

College General English Teaching Reform in Constructing “New Liberal Arts”

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Abstract

Since the construction of “New Liberal Arts” was put forward in China in 2018, college English teaching reform has been discussed. With the guidance of the new requirements, we need to stimulate students’ critical thinking, innovation ability, civic responsibilities and some other related abilities. Therefore, we try to carry out the teaching reform of General English in our university in terms of teaching orientation, teaching content, teaching mode, teaching method, teaching assessment and some related aspects. After the first round of teaching experiment, we conducted a preliminary review and reflection, and found that students had made great progress in college General English learning, and the assessment of students’ learning had been more objective and fair.

Key words: New liberal arts; College general English; Teaching reform

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1. INTRODUCTION

With the development of globalization and the integration of different fields, we urgently need novel thinking and methods to solve the upcoming problems confronting all the human being. The humanistic attribute of

college General English makes it undertake important responsibilities and missions in building a human community with a shared future for mankind. The past General English course design has been not sufficient to meet the needs of our country and the society for talents. In 2017, Hiram College in the United States put forward the concept of “New Liberal Arts”, which helps to reorganize the traditional liberal arts subjects, integrates arts and sciences, and inserts new technologies into the traditional liberal arts curriculum to provide students with comprehensive interdisciplinary learning. In August 2018, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China issued a document stating that tertiary education should strive to develop new engineering science, new medical science, new agricultural science and new liberal arts, and the construction of “New Liberal Arts” was officially put forward. “New Liberal Arts” takes inheritance and innovation, cross-interdisciplinary development and integration as the main way, promotes multidisciplinary integration, and improves the renewal and upgrading of traditional liberal arts. In order to help fully implement the “Six Excellence and One Top” Plan 2.0, the college English teaching for non-English majors should be reconsidered.

General English is English for General Purposes, sometimes EGP for short. It does not aim at a certain major, a certain discipline, or a certain occupation, but covers the knowledge areas that a qualified world citizen should be involved in; it does not have clear professional and occupational goals, and it serves the general communication needs of the people (Wen, 2014). Wei Hongru and Zhao Zhaoxia also hold that General English is not designed for specific professional purposes (Wei & Zhao, 2017).

General English pays more attention to comprehensive knowledge covering different fields such as science, technology and society, and pays more attention to the integration of the excellent national traditions and the fine cultures of other countries (Wu & Han, 2010). The complexity of language and cognition in college General

English is much more difficult than those of middle school English, and the field of knowledge concerned is also broader. Under the background of “New Liberal Arts”, we need to reposition college General English teaching, change our teaching, carry out the reform of teaching content, teaching mode and teaching assessment, and build a college General English course that can meet the needs of national, social and personal development.

2. RESEARCH METHODS

This project is carried out through a teaching reform with freshmen in a university. A combination of action research and interview is applied. One teacher’s teaching reflective journals have been studied. Three teachers and five students have been interviewed. By understanding the shortcomings of the current General English teaches and expectations of the future teaching, we have determined what to do and how to do.

3. RESEARCH IMPLEMENTATION

According to the interviewees’ suggestions, we try to carry out new design of General English course. The specific aspects are as follows:

3.1 Teaching Orientation

Zhou Yi & Li Zhuozhuo proposes that one of the main manifestations of “New Liberal Arts” connotation is to achieve new breakthroughs in interdisciplinary fields in the talent training model of liberal arts (Zhou & Li, 2019). It is also the intention of the new liberal arts to carry out talent training in a wider range of disciplines and majors. A series of practical explorations of talent training have been carried out in foreign countries, with the main goal to improve the innovation ability and critical thinking of the students from different majors of engineering. This inspires us that in the construction of “New Liberal Arts”, inter-disciplinary knowledge of arts and science, and the overall improvement of thinking, civic responsibilities will become important parts for the construction of “New Liberal Arts”. Therefore, we determined the orientation of college General English course in our university. It is the compulsory public basic courses for our students, with English language knowledge and application skills, cross-cultural communication, and general academic English as the main content. It is both instrumental and humanistic, aiming to meet the strategic needs of our country and the needs of our students to serve the society. It can help students to acquire the related professional knowledge in the world, conduct international exchanges, become well-qualified citizens and be well prepared for future jobs.

3.2 Teaching Objectives

The overall objective of college General English course is to improve students’ English language skills and techniques, cultivate students’ autonomous learning

ability. Through reading and listening practice, we try to help increase students’ knowledge in social, cultural, scientific and other fields, and improve their humanistic quality and critical thinking skills. Through writing and speaking practice, we focus on improving the students’ English output ability and comprehensively cultivating their practical ability in English application, so that the students can convey information in English accurately in their future work and social communications; adjust themselves to the national, social and personal development needs. The specific objectives of the course are from three different aspects:

Knowledge objectives: make students be able to achieve a basic understanding of oral or written materials with medium-level difficulty and daily communication topics; be able to recognize and understand the main idea and details, distinguish facts from opinions, identify other person’s purposes and attitudes in communication, determine the point and support, and judge whether an argument is relevant and adequate; be able to communicate concisely in speaking and writing on familiar topics with accuracy and coherence.

Ability goals: assist students to review and preview independently, check for the deficiency in learning tasks, and promote their independent learning; improve their ability to analyze problems and ability in dialectical thinking in English; temper students to think critically in obtaining information in complex international situations, increasing their cross-cultural awareness with international hot topics as examples.

Educational goals: help students to clarify what role students should play in the study so as to correct their learning attitude and become qualified college students; encourage the students to think independently and to believe in reason; broaden their international vision and enrich their knowledge of our country and other countries through cultural learning and examples of social issues.

3.3 Teaching Content

According to the dual functions of the instrumental and humanistic attributes of college General English, we hold that the main teaching content of college General English should cover language skills, cultural elements, interdisciplinary knowledge and ways of thinking.

3.4 Teaching Mode and Teaching Method

The construction of “New Liberal Arts” emphasizes inserting modern information technology into curriculum teaching. Therefore, in terms of teaching mode, we make full use of modern information technology, actively practice a combined teaching mode of online and offline, add online practice to classroom teaching to expand teaching and learning space. The offline teaching is designed based on the online preview learning outcome. The offline classroom teaching method is mainly POA (Production-oriented Approach) method. To be more specific:

Before class, teachers usually will analyze their students' learning characteristics, the teaching material, and the students' current knowledge about the field related to the material. On this basis, teachers will design learning tasks and hand out electronic preview sheets through a special learning APP. After collecting the preview sheet back, teachers will analyze the problems and the gap between the students' current knowledge and the knowledge they should acquire. This can ensure teachers to know more clearly about their students' learning situation and also guarantee the students understand the learning objectives and key points before class. When we design our preview sheets, we will ask ourselves the following questions to design our teaching process and teaching content better: What learning outcomes do we want our students to achieve? Why should students achieve such learning outcomes? What is the current level of the students? What are the gaps between what they have learned and the learning objectives of this unit? How can we effectively help students achieve the learning outcomes determined by the goals? How can we know that students have achieved these outcomes? Through these questions, we ensure our teaching objectives to be implemented, and finally we will test whether these teaching objectives can be accomplished.

In the classroom, teachers will use POA as the main teaching method to design the classroom activities based on the learning effect of preview sheets. Production-oriented Approach was proposed by Professor Wen Qiufang, a famous scholar in China. In order to promote the realization of teaching goals and ensure effective learning, POA method advocates the integration of learning and application. “Learning” refers to the input, such as listening and reading, and “application” refers to the output, including speaking, writing, and translating. This method emphasizes both the output process and the output outcome and it advocates that all classroom teaching activities should serve the goal of effective learning. When designing teaching process, teachers always should focus on what their students can achieve and try to integrate learning and application. Of course, other teaching methods will also be used in the actual teaching according to the situation. On the whole, students will study in an all-in-English environment. English is not only the content of learning, but also a tool for learning, which will ensure to achieve the purpose of acquiring English language knowledge and improving communication skills.

After class, teachers can give students some other assignments to further improve their learning outcomes, and also can give feedback to students on the learning APP. After finish the whole unit learning, teachers can make objective and detailed assessments according to the students' formative learning records on the learning APP. Students' attendance, homework, participation in class activities and other aspects can all be got on the learning platform.

3.5 Teaching Assessment

In the early teaching assessment, summative assessment is the main method. This kind of assessment method is simple and easy to operate, but it often ignores the students' efforts in the learning process, and cannot conduct a comprehensive assessment.

Mr. Scriven put forward formative assessment in 1967. He assumes that formative assessment is to help form or alter ongoing process. Torrance and Pryor regard formative assessment as part of an ongoing process, in which students can monitor their own progress (Torrance & Pryor, 1998). On the online learning APP, the teachers will count on the platform's learning data to observe students' completion of learning tasks, participation in learning activities, changes in learning habits, and thus conduct a comprehensive and multi-element assessment to provide accurate teaching and efficient learning. The summative assessment will use an online testing system to design exams and check the students' mastery of our teaching content.

Formative assessment is a developmental assessment based on the observation of the whole process of students' learning, including the students' learning attitudes and learning strategies. It can help students to understand their own learning process, enhance self-confidence, and achieve greater improvement. At present, formative assessment is widely accepted by teachers and universities as a part of the teaching assessment in order to provide students with a more objective and comprehensive assessment. At the same time, the necessary summative assessment is still required. Our college General English test is conducted in the form of online testing to give students an incentive to do whole reviewing.

3.6 Extracurricular Activities

In order to extend college General English teaching, we also provide more English extracurricular activities for students to enhance the English language cultural atmosphere in the university. We hold that this will integrate English learning into students' daily life, so we have carried out a variety of English extracurricular activities, such as foreign language corners, foreign language culture and art festivals. We also guide students to participate actively in various college English competitions. In the environment of colorful extracurricular activities, students can get involved in activities according to their own interests and levels, improve their English proficiency, and get different kinds of skill training. In addition, these activities also enrich students' campus cultural life.

4. RESEARCH RESULTS

After the first round of reform, great changes have taken place in all aspects of our teaching and students' learning, which is mainly reflected in the following aspects:

4.1 Changes in Teachers' Mindset

We have studied a teacher's reflective journals, analyzing the original writing materials, and found that before the teacher practiced guideline of "New Liberal Arts", her teaching reflective journals focused mainly on the classroom control, teaching content and classroom activities. Her main goal was to review class teaching and found out the deficiencies in teaching activities, and then redesigned the teaching steps according to the findings.

In terms of teaching management, the teacher mainly reflected on the aspects which would help to mobilize students' enthusiasm and participation in the class. Among them, a big concern was how to make students who did not like to speak up in public become active. In classroom teaching, for the teacher, it was mainly about how to control the time, manage teaching content and steps of classroom activities. A big concentrated problem was that sometimes, she did not have sufficient time to accomplish the designed task. When it comes to the teaching content and step arrangement, the problem was mainly that the step design was not good enough so that it could not be conducive to inspiring students.

After practicing the guideline of "New Liberal Arts", we can find she has changed a lot in these aspects. She also begins to pay attention to some other aspects, such as the students' situation, her anticipation to their reaction and the selection of the teaching material and some other aspects.

For instance, when reflecting on specific classroom activities, the teacher could realize that she did not predict effectively about the possible difficulties for the students and their learning situation, and was not able to analyze the students and the teaching material well. Now, she could carry out the teaching steps based on the students' learning situation. What is more important is that when the teacher reflects on teaching, she has jumped out of the limitation of simply focusing on the teaching in class. In the reflective journals, we have noticed her reflection on teaching methods, the process of designing teaching objectives, the use of teaching materials, the reflection on teaching concepts and teaching methods. This shows that the teacher has escaped from her former teaching mindset. Instead, now, she usually will pick out specific events, review and think about the whole teaching process from a broader perspective with a critical eye, which deepens her understanding of the nature of teaching. It can be seen that her teaching philosophy has changed significantly.

4.2 Changes in the Focus of Teaching Content

Through the reflective journals, we can see that she has changed her teaching focus in the teaching content. In the past, the main focus was on the language skills, including reading, writing, listening, speaking and translating. At present, her teaching content focuses have been enlarged, covering thinking, cultural elements and knowledge of other fields. Nowadays, her teaching

content design usually starts with practical problems, training the students' language skills, paying attention to value guidance, and broadening the students' horizon in other relevant fields, such as psychology, sociology, morality and law. One problem with her former teaching is that sometimes the teaching content is far away from students' life and knowledge, which leads to inactivity of students in class. Meanwhile, outside of the classroom, students rarely have the opportunity to practice English. Therefore, when students have limited classroom English communication opportunities and their related English knowledge reserve is seriously insufficient, they will feel the language learning content in the classroom is inconsistent with the communicative context of the actual life. Now, she could take the initiative to choose some current social affairs to be the discussion topic to cultivate more practical abilities for the students.

4.3 Changes in Teaching Mode and Teaching Methods

We make full use of modern information technology to practice a blended teaching mode that combines online and offline teaching activities. The advantages of traditional classroom teaching and online teaching are well organized in this blended teaching mode. The occurrence of Covid-19 boosted the use of online teaching. When teachers become familiar with online teaching and better at searching for the related online resources, they would like to integrate online and offline resources. So, traditional classroom learning has been transformed to a blended learning mode of online and offline learning combination. In this way, before the class, teachers can detect the gaps between students' current knowledge and the will-be-learned knowledge to find out the ZDP (Zone of Proximal Development) of students, so that they can design the teaching content and steps. In the class, teachers can instruct students to grasp the skills and explore ways to solve problems according to the teaching objectives. After the class, students should review and reflect on what they have learned and what they have not understood fully so that they could ask for help, correct mistakes, and further improve the learning effect. This mode is not only in line with the current trend of educational development, more importantly, it also expands the learning dimension of students. Under the monitoring and guidance of teachers, students will have correct and clear goals towards English learning and the learning effect will also be improved.

4.4 Changes in Assessment Methods

Each individual is different. In order to give a complete assessment for students, formative assessment should be applied to evaluate students from aspects including knowledge, attitude, emotion and some other learning related aspects. Most of our formative assessment is carried out on a specific APP. Depending on the data

collected on it, teachers can continuously pay attention to students' learning process and effect, encourage students to learn autonomously after class, give students feedback, help students summarize their achievements and problems, and adjust their learning methods in a timely manner. Meanwhile, teachers can also use a lot of face-to-face oral motivational assessments to affirm and praise students to stimulate students' learning motivation, and help students form good behaviors habit. Furthermore, it is also a useful instrument for students to know clearly about their whole learning process and result. Students can combine their self-reflection and teachers' feedback to promote their learning progress, build self-confidence, and make progress.

Teachers also can obtain feedback from students, reflect and adjust their own teaching, and make teaching progress. In the above mentioned case, the students put forward many useful suggestions for their teachers. For example, students hoped their teachers could demonstrate how to formulate learning goals by themselves in their autonomous learning, how to choose suitable learning strategies or learning methods. Gradually, students became the master of their own self-assessment, they could evaluate themselves in English learning, and later they even could help each other not only in learning but also in evaluating. They evaluated other classmates' learning habit and strategies. When they learned new strategies from others, they would like to make use of the methods themselves to test whether the methods could be used in their learning.

Our General English teaching reform designs curriculum setting based on the real situation, which is conducive to the diversification of curriculum setting, enriches students' English learning experience, and improves students' English practical ability. Therefore, the reform of college General English course can play a positive role in improving students' comprehensive ability.

5. CONCLUSION

The author of this paper has carried out a research on the teaching reform of college General English courses. Specifically, the teaching orientation, teaching objective, teaching content, teaching mode, teaching method and teaching assessment are discussed. This reform has yielded some useful results. In the review of the reform of college General English curriculum in our university, we pay more attention to the teaching content, students' thinking ability and learning habit, and the formative assessment. The teaching mode and teaching methods are more flexible and diverse, and are more suitable for actual needs. It can be gradually expanded to all the students' English learning in our university.

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