choices under this item.

Adapting to New Teaching Medium

Most teachers have consciously transformed the teaching concepts and guidelines. They are applying modern teaching theories and linguistic theories into teaching practice. But because of the limitations of the specialty and teaching conditions, a great number of college English teachers are adhering to the traditional teaching mode of “chalks-and-blackboard”. Modern teaching technologies characterized by net teaching and multi-media teaching cannot be widely used in English classes. In a time when the means of teaching are varied and the students are receiving large amount of new information and technologies so rapidly, the traditional teaching mode can not satisfy the students’ need to pursuing knowledge and novelty, and hence can not attract the students’ attention to the lectures. So it is inevitable to reform the teaching medium in terms of modern teaching technologies.

Constructionists claim that environment, cooperation, conversation and meaning construction are essential factors in language learning. When there is no real language environment, we try to use

various teaching technologies including multi-media technology, interchanging of computers, and net-based teaching to create a simulated environment for learning by combining sound, pictures and words organically. Role-play, group discussion, class report, debating and some other communicative ways are employed as effective ways of teaching to encourage the students to cooperate and converse with each other. The students' cognitive functions are hence activated to construct meaning, and individualism is strengthened. In this way, English learning is no longer a burden and the students' practical abilities are improved in an easy and active environment. It is gratifying that most college English textbooks and other teaching materials published in recent years are attached with multi-media discs or other net-linked facilities, which greatly support the reform of the teaching mode.

The construction of a favorable environment for learning English is not restricted within the classrooms. Second-classroom activities are also utilizable resources for language learning. In order to make English permeate through the students' daily lives, we use broadcasting, TV and other facilities to broadcast English programs regularly, and we also hold many contests such as English lecturing contests, English debating contests, translation contests, writing contests and English abilities contests. Scholars from other universities are invited to give lectures, and foreign teachers often attend the English corner to communicate with the students, all these activities aim to provide the students opportunities to practice English and make English a means to obtain information and express ideas.

Conclusion

College English teaching reform carried out in our university is only a part of the reform of credit hour system. There remain many problems to be solved. More and more qualified and devoted teachers are needed to give lectures on the applicable courses, adding some pressure on the teaching staff. Examination management needs to be adjusted; and fundamental skills in the students' reading, writing, and especially in listening have to be reinforced. It is a challenge to the whole teaching management system. We have made some adjustments among students. In any case, if college English teaching aims to match the development of the time and serve for society and economy, reforms must be carried out all the way in every concerned field. The guideline of "students priority" requires that we focus on improving the students' practicable abilities to use English so as to cultivate a new type of students with high scores as well as comprehensible abilities.

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