

The New College English Teaching Reform in NCEPU: A Teaching Experiment

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Abstract- *Level-based College English teaching has lost its appeal in North China Electric Power University. To stimulate students' motivation in college English learning, a new teaching reform under the production-oriented approach is initiated. In the teaching experiment, we took reforms in teaching materials, teaching process and assessment. Subsequent questionnaire indicates that students hold positive attitudes toward this new teaching approach. However, alteration needs to be made in order to guarantee better teaching results.*

General Terms- *College English teaching; production-oriented approach; NCEPU*

Keywords- *College English teaching; production-oriented approach; output-driven, input-enabled; teaching experiment*

1. INTRODUCTION

College English is a required course for the first-year and second-year students in North China Electric Power University (NCEPU). To effectively launch College English teaching, thereby improve students' English proficiency, various English teaching reforms have been launched in NCEPU, among which the level-based college English teaching was one of the latest invention. This reform of EFL teaching lays emphasis on the roles language learners play in language learning. Under this approach, students were divided into different achievement groups according to their English proficiency levels, and the instructors were expected to adjust their teaching objectives, methods, materials and assessment to the students' English levels so that instructors could conduct effective teaching and learners, whichever groups they belong to, could enhance their English proficiency.

Level-based College English teaching had been conducted for more than ten years in NCEPU. To better understand students' attitudes toward English graded teaching, we conducted a case study in North China Electric Power University. We examined the attitude of learners of different grades and achievement groups toward level-based college English teaching mainly from five constructs: their perception of English graded teaching, the impact of English graded teaching on their learning, their attitudes toward teaching materials, their attitudes toward teaching content and their expectations for college English instructions. We enrolled sixty-six students from ten departments in the study. Analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data from Questionnaire containing both

questions with best choices and open-ended questions indicated that students from different achievement groups tended to hold neutral attitude toward our college English teaching, that our teaching practice may have failed to stimulate their motivation and meet their demand and interest, and that alterations were required with regard to teaching contents, teaching focus and assessment system if it were to regain students' interest. (Ren & Wang, 2018)

In an effort to alter this unfavorable situation in NCEPU, we have initiated reforms in teaching approaches, teaching materials, teaching arrangement, teaching methods and assessment in accordance with production-oriented approach (POA). First, level-based English teaching has been abolished, and students are classified according to their majors rather than their scores in the placement test. Second, teaching materials have been updated. Third, students have different courses to choose in different semesters. In the first semester, students are requested to practice the basic skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking. From the second semester till the fourth semester in the university, students could select courses from general academic English, English reading and writing courses, and listening and speaking courses. With regard to teaching methods, we introduced some teaching platforms to facilitate instruction. In terms of assessment, immediate assessment and delayed assessment have been employed. The motivation behind this teaching reform is to ensure that students of different achievement groups could tap their potential in English learning.

2. PRODUCTION-ORIENTED APPROACH

POA is a teaching theory targeted at adult foreign language learners in China. It originates from output-driven hypothesis (Wen, 2013) and output-driven, input-enabled hypothesis (Wen, 2014). This teaching theory is based on Swain's output hypothesis (1985) and Lantolf's socio-cultural perspective of language learning (2000).

POA is composed of three components: teaching principles, teaching hypothesis and teacher-mediated teaching process. Teaching principles refer to "learning-centered", "learning-using integrated" and "whole-person education". Teaching hypothesis includes "output-driven", "input-enabled" and "selective learning". Teaching process refers to three phases: motivating, enabling and assessing. Teacher's mediation is present at every phase.

According to POA, learning is for using. In order to encourage students to put what has been learned into use, teachers are required to adhere to the principles of output-driven, input-enabled hypothesis, placing emphasis on the role of output activities in language learning and combine output with input in a manner that input could enable the completion of output tasks.

Teachers have different roles to play at different stages of teaching. In the motivating phase, teachers are expected to design proper communicative situations and output tasks that has potential communicative value (Wen, 2014), in an effort to stimulate students' motivation in completing the tasks. During the enabling phase, teachers are required to provide essential input materials and guidance to students in the selection and process of these materials so as to ensure that students to acquire information on language, content and discourse structure necessary for the completion of the output tasks. In the assessing phase, teachers give immediate assessment and delayed assessment. These three phases constitutes the basis for our current teaching practice.

3. THE TEACHING EXPERIMENT

3.1 Teaching materials

New Standard College English is selected for reading and writing. This course book is published in the year of 2016 by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press in Beijing, China. The teaching materials in this course book open a window for students to learn about different cultures, traditions and customs and values. These teaching materials are classified according to their themes. Materials of one theme offer different perspectives so that students could, by analysing different points of view, form critical ideas toward the questions in discussion. In addition, by presenting the materials that explore the relationship between human beings, nature and society, students are expected to raise their social awareness and become whole persons. Furthermore, these materials, by vivid language and true communicative scenes, could stimulate students' interest in English learning,

encouraging them to participate in classroom activities, thereby improve their communicative competence and language proficiency. Finally, these materials play an active role in helping students learn about different cultures. By guiding them to explore the cultural differences, students could raise their cultural awareness and humanity.

We designed our teaching plan for a unit, and after revision and perfection, put it into teaching practice.

The teaching experiment lasts for two weeks, with four periods each week. 26 students participated in the study. Our colleagues were invited to conduct classroom observation. After the experiment, we collected the feedback and comment on the teaching experiment by means of questionnaire and interviews.

3.2 Teaching Theme

We chose the unit of Chinese tradition and culture. Chinese thoughts about Dao and Chinese language are two fundamental aspects of Chinese culture. In order to deepen students' understanding and form critical ideas of Chinese culture, articles written by western scholars as well as Chinese scholars were chosen as teaching materials.

3.3 Teaching Aims

The teaching aims fall into two kinds: language objectives and cultural objectives. As for the language objectives, students are expected to master the words and sentences pertaining to the core concepts of Taoism and Confucianism in English. The cultural objectives includes (i) explanation of the Chinese way of thinking; (ii) analysis of how the Chinese way of life differs from that of the West; (iii) description of the uniqueness of the Chinese writing system and (iiii) Summary of the advantages and disadvantages of the Chinese writing system

3.4 Task Design

Writing practice: Write a paragraph based on the following beginning: The differences between Western and traditional Chinese thought are extensive. The aim of this task design is to encourage students to, by analysis and synthesis, use sentence patterns to illustrate the possible differences between western and traditional Chinese thought.

3.5 Teaching Process

Input-Driven

Teachers ask students to brainstorm a list of Chinese tradition and culture that they would introduce to a foreigner in his first visit to China. In doing this, students could identify possible difficulties in lack of knowledge and inappropriate use of English or limited English vocabulary.

Output-Enabling

Teachers guide the students to select from the reading materials the ones relevant to the output tasks.

First, students find the words that are used to describe the core concepts of Taoism and Confucianism in English.

Second, students select the sentence patterns that indicate traditional Chinese world view and the traditional western world view.

Finally, teachers ask students to comment on some of the statements in the teaching materials. Statements like those being listed below:

- a) "In the Chinese view there is no fundamental dualism: Gods and demons belong to the same continuum as humans and animals; they obey laws that are similar or parallel to those governing the thoughts and actions of human beings." Do you agree that in the Chinese view, gods and demons obey laws that are similar to those of human beings? Use examples to illustrate your point.
- b) "It implies loyalty of the subject to the ruler, obedience of children to their parents, mutual reliability between friends, and so on." Do you think Chinese people still attach great importance to these concepts nowadays? Why or why not?
- c) "Traditional Chinese thought is acutely aware of how precarious and fragile a thing an orderly society is." Why do the authors think the Chinese are particularly desirous of an orderly society?

Why do you think traditional Chinese thought has such kind of awareness?

After learning the teaching materials, students are required to write a paragraph about the differences between western and traditional Chinese thought. This output task is aimed to put what they have learned into practical use. It can be shown from their writing that most of them have creatively applied what they have learned about from the teaching material, what's worth mentioning, is that they have also done some research from other sources, based on which they have formed their own perspectives.

3.6 Assessment

Students are divided into five groups; each group is required to read the paragraphs written by the members within their own group and give comment in accordance with the checklist provided by the teachers. They are expected to point out the weakness or strong points in the writings they have reviewed. Teachers give their comments after receiving students' comments.

3.7 Feedback

After this teaching experiment, teachers come to learn, by means of questionnaire, students' evaluation of this teaching approach. This questionnaire includes four dimensions: their learning results, the difficulties in their learning, their evaluation of teaching methods and suggestions for teachers. We collected 24 questionnaires of the total 26 handed out to students.

Of all the 24 collected questionnaires, 21 of them held positive attitude toward our teaching method, regarding it to be more practical and motivating. One of them noted that "compared with the dullness of college English class

before, this teaching method could encourage students to put what is learned into practical use. I feel so motivated and proud when I could do this."

As for the learning results, a vast majority of them believe that they have gained much in language knowledge and cross-cultural awareness. "Thanks to the different sub-tasks to fulfill in each period, I have to concentrate my attention on the teaching materials and try to complete these tasks by means of analysis, synthesis, evaluation, etc. This is big challenge yet great fun. I have learned much from this lesson."

When it comes to the difficulties, students commented that some of the traditional Chinese thought is difficult to explain, or since most of such reading materials are written in Chinese, they found it a challenge to translate them into proper English.

Teachers found that students' language output has greatly improved. They held that this teaching method cannot only create opportunities for language use on the part of the students, but also increased their chances of using what has been learned through selective learning.

4. CONCLUSION

Output-driven approach is conducive to our college English classroom instruction. To implement this teaching approach, however, several factors need to be taken into account. First of all, teachers are required to design appropriate output tasks. This is the starting point while at the same time the difficult one. Teachers need to create real communicative situations and design output tasks of potential communicative value in classroom instruction.

(Wen, 2014) This poses great challenges for teachers. They have to insure that the output tasks could contribute to the achievement of the teaching objectives. This means that the tasks should be changing on the one hand and achievable on the other.

Furthermore, teachers should guide the students to learn selectively in the enabling phase. (Wen, 2015) That is, teachers need to guide students to select and process the input materials in order to ensure the completion of the output tasks.

Finally, teachers may attempt to assign different output tasks to students of different levels. For students of intermediate and above levels, they may be required to complete tasks that require more information than could be provided by their learning materials. In this way, they need to look for more information in search for more critical and creative answers. For students of lower levels, teachers may design tasks that selective learning on the basis of the learning materials could be sufficient for them to complete. The reason for doing this is to ensure that, whatever level the students are in, they could put English into practical use and thus benefit from our English classes.

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