



A Study on Public English Teaching in Higher Vocational Colleges under the CBI Concept

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Abstract. By analyzing the current situation of public English teaching and learning in higher vocational colleges, this paper proposes integrating content-based instruction with language teaching to give full play to the learning advantages of vocational college students, stimulate their learning initiative, and enable them to acquire language naturally in the process of gaining knowledge, thereby achieving optimal learning outcomes. Furthermore, this study proposes pathways of public English teaching reform in higher vocational colleges.

Keywords: content-based instruction, public English teaching, higher colleges

1 Introduction

With the development of China's economic construction and the demands of education, Public English course has become one of the compulsory courses in higher vocational colleges. Both teachers and students generally devote considerable time energy to English teaching and learning, yet the outcomes are often unsatisfactory. Prominent problems are summarized as follows:

1.1 Students' Weak English Foundation

The student sources in higher vocational colleges consist of graduates from technical secondary schools, vocational high schools and regular senior high schools, resulting in uneven and generally weak English foundations. Restricted by the overall curriculum arrangement of talent training programs in vocational colleges, English course hours have been continuously reduced, forming a teaching dilemma of insufficient learning time and heavy learning tasks.

1.2 Outdated Textbooks and Monotonous Teaching Methods

Most public English textbooks in higher vocational colleges are outdated and lack novelty. Teachers focus excessively on vocabulary memorization and grammar ex-

planation while neglecting the teaching of professional English. This teaching mode separates language knowledge from professional application, leading to passive learning and poor practical application ability among students. Students are not interested in teaching contents, and their poor foundations further lead to ineffective learning.

Most higher vocational college students learn English with clear practical purposes. They aim to improve their comprehensive competitiveness and acquire better employment opportunities in the future. Therefore, if the learning content is relevant to their future work and meets their practical needs, it can greatly stimulate their learning enthusiasm. Through the introduction and practice of teaching and research professionals in various countries, content-based instruction has demonstrated positive teaching outcomes (Stryker & Leaver 1997)^[4]. To address the problems caused by skill-oriented foreign language instruction, content-based instruction (CBI) was introduced into language teaching in China in the early 1990s. Gu Feirong and Shi Guizhen (2009)^[2] confirmed the effectiveness of CBI in college English teaching. Yuan Pinghua (2010)^[5] explored the necessity, advantages, and feasibility of applying the content-based language teaching model in college English classrooms.

2 Overview of CBI Theory

2.1 What is the CBI Theory?

Content-Based Instruction (CBI) was proposed by Mohan in his book *Language and Content* published in 1986. CBI is a teaching approach that focuses on teaching content through language rather than teaching language in isolation. The optimal condition for teaching language is to integrate language with the content it carries, using language as a medium for learning a subject. Content refers to the subject or theme used for language teaching purposes. The definition of subject in CBI theory is broad, including topics or themes that meet students' interests or needs, as well as more specific academic or technical courses.

Applying CBI in ESL classrooms has numerous advantages: it provides students with abundant comprehensible and meaningful input. Krashen (1985)^[3] pointed out that second language acquisition is not achieved by having students memorize words or complete grammar exercises, but by receiving comprehensible input. CBI theory exactly meets this requirement by providing substantial meaningful input through language. To improve communicative competence, learners will inevitably seize opportunities to produce output in the second language. Moreover, it enhances learners' interest. When learners find that the learning content is relevant to their personal interests or work needs, their motivation and interest increase, and anxiety decreases.

2.2 Models of CBI Teaching

According to Brinton, Snow & Wesche (1997)^[1], CBI teaching is divided into three models: the theme-based model, the sheltered model, and the adjunct model. These models differ slightly in teaching due to different contexts, courses and learners, but

they share the same starting point — integrating language teaching with content teaching.

The common characteristics of these CBI models are: (1). They combine language learning with learning professional content, focusing on content where the main goal is acquiring information rather than mastering grammatical knowledge and vocabulary, which aligns well with the learning objectives of students in higher vocational colleges. Given their weak English foundation, students in higher vocational colleges tend to develop a sense of frustration in the process of English learning. When instruction is delivered from a content-based perspective, students can, within a given period of time, achieve a certain level of mastery over a specific theme, thereby gaining a sense of accomplishment. This, in turn, can enhance their motivation for learning. (2). Students are exposed to authentic materials instead of textbooks designed only for language knowledge; they can apply what they learn immediately, thus truly achieving the integration of language input and output. Moreover, this application in turn stimulates further learning enthusiasm.

The theme-based model can be widely applied in EFL classrooms, in which one or several themes are selected as the content of classroom instruction. The themes selected should be of great interest to students, so as to engage and stimulate their enthusiasm for learning. Classroom instruction may be organized around themes pertinent to future workplace contexts, including resume writing, business correspondence, client reception, product presentations, and the interpretation of equipment operation manuals—tasks that collectively represent high-frequency activities in professional environments. Teachers focus on teaching themes, that is, language teaching is realized through the language used in theme instruction rather than specially arranged language points. The skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing are developed through the process of learning thematic content.

3 Application of CBI in Higher Vocational Public English Teaching

While CBI theory has its merits, it cannot be adopted wholesale for public English teaching in higher vocational colleges. Among the three CBI teaching models, the theme-based model can be widely applied in EFL classrooms. The theme-based model can be effectively applied to learners at any language proficiency level. Therefore, the theme-based model is also applicable to public English teaching in higher vocational colleges.

3.1 Curriculum Objectives

Theme-based model of CBI in higher vocational public English teaching aims to cultivate students' foundational professional and technical knowledge alongside relatively proficient language application skills. This instructional model, which integrates disciplinary content with language knowledge, should provide students with increased opportunities for exposure to authentic language communication contexts and famil-

iarize them with current or future work environments and occupational demands through the completion of various learning tasks and classroom activities. Accordingly, public English course under this model should have both professional knowledge objectives and language knowledge and skill objectives.

Given that the majority of students in higher vocational colleges already possess a certain foundational knowledge of specialized technical skills, or are concurrently enrolled in professional courses, the language-related instructional objectives should assume a more prominent role in the implementation of this model. The objectives of public English course designed around the theme-based model of CBI in higher vocational colleges can be broadly categorized as follows: (1) cultivating students' awareness and competence in intercultural communication; (2) introducing fundamental concepts and content of specialized knowledge pertinent to the thematic content; (3) enhancing students' ability to apply specialized knowledge related to the instructional themes in performing basic listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translation tasks.

3.2 Curriculum Content

CBI places high demands on curriculum design and textbook selection and compilation. A key challenge in actual teaching practice lies in how to organically integrate content with language instruction. Under current circumstances, it is difficult to identify systematic textbooks that are tailored to a specific discipline while also matching the language proficiency levels of vocational college students. This necessitates substantial investment of effort on the part of instructors, who must learn to utilize a wide range of authentic language materials relevant to specialized disciplinary knowledge, such as the development of compact, sharply focused, industry-specific English micro-course resource—for instance, “Practical English for Scenic Spot Interpretation” for tourism and “English Communication for Cross-Border Customer Service” for e-commerce, which can serve to forge an initial connection between classroom instruction and authentic job demands.

The design of instructional content should be closely connected to students' future work and life, enabling them to recognize that their current learning will serve a guiding function for the future. A general workplace English module may be offered, covering areas such as workplace etiquette, telephone communication, business email writing, and meeting presentations and discussions, thereby equipping students with foundational English skills that are transferable across a range of positions. The selection and development of teaching materials should attend to the breadth and gradient of knowledge, thereby facilitating students' continuous improvement in language proficiency and the expansion of their professional knowledge scope. Only in this way can the CBI approach achieve its maximum pedagogical effectiveness.

4 Implementing public English teaching reforms in higher vocational colleges under the CBI concept

4.1 Strengthening the Cultivation of “Dual-Qualification” Teacher Competencies

CBI places exceptionally high demands on teachers, as it significantly expands their role within this instructional model. Teachers are required not only to deliver language instruction but also to teach content-based knowledge, integrating the two seamlessly. Moreover, they must selectively present this content-based knowledge at a level appropriate to students' linguistic proficiency. This necessitates that teachers themselves possess a high level of competence, which remains a weakness among English instructors in higher vocational colleges. The majority of teachers in higher vocational colleges are proficient in English language pedagogy; however, they often lack mastery of certain content-based teaching tasks, resulting in a scarcity of truly interdisciplinary educators. Taking Hotel Management as an example, even if teachers use the relevant textbook and the instructional content centers on routine hotel operations, they frequently fail to convey the deeper substance of the subject due to their lack of systematic, hands-on experience in the field, causing instruction to remain superficial. Consequently, there is an urgent need for English teachers in higher vocational colleges to broaden their professional scope, enabling them to meet the demands of content-based instruction.

To address this issue, a cooperative teaching approach can be adopted, where language teachers and subject-matter teachers collaborate to compensate for the gap in a single instructor's combined language and content expertise. Furthermore, a strategy of “inviting in and going out” should be implemented to provide professional development opportunities. Experts from industry or abroad can be invited to offer training in both language and content, or teachers can be dispatched for external study.

4.2 Reforming Assessment Methods: Constructing a Multi-dimensional Evaluation System

In traditional English teaching, the course evaluation system has relied predominantly on written mid-term and final examinations, the results of which have been regarded as the sole reflection of students' language proficiency. Consequently, both teachers and students have invested considerable time and energy in mastering isolated linguistic knowledge points geared towards exam preparation, thereby neglecting the development and enhancement of communicative competence, intercultural communication skills, learning strategies, and learning motivation.

In the evaluation system of content-based English instruction, formative assessment should be integrated throughout the entire teaching process, alongside summative assessment. Regular quizzes can be employed to promptly check whether students have grasped specific instructional content. Additionally, learning journals and oral tasks can serve as effective tools for evaluating student learning. In summary, within

this instructional model, mid-term and final examinations are regarded as only one component of the overall course evaluation system. Students' classroom performance, regular quizzes, oral and written assignments, as well as self-assessment, all constitute indispensable parts of the entire evaluation framework. In terms of assessment formats, both written and oral examinations should be included, and the test content should cover not only linguistic knowledge but also, and more importantly, specialized technical knowledge.

5 Conclusion

For a long time, foreign language teaching in China has emphasized the instrumental nature of language, especially in higher vocational colleges. Excessive attention has been paid to explaining language knowledge and cultivating language skills, while neglecting the importance of teaching content. The essence of language lies in its content; without solid content, language appears weak and pale. Therefore, we should not always focus only on improving English proficiency. Learning English should begin with absorbing knowledge, and in the process of absorbing knowledge, language acquisition naturally occurs.

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