



Causes for Ineffective College English Teaching and Relevant Countermeasures

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Abstract

Through a questionnaire and a survey, the paper analyses the present College English teaching and the contributing factors for the ineffective College English teaching. Based on the analysis, the paper suggests four countermeasures to improve College English teaching quality. According to this paper, only when teachers and educational workers continue to learn modern foreign language teaching theory, reform teaching methods and patterns, instruct students in adjusting learning strategies, train students' intercultural communication competence, and enhance the construction of College English course, can we improve the teaching effect and students' practical English competence.

Keywords: College English, Teaching pattern, Learning Strategy, Contributing factors, Countermeasures

To promote College English course teaching reform and relevant research, and train students' practical English competence are always important subjects for College English educational workers and teachers. During recent ten years, College English course teaching and teaching reform has gained noticeable achievements, publishing College English (new edition) serial textbooks, multi-media courseware, comprehensive textbooks, and national test questions storehouse, further perfecting CET (College English Test) 4 and 6. College English course teaching has gained wide social attentions. However, College English course teaching faces series of abnormal phenomena, such as "time consuming but low efficiency", "mute English", and "high grades but low competency". What is the sticking point in College English teaching? How to change the "time consuming but inefficient" condition? In order to find solutions for these questions, authors perform a questionnaire survey and make deep studies and analyses on the result. In conclusion, authors suggest relevant countermeasures for improving College English teaching effects.

1. Design and execute the questionnaire survey

(1) Objective: Lots of questionnaires and evaluations focus on College English teaching effects. In order to improve the College English course teaching effect better in North China Institute of Science & Technology, identify factors that restrict the College English course teaching effect, and advance relevant countermeasures, we perform a questionnaire survey in May, 2004.

(2) Objects: Objects in this survey include 200 college students, 150 boys and 50 girls, whose majors concern more than twenty subjects but not English in North China Institute of Science & Technology. These students have already finished their College English serial curricula.

(3) Content: It covers five aspects, including College English teaching pattern, College English listening and speaking teaching, College English learning beliefs, College English textbooks and teaching contents, College English learning attitudes and methods. In the questionnaire survey, students must select the closest item from all options.

(4) Data analysis: By sampling, this survey targets at 200 students who major in any subject but not English. These students complete the questionnaire at spare time. Afterwards, we make data statistics and analysis.

2. Analyze the results of survey

2.1 College English is an important basic course. However, it tends to be "time consuming and inefficient" at present.

College English is an important basic course for college students. It covers the first, the second, the third, and the fourth term. Students in Class A study the Concise Course for College English Improvement. "Foreign language studies need not only considerable time but also making best use of time. (Shichun Gui, 1985)" According to Table 1, the average time spent by students in learning English at their spare time is no more than 1-2 hours everyday.

2.2 Although College English listening and speaking teaching has been emphasized, students could not adapt themselves to it psychologically. They fail to improve the listening competence, still more the speaking competence.

The *College English Curriculum Requirements* regulate: "In designing College English courses, requirements for

competence in listening and speaking should be fully considered, and corresponding teaching hours and credits should be adequately allocated. Moreover, the extensive use of advanced information technology should be encouraged, computer-based and web-based English teaching should be promoted, and students should be provided with favorable environment and facilities for language learning.” According to Table 2, students show a kind of psychological repulsion to College English listening and speaking teaching, teaching environment, and teaching effect. These students regard learning English as a nightmare.

2.3 Teachers do not master necessary modern foreign language theories. Students fail to adjust their learning strategies. Neglect to train the intercultural communication competence.

The *College English Curriculum Requirements* regulate: “As a systematic whole, College English has as its main components knowledge and practical skills of the English language, learning strategies and intercultural communication; it takes theories of foreign language teaching as its guide and incorporates different teaching models and approaches.” Teachers should study modern foreign language teaching theories and language acquisition principles, instruct students to adjust their learning strategies, and perform intercultural communication teaching properly.

According to Table 3, teachers do not acquire sufficient modern foreign language teaching theories. They prefer to impart language knowledge but not the cultural background of English-speaking countries to students, and neglect to train students’ language skills and communication abilities. Because teachers do not point out the cultural differences in teaching, students usually feel frustrated due to cultural barriers in learning English, which is also named as a culture shock phenomenon. Students fail to adjust their learning strategies properly.

3. Reasons for College English teaching’s poor effects and countermeasures for improving teaching effects

3.1 The teaching pattern and language environment restrict the train of English application skills. The teaching pattern should realize a spanning development of “students-centered task-based and reflective teaching approach” based on the Constructivist Learning Theory.

The *College English Curriculum Requirements* regulate: “The new model should combine the principles of practicality, knowledge and interest, mobilize the initiative of both teachers and students, and attach particular importance to the central role of students in the teaching and learning process.” However, the survey shows that although College English teaching adopts the multi-media teaching approach, it still focuses on the traditional teaching model that takes teachers as the center in class. Because of an absence of English teaching environment, students’ enthusiasm and interests in learning English suffer from certain constraints. As a result, it is meaningless to talk about improving students’ English application competence.

According to Table 4, traditional teaching model and dull language environment seriously hurt students’ interests and initiatives, killing students’ desire and enthusiasm for English studies.

Therefore, firstly the teaching model should realize the spanning development of “students-centered task-based and reflective teaching approach” based on the Constructivist Learning Theory. The *College English Curriculum Requirements* regulate: “Changes in the teaching modelin a shift from the teacher-centered pattern, in which knowledge of the language and skills are imparted by the teacher in class only, to the student-centered pattern, in which the ability to use the language and the ability to learn independently are cultivated in addition to language knowledge and skills.” “All the courses, whether computer-based listening and speaking courses or classroom-based reading, writing, and translating courses, should enable students to have a solid foundation in the English language while developing their ability to use English, especially their ability to listen, speak, and write in English.” “Colleges and universities should each design a computer-based or Internet-or campus-network-based multimedia listening and speaking teaching model that suits their own needs in line with their own conditions and student situation. Those in more favorable situations may deliver listening and speaking course via the Internet.” The students-centered task-based and reflective teaching approach exercises the scientific development view. Its core is “human- oriented” and “learning-oriented”. The theoretical base is the “constructivism”. So, it can inspire students’ interests and inner initiatives in learning, help teachers to know learners’ English levels, create a favorable psychological environment for learners, make teachers to help learners to develop the self-controlled learning consciousness, assist teachers to adopt the heuristic teaching, and train students’ creative and self-study competence.

Secondly, the teaching should realize a spanning development that “takes listening and speaking as the primary task, emphasizes on reading, writing, and translating, and lay stresses on intercultural knowledge”. For a long period, teachers are the center. In order to complete teaching tasks, teachers are busy in imparting language knowledge and students are busy with taking notes. Communications between teachers and students are few. Generally speaking, College English teaching merely focuses on training students’ reading and translating competence but neglect trainings on listening, speaking, and writing. As a result, students’ listening and speaking competence is poor. Students fail to realize a comprehensive development in English listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translating.

3.2 What students study for is to pass the national test, which strays away from learning initiatives and interests. To train students' intercommunication competence becomes a lie. The teaching approach should realize a spanning development "emphasized on both language teaching and cultural teaching", training students' intercultural intercommunication competence.

Language test exerts a strong effect on teaching. CET 4, CET 6, and PRETCO (Practical English Test for Colleges) impact the reform of teaching contents, teaching approaches, and teaching methods, and students' learning strategies, learning attitudes, and learning interests to a great degree, neglecting to train students' speaking skill. Widdowson (1978), an English linguist, points that in social communication, language exchange is an interpersonal activity. The objective of language teaching is to help students to use the language to accomplish necessary communication. From Table 3 and 5, we notice that students lay stresses on the pass rate of CET 4 and CET 6. The initiatives of learning tend to be multi-polarized, such as passing the test, job-hunting after graduation, or improving language application and communication competence. CET Spoken English Test (CET-SET) is still not popularized at present. The task of College English teaching strays away from training students' language competence. The teaching model and test model need to be reformed deeply.

Therefore, the teaching approach should realize a spanning development "emphasized on both language teaching and cultural teaching", training students' intercultural communication ability. College English course is to impart basic language knowledge, which can expand students' vision and help them understand the western social culture. So, necessary cultural background knowledge can benefit the training of language application competence. Byram, an English linguist, thinks that "Language is the riches source for learning the culture". Kramsch points out: learning the cultural consciousness and the secondary language culture can help to improve the efficiency of the secondary language acquisition. Without knowing the similarities and differences of cultures, people may fail to achieve effective communication, and even face mistakes or failures in intercommunication. Therefore, as teachers impart language knowledge and skills to students, they should disseminate international culture knowledge, make a comparison between Chinese culture and western culture, perform a cultural recognition teaching, and realize an organic integration of language teaching and cultural teaching, improving students' insight into the culture, and training their intercultural communication ability. Just as what Mr. Zuoliang Wang says: "Without knowing the social culture in certain language, nobody can master the language completely."

3.3 College English teaching materials and contents are lack of timeliness and interests in a sense. The teaching materials and teaching approaches should realize a "three dimensional" and deep development, building provincial or national elite courses, and achieving students' autonomous learning.

The design of textbooks restricts the class teaching model and impacts students' learning model and learning effects to a great degree. The composition of textbooks should follow the principles of modern language teaching theories. According to Table 6, the satisfaction degree is only 70%, which indicates that the structure of College English serial textbooks needs to be adjusted further, improving the timeliness and interests of contents. Therefore, it is urgent to compose a brand-new edition for College English textbooks, and perfect the three-dimensional web-based teaching platform. Then, these approaches are in accordance with the training of students' English application ability.

Therefore, textbooks and teaching approaches should realize a deepening development, building provincial and national elite courses, applying web-based courses, and achieving students' autonomous learning. The *College English Curriculum Requirements* regulate: "The new model should be built on modern information technology, particularly network technology, so that English language teaching will be free from the constraints of time or place and geared towards students' individualized and autonomous learning. The new model should combine the principles of practicality, knowledge and interest, and mobilize the initiative of both teachers and students." The perfect of "three dimensional textbooks" can benefit the comprehensive application of "web-based course" and realize the organic integration of "class teaching" and "web-based teaching". By this way, it will be easier to accomplish teaching management and evaluation. The College English Course in North China Institute of Science & Technology has been selected as a provincial elite course, what means a significant progress of College English teaching reform.

Therefore, it is urgent to modernize the teaching facilities for English education. Based on the Internet and school net, we should build up web-based College English course, realize the net teaching approach and digital teaching information, apply the credit system, offer students for optional course modules, create individualized learning environment, and improve the English teaching effect. Meanwhile, we should make up credit standards and guidance for English course, taking students' initial levels and final levels as main indexes to evaluating their English levels. Besides, students can choose the learning time and courses freely and adjust their learning strategies in time. By this way, we can inspire students to adopt multiple approaches to improve their English application competence.

3.4 Students fail to make up effective learning strategy and lack of initiatives of learning English. They could not evaluate their English levels properly. The English teaching should realize a spanning development that "integrates with strategy teaching", training and adjusting students' learning strategies.

Learners are subjects of language learning. The absence of learning strategy and initiatives, and improper self

evaluation will inevitably affect the learning effect. Morrow (1981) says that an important component of language teaching is the positive participation of learners.

According to Table 7, more than 60% of students do not devote themselves to English exercises and lack of initiatives in class. More than 60% students could not make self evaluations properly and seldom adjust their learning strategies. More than 70% of students just accept English knowledge passively in class and seldom speak in class. Nearly 90% of students seldom join in English secondary classes. More than 60% of students do not prepare for new classes. And about 70% of students do not review former knowledge.

Therefore, the English teaching should realize a spanning development that “integrates with strategy teaching”, training and adjusting students’ learning strategy. O’Malley & Chamot think that “Strategy teaching should combine with the language teaching. Teachers should not impart strategies only. Strategy teaching should be direct. Then, learners can better understand the contents and application of strategies, which can help them to employ relevant strategies in similar environment.” O’Malley & Chamot define the learning strategy as “the special thought and behavior used by learners to understand, learn, and memorize new information”. Or, in other words, the learning strategy is certain special method and approach used by learners in learning language to acquire, store, and process information. Therefore, in order to obtain effective learning strategy, amounts of trainings are necessary. Meanwhile, to emphasize on information feedback and evaluation on the effects of strategy teaching and help students to realize self supervision, self evaluation, and self adjustment can improve the learning effects. Just as what says by Andrew D. Cohen (1990), a linguist, “The success of language learning is determined by learners themselves, the individual factors, and their abilities of making best use of learning opportunities.”

4. Conclusion

The *College English Curriculum Requirements* regulate: “The objective of College English is to develop students’ ability to use English in an all-round way, especially in listening and speaking, so that in their future work and social interactions they will be able to exchange information effectively through both spoken and written channels, and the same time they will be able to enhance their ability to study independently and improve their cultural quality so as to meet the needs of China’s social development and international exchanges.” Generally speaking, College English teaching usually emphasizes on imparting language knowledge and language skills but neglect the cultivation of English application ability. In authors’ opinion, College English teaching experiences two reforms. Now it is the time of the third reform for new breakthrough and improvement. The Ministry of Education extremely supports the construction of national and provincial elite courses. Therefore, all English educators and teachers should explore the problems in College English teaching, change traditional teaching thoughts and ideas, take modern education and teaching theories as guidance, regard reform of teaching contents, teaching model, and teaching approach as breakthroughs, start from training students’ intercultural communication ability, emphasize on cultivating students’ English application abilities, especially the listening and speaking competence, and focus on training students’ effective learning strategies and humanistic qualities. Supported by the three dimensional textbooks and web-based courses, teachers can create a nice environment for learning English, improving College English teaching effects and quality to a great degree, realizing a significant achievement, and meeting the requirements for China’s social and economic development better.

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Table 1. The average time used for learning English everyday

Half an hour	One hour	Two hours	Three hours	Four hours	More hours on weekend
15% (30 students)	49% (98 students)	26% (52 students)	2.5% (5 students)	1% (2 students)	6.5% (13students)

Table 2. The questionnaire for College English listening and speaking teaching

English teachers' education and teaching conception	Need to be changed	Computer knowledge and application competence needs to be improved		Familiarize with and make best use of multi-media education technologies	
	50%	40%		60%	
English listening and speaking teaching approach	Recorder	Language lab for watching and listening		Multi-media language lab	
	85%	10%		5%	
English listening and speaking self-learning approach	Mono-player	Repeater	Language lab is available for spare time		No training
	67%	13%	5%		15%
English listening and speaking training approach	Join in class discussion actively	Language lab for watching and listening		Multi-media language lab: group discussion, communication, and appreciating films.	
	26%	10%		5%	
Psychological barriers in English study	Traditional teaching and Chinese thinking	Be negative in class		Multi-media teaching. Rich contents, various approaches, and strong interests.	
	85%	10%		5%	
Language lab (for listening, for watching and listening)	Satisfaction	Common		Dissatisfaction	
	75%	10%		15%	
Multi-media language lab	Satisfaction	Common		Dissatisfaction	
	25%	45%		30%	
Language experiment teaching materials	Rich and perfect	Relatively rich		In serious short	
	25%	5%		70%	
Language lab utilization and management	Orderly management	Disordered management		Improve management	
	35%	30%		35%	

Table 3. College English learning strategy

Main English-learning activities	Memorize words, learn texts.	Focus on listening and speaking	Extracurricular reading	Exercises after classes	Model tests
	46% (92 students)	33% (66 students)	15% (30 students)	5% (10 students)	1% (2 students)
English teachers' preference for teaching contents	Impart language knowledge	Emphasize on language application	Skill training	Impart knowledge and train skills	
	26% (52 students)	29.5% (59 students)	11.5% (23 students)	33% (66 students)	
Know the culture and background in English teaching	Lots of	More	Some	Few	
	4% (8 students)	39% (78 students)	48% (96 students)	9% (18 students)	
English teachers' primary task	Impart language knowledge	Emphasize on exercises	Class discussion	Guidance and answering	
	57.5% (115 students)	18% (36 students)	10% (20 students)	14.5% (29 students)	
Master communication skills by learning English	Lots of	More	Some	Few	
	4% (8 students)	41% (82 students)	50.5% (101 students)	4.5% (9 students)	
English learning preference	Language knowledge		Language application	Language communication	
	18% (36 students)		33.5% (67 students)	48.5% (97 students)	

Table 4. College English teaching model

Main English teaching approach	Textbook, blackboard, and chalk	Add record and video	Multi-media teaching
	65% (130 students)	23% (46 students)	12% (24 students)
Create English teaching environment	Group discussion in class	Add new figures for introducing background knowledge	Students' spot play
	31% (62 students)	21% (42 students)	48% (96 students)
Preference for English teaching model	Duck-fed teaching, traditional and unchangeable	Diversified and enlightening	Intercommunication
	12% (24 students)	51% (102 students)	37% (74 students)
Preference for English classroom teaching design	Teaching all the time	Take the teacher as the center	Take students as the center
	6.5% (13 students)	49% (98 students)	44.5% (89 students)

Table 5. College English teaching's guiding effect

Pass CET 4 and CET 6	Emphasize on pass rate		Relatively emphasize		Have nothing to do with teachers	
	24.5% (49 students)		56% (112 students)		19.5% (39students)	
Pass PRETCO	Emphasize on pass rate		Relatively emphasize		Have nothing to do with teachers	
	46% (92students)		46% (92students)		8% (16students)	
Objective of learning English	Pass course exam	Pass CET 4, CET 6	Pass PRETCO	Job-hunting after graduation	Interpersonal competence	
	5.5% (11students)	25.5% (51students)	7.5% (15students)	31.5% (63students)	30%(60students)	
Main model for learning English	Memorize words and sentences		Lots of after-school reading	Amounts of questions and tests	Emphasize on practical use	
	29.5% (59students)		25% (50students)	0.5% (1students)	45% (90students)	

Table 6. College English textbooks and the contents

College English textbooks	Strong college character	Weak college character	Stray away from practical life
	57.5% (115students)	38.5% (77students)	4% (8students)
College English teaching contents	Full of timeliness and interests	Lack of timeliness and interests	Seldom concern cultural knowledge
	54% (108students)	30% (60students)	16% (32students)
Whether College English textbooks and teaching contents help to train the intercommunication ability of students	Very helpful	Helpful basically	Almost unhelpful
	11% (22students)	69% (138students)	20% (40students)
Whether students feel satisfied with or interested in College English textbooks and teaching contents	Very satisfied	Satisfied basically	Dissatisfied
	7% (14students)	72.5% (145students)	20.5% (41students)

Table 7. Students' attitudes and approaches in learning College English

Plan for English learning	Plan for learning at spare time	Unclear plan for learning	No plan for learning	
	61.5% (123students)	33.5% (67students)	5% (10students)	
Constraints for English learning ability	Self conditions	Teachers' levels	Teaching environment	
	61% (122students)	11.5% (23students)	27.5% (55students)	
Learning state in class	Passive	Initiative	Negative	
	57.5% (115students)	34% (68students)	8.5% (17students)	
Self evaluation on English learning	Often	Sometimes	Seldom	
	21% (42students)	26% (52students)	53% (106students)	
Reasons for class discussion and answering questions	Teaching model	Be afraid of others' teases	Few chances	Lack of interests
	35% (70students)	12.5% (25students)	22.5% (45students)	30% (60students)
Participate in English secondary class	Often	Sometimes	Seldom	Never
	11.5% (23students)	47.5% (95students)	32% (64students)	9% (18students)
Attitudes toward English exercises and whether finish them or not	Many, timely	Common, passive	Bad, copy	Indifference, undone
	44.5% (89students)	51.5% (103students)	2.5% (5students)	1.5% (3students)
Preparation	Careful preparation	General preparation	Occasional preparation	No preparation
	21% (42students)	39%(78students)	19%(38students)	21%(42students)
Phase review	Often	Sometimes	Generally	No
	22%(44students)	38.5%(77students)	33.5%(67students)	6%(12students)