Difficulties and Solutions of English Teachers in the Reform of Blended Teaching

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Abstract. Various kinds of blended teaching modes, such as flipped classroom, MOOC teaching, SPOC teaching, etc. have entered the classroom and become a fashion nowadays. This paper discusses the main difficulties faced by English teachers in the process of blended teaching reform and correspondingly provide some implications and suggestions with the hope to help promote the English teaching reform.

1. Introduction

On the basis of traditional teaching technology and modern information technology, information-based teaching establishes technology-based teaching mode or information-based learning mode [1]. At the same time, with the rapid development of information technology and network technology, blended teaching came into being and continues to develop. A large number of studies over the past 20 years have shown that blended teaching can indeed achieve better teaching effect than face-to-face teaching in the classroom, and it has obvious effects in improving students' academic performance and passing rate, improving students' satisfaction and improving teaching efficiency. Researchers, teaching practitioners, government and educational institutions have reached a consensus that blended teaching will become "New Normal State of Education" in the future [2].

At present, all kinds of blended teaching modes, such as flipped classroom, MOOC teaching and SPOC teaching, have entered the classroom, but the number of these English classes is not too large, which shows that many English teachers might face many challenges during the reform of blended teaching. Based on investigations of teachers and students involved in blended teaching and learning, this paper will discuss the main difficulties faced by English teachers and then provide some corresponding implications and suggestions with the hope to help promote the English teaching reform.

2. Difficulties in the reform of blended teaching

According to a survey carried out in a college, the challenges English teachers claimed to face in the reform of blended teaching mainly include their lack of proficiency in applying information technology, lack of theoretical guidance on how to integrate technology and curriculum, and students' poor performance in autonomous learning. In addition, they found it hard to afford the energy and time in preparing lessons suitable for blended teaching mode.

2.1 Lack of proficiency in application of information technology

Although most English teachers are fully aware of the trend of informationization and have heard of or are convinced of the advantages of information-based teaching, their anxiety about technology is still widespread. Some teachers are not good at making multimedia courseware yet. When participating in various kinds of foreign language micro-course contests, some teachers rely heavily on professional technicians to present their teaching design. The number of teachers who can truly complete a micro-course independently is quite small, and there are even fewer teachers who have

the courage to try various online teaching modes. It is not surprising that lack of proficiency in applying information technology makes some teachers hesitate to be involved in blended teaching reform.

2.2 Lack of theoretical guidance on the integration of technology and curriculum

Blended teaching practice in China has been developing vigorously, but the related research is relatively few, obviously lagging behind the pace of teaching practice [3]. The theoretical basis for information-based teaching mainly includes cognitive theory, humanism theory and constructivism. However, there is still no widely-accepted rules or methods to integrate information technology and disciplines, and most of the traditional teaching theory can not meet the needs of educational informationization. Teachers must explore for themselves in the process of blended teaching practice, which inevitably leads to a lack of motivation from time to time.

2.3 Students' insufficient ability on autonomous learning

According to the author's survey based on a questionnaire, about 73% of the teachers investigated believe that students' weak autonomous learning ability is the biggest challenge they face in the process of blended teaching. It's a common phenomenon that English learners in Chinese universities have quite low autonomous learning ability [4], which is mainly manifested in poor learning consciousness, poor desire or perseverance for active learning, and weak self-monitoring awareness and ability.

2.4 Lack of energy and time in preparing lessons suitable for blending teaching mode

At present, English teachers in many domestic universities are required to teach 16 to 22 lessons a week. Besides, they need to undertake tasks of research and complete the goal of publishing papers. The time they may afford in teaching reform seems little.

However, in blended teaching reform, teachers not only need to establish a resource bank to support online teaching and redesign their lessons which are quite different from those in traditional teaching mode, but also need to give timely guidance and supervision for students' online learning. It means teachers involved in blended teaching reform should spend much more time and energy. And for teachers who are not skilled in the application of information technology, the situation is even worse. Many teachers will easily be disappointed and frustrated when the effect of blended teaching is lower than expected and when the proportion of teaching input to output is out of balance, which may lead to their withdrawal halfway.

3. Tips for blended teaching reformers

To help teachers overcome difficulties in the reform of blended teaching, the following four tips may be worth considering.

3.1 Choose a decent software or learning platform

Information technology is the general term for all information management technologies and data processing technologies. With the rapid development of information technology, its wide application in the field of life has fundamentally changed the way of human life, fundamentally affecting our education and teaching methods. Therefore, information-based teaching ability has become one of the necessary abilities of teachers in the era of e-education. However, this does not mean that teachers should master technology, but that teachers should have the ability to use information technology to design, implement and monitor teaching.

With the development of mobile learning platforms, they are designed to help teachers to solve the problem of "direct" mastery of information technology. Teachers only need to be familiar with the interface and functions of the platform as those of a new mobile phone, so they can easily realize the high-level application of information technology in teaching, thus implementing blended teaching.

For teachers, these mobile learning platforms are easy-to-use educational software based on

mobile phones and computers. They are close to the teaching reality and have various functions, including basic functions such as notification, check-in, upload and download, testing, voting, etc. They also have special functions such as bullet screen interaction, mobile screen projection to realize content display and sharing. Teachers do not need to invest a lot of time in learning technology, but only need to be familiar with those functions and learn to make use of each function to serve the blended teaching. In other words, mobile learning platforms, such as Chaoxing and Lanmoyun, can help teachers to easily realize information-based teaching, help teachers to effectively realize the role of knowledge implementers, learning instructors and activity organizers, and give full play to students' enthusiasm, initiative and creativity as learning subjects.

3.2 Explore approaches to fully integrate technology and curriculum

Although there is no complete theoretical system of integration of technology and curriculum, the teaching concept of "student-centered" has been established, and the basic laws of teaching and learning remain unchanged. Therefore, we need to make use of the existing technical means to inherit the essence of traditional teaching better, which means to realize what can not be done before by means of technology and thus to actively explore the teaching mode of deep integration of technology and curriculum with the aim to cultivate students effectively and to make teaching process flexible.

In the process of exploration and applying information technology, teachers are advised to follow several basic principles: goal principle, applicability principle and openness principle. First of all, teachers should bear in mind that information technology is always a tool for teaching and learning, or say, a tool to help and optimize students' learning. Therefore, when using mobile learning/teaching platforms, teachers should avoid merely scrambling for new technology or new functions, and should always be guided by advanced teaching concepts, while devoting themselves to improving teaching efficiency, teaching quality and talent quality. Secondly, the goal that teachers should pursue is to use information technology properly to serve teaching instead of to use as much technology as possible. Before choosing and using a certain function, teachers should fully consider whether the function is applicable to the nature of the curriculum, the content of classroom teaching, the characteristics of students, etc. In other words, the functions used must be able to help solve, or more effectively solve problems that traditional classroom can not solve or difficult to effectively solve. Finally, teachers should keep an open mind, which means to innovate boldly and try to explore different modes of blended teaching instead of following suits all the time.

3.3 Make improving learners' autonomous learning ability a goal in blended teaching

The weakness of learners' low autonomous learning ability is considered by teachers as the biggest difficulty in their reform of blended teaching. But if no blended teaching reform is to carried out, will learners' autonomous learning ability naturally be improved? In other words, whether a blended teaching reform is carried out or not, improving students' autonomous learning ability should always be one of the teaching objectives. In a survey carried out at the end of one semester's blended teaching practice, when 160 students answered "What knowledge or ability do you want most to acquire through learning the course", 68.1% of them chose "the method and ability of self-learning", second only to "curriculum-related knowledge" (72%). This shows that students themselves are aware of the importance of autonomous learning ability, and they look forward to more guidance and help from teachers.

Liu Yi et al. (2018) [5] investigated the beliefs of college English teachers in learner autonomy through 481 quantitative questionnaires and 10 teachers' qualitative interviews. It was found that although teachers affirmed the role of teachers in the teaching of autonomous learning, they were not clear about how to improve learner autonomy in classroom practice. The measures they took were mostly confined to teaching methods such as group or cooperative learning, without considering integrating autonomous learning into classroom practice such as teaching evaluation, teaching objective determination, content selection and classroom activity selection. The researchers appeal to foreign language teachers and educational researchers to pay more attention to the exploration of how to improve learner autonomy in classroom practice, and to explore how to provide effective and operable teaching methods in specific learning and teaching environments.

Taking Chaoxing Platform as an example, it can generate teaching reports recording the whole teaching process, including each student's classroom performance, video browsing records, homework completion, chapter test scores and other learning behaviors and results, and each student can also view their own learning records. In blended teaching practice, teachers can use these functions of the platform to reform evaluation system and establish a formative evaluation system, which can objectively reflect students' efforts and learning results during the whole learning process, especially those outside the class. By setting different weight on different learning behaviors, teachers can effectively apply an evaluation system to guide and promote students' self-learning behaviors.

3.4 Cooperate with team members for gradual improvement

Faced with insufficient energy and time, foreign language teachers should adapt themselves to the characteristics of the rapid development of information and digitization, establish the concept and confidence of lifelong learning, actively step out of the predicament of "self-survival" and seek peer support and teamwork [6]. Teachers can take part in the blended teaching reform by means of cooperative teaching, on-line guidance in different periods or mutual teaching assistants. In addition, the reform is not achieved overnight. When there are many problems that need to be paid attention simultaneously, teachers do not need to make strictly balanced efforts and solve all the problems at the same time. Instead, when facing different challenges, teachers should be aware that priorities can be determined according to teaching objectives and the pace of reform can be gradually promoted.

4. Conclusion

It has been proved that the efficiency of blended teaching, thanks to information technology, is obviously better than that of traditional teaching. Various MOOC and mobile learning platforms provide opportunities for teachers to promote information-based teaching through innovating teaching modes and methods. However, the success of teaching reform necessarily requires teachers to make efforts to overcome difficulties and get out of the predicament. To this end, teachers must establish modern teaching concepts, scientific information technology concepts and better information literacy, adhere to lifelong learning, and constantly innovate in teaching. In addition, teachers should be good at collecting data, analyzing data and making full use of data in teaching, so that the teaching process and teaching design become a dynamic and evolving process. What's more, the impact of different external factors on the enthusiasm and effectiveness of teachers' participation in blended teaching can not be ignored, which include hardware conditions, especially the network support, related management policies and so on.

We hope that more English teachers and teaching teams will join the tide of blended teaching reform and explore more scientific and effective teaching modes, create more equal, enlightening, sharing and harmonious teaching and learning environment for learners, and create a teaching structure, in which both the teacher and students bring into full play their initiative.

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