

A Practical Exploration in ‘Contest-Teaching Integration’ : Teaching Reform for Higher Vocational English

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Abstract: Based on the concept of ‘contest-teaching integration’, this study presents the following essential points of teaching reform in higher vocational English: 1) integrate the contents and objectives of various English contests into daily aspects and activities of English teaching; 2) implement reform exploration in different aspects (including curriculum standards, teaching contents, teaching methods and means, and examination and evaluation methods); and 3) improve students’ comprehension proficiency in applying English and vocational competence.

Keywords: Contest-teaching integration; Higher vocational English; Teaching reform

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1. Introduction

The Teaching Requirements for English Courses in Higher Vocational Education (Trial) issued by the Steering Committee of Higher Vocational English Teaching of the Ministry of Education, China, has formulated new provisions on the teaching objectives of higher vocational English courses that not only help students build a strong language foundation, but also develop their ability to communicate in English in a workplace environment, especially to deal with the issues related to their future careers (Zhang, 2013). This fully reflects the core concept of application-oriented vocational education. This concept is clearly manifested in various skill contests. Currently, various national and provincial level English skills contests intend to examine students’ comprehensive language proficiency (e.g. oral expression, reading comprehension, and writing skills) and communication competence relevant to advance their future career. Briefly, such contests reflect the requirements of social development for students’ language learning ability, practical application, and development trends of certain skills in higher vocational English teaching. The ability and quality requirements for contestants represented in these contests indicate orientation for English language learners. In short, contest-teaching integration has emerged as an inevitable trend of English teaching reform.

Unfortunately, most related studies remain merely at the macro level, and do not present any specific implementation plans on ‘contest-teaching integration’. Besides, the teaching reform plans (if any in related studies) are not practicable, more specifically, the original curriculum standards and teaching contents are not adjusted or redesigned properly appropriate to the purpose and requirements of contests, and the existing teaching model and design are not perfected.

2. Revising Curriculum Standards for Higher Vocational English and Highlighting Application-oriented and Vocational Characteristics

English Contests are intended to examine not only the basic knowledge acquired by contestants but also their ability to apply the new knowledge and concepts to solve job related problems; Hence, the contest results have been used for reference in measuring the teaching level of higher vocational education. Most of the tasks in the contest are designed based on typical workplace scenarios. To achieve good results in the contest and genuinely improve students’ comprehensive proficiency in applying English in a workplace

environment, it is necessary to integrate the job requirements of future careers into daily disciplinary teaching.

2.1 Regarding curriculum objectives

It is necessary to decompose the skill requirements of various English contests, set a general goal (i.e. using the language learned to complete various tasks experienced in daily life and at the workplace), and highlight the development of students' language expression and communication competences in workplaces, so that students can solve problems in English in their future workplaces, meet the job requirements in future careers, and achieve sustainable career development. Regarding task objectives, it is necessary to formulate specific and feasible objectives and highlight the fulfilment of vocational competence objectives.

2.2 Regarding selection of the curriculum content

It is necessary to select students' frequently occurring communication activities in daily life and future workplaces as typical job tasks based on the requirements of listening, reading, writing, and translation in various skills contests. The curriculum content should integrate the required language knowledge and skills, as well as the disciplinary content related to students' future careers. In addition, the curriculum content must prioritise listening and speaking, highlight oral teaching, and intensify practical reading.

3. Implanting Disciplinary Content into English Teaching to Complement and Integrate Curriculum Content

The content of English contests reveals that future jobs increase high requirements for comprehensive language proficiency. Hence, the selected teaching content must be combined with specific disciplinary knowledge, consider the intersection and integration between different disciplines, and incorporate the content of specific disciplinary areas into various teaching modules, and contain typical linguistic data about industries or occupational activities. The following section provides an example of public English teaching skills. Certain general disciplinary content associated with some industry is introduced in English teaching, and is centred on future occupational activities, so that the students can improve their comprehensive language proficiency in an established disciplinary environment.

3.1 Vocabulary

By discussing and communicating with professional teachers, we can design a vocabulary on some majors and use it for daily vocabulary teaching. In addition, vocabulary exercises can be designed to convince students that learning English is not separate from their future careers, will enable students to acquire basic knowledge of understanding their disciplines while learning a greater number of English terms.

3.2 Grammar

Most vocational college students lack a clear and complete understanding of basic grammatical knowledge they had studied during their middle school years, adversely affecting their language expression and communication ability. Hence, grammar rules can be presented, exercised, and applied in certain language contexts related to the discipline, thus making grammar teaching more interesting. This not only provides an approach to creating contexts for vocational language learning but also teaches students how to apply grammar rules in specific disciplinary situations.

3.3 Listening

Industry-specific English teaching materials and online resources are reorganised for listening. From the perspective of improving students' confidence in learning, listening exercises must be designed focusing on the need to understand words and phrases. Listening exercises will enable students to learn English technical terms, improve their English listening ability, and acquire an in-depth understanding of job content in the water conservancy industry.

3.4 Reading and translation

English reading contests and translation contests are intended to test not only students' ability to comprehend English vocabulary and textual structure but also their ability to use English to acquire information quickly, express themselves, and communicate with others. In addition, discourse reading in English contests have placed higher requirements on students' problem-solving ability. Therefore, English reading materials must give due consideration to the breadth and depth of content, and major-related English publications that highlight basic knowledge can be selected for the purpose of translation teaching. As a result, students will not only strengthen their understanding of disciplinary knowledge but also learn how to analyse the sentence structure and strengthen their ability in applying grammatical knowledge.

4. Updating the Teaching Model and Method and Promoting Integration of Teaching, Learning, and Doing

Oral English Contest, the most representative, intends to examine students' ability to describe scenes, converse, debate, and respond in English, and indicates students' comprehensive proficiency and their ability to solve job-related problems in English in their future careers. Each part of the Contest involved common career-related topics, is similar to simulation of real scenarios, and fully embodies the teaching principle of 'listening and speaking first and is application oriented'. Based on this principle, higher vocational English teaching should be practice-oriented, and link in-class teaching with off-class practice, so that students can actively immerse themselves in industry-specific simulation activities and achieve integration of learning and doing.

Hence, it is necessary to reform and conduct English teaching activities according to ability and development objectives. As exemplified by the topic of 'Renting a Car', we can predetermine a scenario of 'a young American visitor in China trying to rent a car from a car rental company' for students pursuing their study in the discipline of automobile engineering. Specifically, students are asked to complete the oral communication task about car rental, which involves a few questions about the car size or model, price, time, place, rules, and payment method. A real car rental scenario can be simulated for performance. Meanwhile, students are encouraged to further extend the scenario imaginatively and complete the oral communication task creatively. Throughout the task process, students work in small groups, enact different roles, and produce micro-video content of the simulated scenario. On this basis, students will acquire a professional level in English proficiency and vocational skills.

In summary, various English contests can give an impetus for teaching reforms in higher vocational public English in various aspects, and made an active impact on talent training. Based on the principle of 'contest-teaching integration', we can build a reasonable and effective teaching model for higher vocational English and conduct highly targeted language practice teaching activities. This is of certain practical significance to improve language-based communication competence and vocational skills of vocational college students and help such students fulfil the requirements of industrial development. Therefore, English teachers of vocational colleges must actively follow the development trend of higher vocational education, conduct teaching reform of 'contest-teaching integration' across all aspects of daily teaching, rely on various English contests to verify the effectiveness of English teaching, collect information on teaching reform, and achieve coordinated development of teaching, scientific research, and contests, to effectively improve the quality of English teaching.

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