Teaching Reform on Constructing Creative English "Golden Course" in Private Colleges

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ABSTRACT

In order to construct the "Golden Course" characterized by high order, creativity and challenge, this paper takes the course of Advanced English as an example and presents a series of teaching reform in terms of teaching content, use of textbook and students' learning outcomes respectively. Based on the literature review and in light of the training objectives and students' language proficiency unique to private colleges, Advanced English course realizes its creativity by means of updating teaching content, reconstructing textbooks and designing individualized learning assignments. Hopefully, this paper can provide a recommendable experience and teaching model for similar courses in private colleges.

Keywords: Golden Course, creativity, teaching content, textbook, learning outcome

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the Ministry of Education initiated the "Six Excellences and One Top-notch" plan and implemented the construction of "Golden Courses" in 2016, universities of various levels have been committed to creating "Golden Courses" and eliminating "Unqualified Courses", marking the beginning of a new round of teaching reform. In the same year, Wu Yan, director of the Higher Education Department, expounded the characteristics inherent in "Golden Courses", namely, higher order, innovation and challenge, which provided a theoretical framework for teaching reform. According to the survey results [1], English majors of private colleges expressed their dissatisfaction with college courses regarding its cultivation of "students' independent learning". Therefore, it is an urgent task for private colleges to launch English teaching reform. Given the comparatively low language proficiency and learning motivation of students in private colleges, it is advisable that teaching design be updated and innovated, embodying training objectives and tailored to students, thus exploring distinctive English "Golden Course" and blazing a new trail appropriate for private colleges.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Wu Yan, innovation of "Golden Courses" entails three aspects, namely, teaching content should be updated and reflective of the times, teaching delivery be advanced and interactive and learning outcomes be inquisitive and individualized. Classroom teaching activities should be student-centered, focusing on tapping students' learning potential, enhancing their social responsibility, innovation and problem-solving ability.

Wen Qiufang [2] believes that for liberal arts students, a more feasible requirement is "innovation in learning", namely, students acquire a strong interest and curiosity in their unknown fields, apply creative thinking, raise doubts and write critical articles about what they know. Students' innovative learning can be reflected in their potential for academic research, awareness to identify problems, ability to acquire professional knowledge, logical reasoning and research methods[3]. Zhang Wenzhong[4] listed "individualized learning and seminar" as the fundamental course of innovation, and believed that individual differences among students can be employed as teaching resources in terms of interest, learning ability and outcomes." "Only when students' individual differences are genuinely emphasized and fully exploited, and their interests serve as the motivation for learning, can we expect students' active learning and accumulation, their innovation of seeking new and difference, which, in turn, may be the source of inspiration and creation". When students' personalized learning interest drives their creative thinking, they can delve into their content, study independently and search for literature and resources, and give play to their learning initiative. Zhong Weihe [5] also contends, "Individual differences will gain increasing attention in teaching". It is advisable for teachers to encourage students' novelty and spontaneity, offer individual-tailored tutoring and help them transform their interest into personalized learning outcomes.

Teaching reform is not so much about updating teaching contents or improving teaching design as about teachers' awareness of their shifting role from stage actors to behind-screen directors, building a student-centered stage where students' emotional and social needs can be satisfied, their personalized learning outcomes displayed, their self-confidence and a sense of accomplishment cultivated, hence the ultimate goal of students' self-actualization. According to the survey, despite the limited English proficiency of English majors in private colleges,

most students still acquire deep learning motivation. Teachers should guide students accordingly, arouse their potential interest in learning by elaborately designing teaching activities and assigning personalized tasks based on their cognitive literacy. For students with academic potential, teachers can cultivate their academic interests and encourage independent learning, so as to maximize their learning results.

3. PRACTICE OF TEACHING REFORM

3.1. Updating Teaching Content

The innovation of Advanced English Course is mainly reflected in the supplement of materials to textbook and case study. The choice of teaching content is not restricted to the textbook itself; instead, sufficient up-to-date language materials are provided as input. Therefore, teaching content varies from year to year despite the same teacher. In addition, text analysis is not limited to the article itself. Besides in-depth exploration of the theme and cultural connotation, the teacher also relates to social reality and students' personal experience to launch case studies.

Teachers should enhance sensitivity towards text materials and be good at capturing the convergence points of discourse content closely related to social issues or student experiences, and design scenario questions accordingly, organize group discussions, and encourage students' critical thinking. The optimal sources for case study are controversial and debatable social concerns that keep pace with the times. Students are required to compare, illustrate, challenge and justify, which will boost their critical thinking skills such as analysis, reasoning and demonstrate some social phenomena, and develop their critical skills of analysis, reasoning and evaluation.

In this process, students are not only text decoders or meaning constructors, but also analyzers and users of the text, equipped with clear logic and justified interpretation of social issues, in-depth analysis of social phenomena, swiftly changing point of view, alternatively applying various critical skills to observe and perceive problems, thus obtaining core skills of critical thinking such as logic, profundity and flexibility. Meanwhile, students have access to the essence of text materials, which is not genteel or artistic works beyond their appreciation, but down-to-earth works mirroring their personal life and social reality, where they can find traces of themselves and obtain philosophical wisdom. In this way, it triggers the interaction between students and texts and makes possible resonance of mind, thus stimulating students' learning motivation while satisfying their curiosity and thirst for knowledge, shaping their uprightness and positive values.

For example, E. M. Foster's masterpiece My Wood begins with his own experience, illustrating a series of psychological changes after he bought a small wood. The author discusses the psychological effects of material property and possession on people, including "enormously stout, endlessly avaricious, pseudo-creative and intensely selfish". Regarding the author's second point, the teacher throws several questions, "Do you agree with the author? Do you have similar experience?" "Are you satisfied with what you have? Do you need something else to match the Fancy dress?" which initiate heated discussion among students. They propose, "To conform to the classic style, I also need to buy the fine jewelry and the luxury handbag. And the shabby home is no longer the right place for a lady wearing such a fancy dress." Hence the conclusion that "People will never be satisfied. They always want more." which perfectly explains and echoes the author's claim of "endlessly avaricious", thus deeply impressing students. Given the perfect timing, the teacher takes Global Shopping Spree and Black Friday as cases of study, ask students to analyze the underlying causes of "consumerism" and discuss the following topic: Do possessions make you happy? In group discussion, students knock their ideas against each other until they spark: some students apply the mentality of "buying a new life and filling the vacancy" -what they learn in Unit 6- to interpret "consumerism" ; some quote the punch line of Oscar Wilde, "There are two tragedies in one' life. One is not getting what one wants; the other is getting it.", pointing out the piling of large quantities of items not only occupy space but also give rise to people's selection syndrome, involving them in frustration of failure to afford better stuff; some explain the concept of "minimalism" after watching the supplementary TED lecture "A Rich Life with Less Stuff", calling on everyone to dispose unnecessary items, lower material gains and sustain a low-carbon lifestyle; still some initiate an in-depth research by means of questionnaire and semi-structured interview to identify sources of students' satisfaction, such as achievement of one's goal, the pleasure of helping others, whole-hearted devotion to one's dream, company of beloved family and bosom friends, etc., realizing that people are overwhelmed with endless hollowness and trouble after the initial satisfaction brought by material possession, thus refraining from conspicuous consumption or hedonism and shaping positive values.

In the case study, not only do students deepen their understanding of the author's claims in the text by relating to personal experience and social reality, but also they are equipped with the ability to synthesize knowledge, apply it to practice, search for relevant materials and collect and analyze data, which greatly enhance their multi-tasking and problem-solving. Coincidentally, the writing topic of TEM-8 (test for English majors band 8) in 2019 happened to be "Consumerism", on which students could elaborate with their insightful views after the in-depth discussion in class and after-class research.

3.2. Deconstruction and Reconstruction of Textbook

As to how to optimize the use of textbook, it is advisable to adjust the framework and sequence flexibly according to actual teaching instead of rigidly following the inherent structure of textbook. For example, in genre-oriented teaching, the teacher will synthesize texts with the same genre, which facilitates students' master of the writing characteristics unique to this genre. Alternatively, the teacher can break the barriers between textbooks targeted for different grades or majors, integrate articles with similar themes and encourage students' comparative analysis.

Take Unit 3 Book 5 A Hanging as an example. The theme of the text is death. The teacher supplements teaching materials with similar themes: Discus Thrower from Unit 8 Book 4 and Graceful Hands from College English, and assigns students with comparative analysis in terms of scene description, characterization, author's tone and writing strategy. Another example includes Beauty in unit 11 and Clothes Makes the Man -Uneasy in unit 12. Both authors are female and both deal with the issue of gender stereotype despite different perspectives. Students are required to compare and analyze writing motivation and points of view. To further explore the theme of stereotype, the teacher asks students to relate to The Fourth of July in unit 1 and Severe Bias in unit 12 of Book 4, analyze its symptoms in different fields and underlying roots and come up with recommendations.

Likewise, when approaching Bards of Internet in unit 2 Book 6, the teacher associates it with Alienation of Internet in unit 3 Book 4 and Technology in Reverse in the first edition of Book 6, and encourage students to compare the similarities and differences regarding the authors' viewpoints, and discuss how technology shapes their lives based on their own experiences. When dealing with texts which are philosophical, like How to Grow Old in unit 9, it is also advisable to supplement input materials such as Virtues of Growing Older in unit 7 Book 2 and Youth, a classical reading piece for students' comparative analysis.

3.3. Individualized Learning Outcomes

3.3.1. Learning Portfolio

Student's portfolios can record either in paper or electronically students' learning outcomes during a particular period of time in chronological sequence, which enables teachers to track down students' learning progress and offer immediate feedback. Also, portfolios offer students access to their longitudinal progress and gain confidence and sense of achievement. In Advanced English, students' portfolios consist of preview assignment, vocabulary bank, worksheet, group work, mind map, writing, translation & writing workshop, quiz for each unit, project, book report and course reflection, varying in

format and content, to display a panoramic of student's learning process and outcomes.

3.3.2. Mind Map

One of the most challenging aspects of language teaching is how to present the complex and abstract text structure and logic between paragraphs clearly and accurately. Visualized illustration of structural logic works as the optimal solution to the problem. When the teacher asks students to illustrate textual structure and construct abstract logic models with various vivid mind maps, students take it as an opportunity to demonstrate their versatility. Some students show strength at hand-drawing, from bubble map to bridge map, from tree map to bracket map, from flow chart to arrow map, all of which are well-crafted, delicate and logical. Therefore, students' mastery of structural logic and their individualized outcomes are embodied in these mind maps.

3.3.3. Autonomous Learning Chart

Wang Shouren and Chen Xinren once described English majors as the following, "They lack problem awareness, feel reluctant to raise doubts and not sure what to ask. Even they do squeeze some questions; they are no impressive or inspiring ones. They habitually take everything for granted, rarely speculating on why things are this way instead of that way. Most students tend to accept what they are told or sold passively without the courage to challenge authority". Zhang Wenzhong contended, "Creativity depends on problem awareness, which entails deep learning and pondering, and is never attainable with superficial learning". According to Paul& Elder [6], "To conceive and formulate fruitful questions, we must call upon both creativity and criticality."

The essence of language teaching lies in "focusing on text", so detailed analysis of text constitutes the significant link of English teaching. In order to boost students' autonomous learning and cultivate their sensitivity of inquiry, the teacher designs a text-specific autonomous learning chart with blank columns for students to raise their own questions in terms of lexical choice, syntactic pattern, logic between paragraphs and textual comprehension respectively. Students' questions are comprehensive and cover a wide range of dimensions, including subtle difference between synonyms, emotional color of diction, figurative speeches employed in sentences, logical relation between paragraphs, difficult points regarding grammar and translation, generic features and author's tone, etc. Following individual study is group discussion where students present and exchange their findings and confusion in class. In this process, the teacher creates an environment in which students' thirst for knowledge can be fully stimulated. Driven by these questions, they can give play of their learning initiative,

think independently and construct meaning together. However, the seemingly relaxing class atmosphere is anything but laissez-faire; instead, the teacher should take the responsibility of inspiring, guiding, organizing and responding to students' confusion, therefore helping students wrap up the process of inquiry and deep learning.

3.3.4. Role Play

Students born after 1995 or even 2000 tend to demonstrate a strong desire for showing and socialization who are eager to communicate with peers and gain a sense of belonging and identity in social interaction. Therefore, when dealing with narratives or dramatic fictions, the teacher will ask students to adapt the text into a script suitable for their role play. Students put themselves in the author's shoe, think within his/her logic, select and manipulate actions and craft an open ending. Besides, they prepare their own props, polish lines, arrange the stage, and finally wow their audience with brilliant performance. Play script writing and role play can develop students' empathy and curiosity, so that they can connect their small world and limited life experience with the kaleidoscopic world, and cultivate their aesthetic and critical thinking.

3.3.5. Video Blog

Another characteristic of contemporary college students is their open-mindedness, willingness to try new things and quick learning. With the viral development of social media, many students are tech-savvy and flexible in software operation. They are eager to share and obtain acknowledgement from their peers. Accordingly, the teacher assigns student-tailored group work when approaching the theme of technology in unit 2: students are supposed to video record their overdependence on social media (such as Wechat) and electronic devices (such as cell phone), and put forward feasible recommendations to reduce their reliance on both, thus improving students' problem-solving. The highlighted contrast of before and after effectively triggers students' reflection and calls on students to use cell phones wisely and moderately, hence maximizing their distant-learning efficiency. The Vlogs submitted by two groups are directed and acted by students themselves. When displayed in class, the two Vlogs take the whole class by storm with their superb acting, professional cutting & editing, smooth transition, focused content and well-matched subtitles.

3.3.6. *Public Account*

Another assignment that incarnates students' adeptness in technology is setting up a public account named Paradise for Learners' Critical Thinking, which centers on the theme of each text, is updated after each unit, and regularly maintained. Take unit 2 Bards of Internet as an example,

which is constituted by six "ones" related to the theme of technology: one song, Daddy's Car composed by artificial intelligence developed by Sony corporation, which reflects AI's first attempt to compose and its deep learning; one picture, from the cover of Amusing Ourselves to Death (Chinese version), where a family of four sit in front of television, brainless, a metaphor that flooding TV programs deprive human beings of independent and deep thinking; one quote, from Mc Luhan, a famous Canadian media expert, "We shape tools and thereafter tools shape us.", which provokes students' thinking of the paradox of technology; one TED lecture, titled Connected But Still Lonely, which explores how technological media shape people's lifestyle secretly and unconsciously; one TV drama, Black Mirror, which discusses effects of technology on humanity from multiple perspectives, such as bonding, affection and human-robot relationship. Students wrap up each "One" section with summary and their critical thinking, which could be regarded as a successful attempt.

4. RESULTS

According to the survey of course feedback, among the 97 English juniors who take the course Advanced English, up to 92.8% express their satisfaction with the quality of this course; 78.3% of respondents agree or strongly agree that they "enjoyed taking this course".

57.Generally, I am satisfied with the quality of this course.		
Choice	No.	Proportion
Strongly disagree	0	0%
Disagree	1	1.03%
Not sure	5	5.15%
Agree	51	52.58%
Strongly agree	39	40.21%
(Blank)	1	1.03%
Sample No.	97	

Figure 1. Data of Survey Question 57

61.Generally, I enjoyed taking this course.		
Choice	No.	Proportion
Strongly disagree	1	1.03%
Disagree	2	2.06%
Not sure	18	18.56%
Agree	47	48.45%
Strongly agree	29	29.9%
Sample No.	97	

Figure 2. Data of Survey Question 61

In summary, teachers should constantly update teaching content, flexibly reconstruct the textbook, and facilitate students in producing individualized learning outcomes. When it comes to teaching content, centering on the theme of text, Advanced English keeps pace with the times and adopts the slates controversial issues as sources for case study. As to how to use textbook, Advanced English transcends the conventional barrier between textbooks, and synthesize texts of same genres and similar themes for sake of students' comparative analysis. Last but not least,

Advanced English pays much attention to students' emotional needs, especially their desire for expression and socialization, and encourages students' tangible, trackable and individualized learning outcomes, thus promoting their confidence and sense of achievement.

5. CONCLUSION

To conclude, this paper takes the course of Advanced English as an example and presents a series of teaching reform in terms of teaching content, use of textbooks and students' learning outcomes respectively to construct an innovative top-quality English class. Based on literature review and students' language proficiency distinctive to private colleges, the Advanced English course realizes its creativity by means of updating teaching content, reconstructing textbooks and designing individualized learning assignments. Hopefully, this paper can provide a recommendable experience and teaching model for similar courses in private colleges.

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