

The Problems and Countermeasures of Vocational English Teaching Practice in Higher Vocational Education

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Received 2 October 2016; accepted 5 December 2016
Published online 26 December 2016

Abstract

In recent years, under the guidance of the national principle of striving to develop vocational education, China's higher vocational education has been developing vigorously. However, due to various conditions, vocational English teaching in higher vocational education has encountered many problems. This paper makes an objective analysis on the problems in this regard such as educational concept, teaching mode, teaching method and course setting, etc., and puts forward comprehensive solutions for the problems of "lack of training of vocational English ability, lack of practical teaching, and how to establish a complete English practical teaching system in higher vocational education based on the concept of vocational education".

Key words: Higher vocational education; Vocational English

Wang, Y. (2016). The Problems and Countermeasures of Vocational English Teaching Practice in Higher Vocational Education. *Cross-Cultural Communication*, 12(12), 35-39. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/ccc/article/view/9143>
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/9143>

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, under the guidance of the national principle of devoting major efforts to developing vocational education, China's higher vocational education has flourished. Higher vocational education is aimed to "serve for the mass and focus on the

employment of students", adopts the training mode of "combination of working and learning", and strives to train high-level skilled front-line workers of technology, production and management. *The Requirements of English Course Teaching in Higher Vocational Education (Trial)* has pointed out that English teaching in higher vocational education is divided into two stages, namely basic English stage and vocational English stage. However, at the stage of vocational English teaching, many higher vocational colleges which offer English courses have no clear concept in the educational philosophy, teaching mode and teaching method, etc.. Many vocational colleges hold that vocational English course is dispensable, and do not give attention from a strategic perspective to the relationship between vocational English and personnel training. Many teachers believe that the students in higher vocational colleges have weak English foundation and should focus on the basis, so vocational English teaching is hard to develop on a big scale like a castle in the air. Due to various conditions, the teachers teach only a fragment of industrial knowledge in the process of teaching vocational English. Some of them use the teaching method of "reading and translation", and the students are only required to remember vocational English terminology. The above factors have resulted in deficiency of training vocational English ability, lack of practical teaching, lack of the characteristics of higher vocational education and neglect of the needs of students' future employment. Therefore, the current vocational English teaching is far from being able to meet the needs of society, and most of the graduates of vocational colleges do not grasp the necessary English knowledge and practical ability of their industries, which is extremely unfavorable for their future career development.

1. THE PROBLEMS OF VOCATIONAL ENGLISH TEACHING IN HIGHER VOCATIONAL EDUCATION

1.1 The Educational Philosophy Is Backward

The Opinions of The Ministry of Education on Strengthening the Personnel Training Work in Higher Vocational Colleges has pointed out that higher vocational education is an important part of China's higher education, and we must train the application-oriented talents of high technology who support the Party's basic line, adapt to the first-line needs of production, construction, management and service, and comprehensively develop in morals, intelligence, physical fitness and aesthetics. This determines that English teaching in higher vocational education must update educational philosophy, explore its own developmental characteristics, and find out a market-oriented developmental path of training application-oriented personnel. However, vocational English teaching in vocational colleges has many problems such as old-fashioned educational thought and invisible characteristics of higher vocational education, which are mainly reflected in the following two aspects:

(a) Lack of awareness of higher vocational education science

At present, the practice of English teaching in vocational colleges remains in the improvement of language skills, but ignores the training of vocational and practical skills. The aim of higher vocational education is to cultivate application-oriented talents and workers with a certain educational level and professional skills. Compared with general education and adult education, higher vocational education focuses on the training of practical skills and actual working ability. Therefore, vocational English teaching needs to have a correct educational ideology and accurate teaching positioning, should take a practical teaching mode and pay attention to the training of students' practical ability of using English.

(b) Improper handling of the relationship between teaching and learning

In the traditional vocational English teaching, the teachers emphasized theory and neglected practice. They only focused on book knowledge and ignored practice, resulting in the divorce of teaching and practice. China's well-known educator, Mr. Tao Xingzhi, has advocated the theory of "combination of teaching, learning and practice", that is, "learn through practice and teach through learning. Teaching without practice cannot be regarded as a real teaching, and learning without practice cannot be regarded as a real learning. Teaching and learning must be both based on practice." This theory is of great significance to vocational English teaching in vocational colleges. Vocational English teaching needs to correctly deal with the relationship between teaching and learning, follow the educational thought of "combining teaching, learning

and practice", pay attention to "practice" in the teaching process and make students learn in practice, so as to fully implement the educational objective of cultivating high-quality skilled personnel.

1.2 Old-Fashioned Teaching Model

At present, the teaching mode of vocational English in vocational colleges is outdated. Classroom teaching only emphasizes on imparting knowledge, emphasizing reception learning and mechanical training, neglecting the cultivation of students' vocational and practical skills. It treats students only as the container for inculcating knowledge, instead of the real master of learning. The serious lack of practical teaching is mainly reflected in the following two aspects:

(a) Curriculum setting is stereotypical

Due to the influences of traditional curriculum, many vocational colleges blindly compete with comprehensive universities on vocational English course setting, and seldom take into account the actual needs of higher vocational education. This can be reflected as follows: (i) There is no clear positioning of vocational English curriculum. The curriculum has the general character of higher education, but lacks the individuality of vocational education. (ii) Although the curriculum has also offered some practices, but they remain in formality and lack adequate practice bases and specific practice contents, methods and evaluation indicators. (iii) Lay too much stress on listening, speaking, reading and writing skills, but make light of the cultivation of humanistic qualities. (iv) Pay attention to the integrity of curriculum, but take no account of the effectiveness. (v) Attach importance to material benefit, but look down on spiritual development.

(b) Textbooks' contents are repeated

In recent years, the construction of vocational English textbook in vocational colleges has made great progress. Several sets of vocational English teaching materials with updated teaching ideology and higher quality have been released. However, there are still some problems which have affected the reform of teaching mode: (i) The teaching materials are affected by undergraduate English teaching materials and can not meet the needs of higher vocational education. This is reflected as the textbooks' impracticability, no pertinence, absence of practicality and absence of the characteristics of vocational education, which largely affects the development of English practicality. (ii) Fitness of teaching materials. At present, although there are several sets of vocational English teaching materials with updated teaching philosophy and higher quality, there are still less variety of teaching materials, which means that a considerable number of students can not select their suitable textbooks. The existing textbooks are generally invariable for arts and sciences, incompetent in specialty and communication, and weak in adaptability. (iii) The contents of the teaching materials cannot meet the needs of cultivating application-oriented personnel, and has a wide

gap between the employment demand of students. (iv) The teaching materials embody few practical contents related with occupations. Under such circumstance, students will not be interested in lectures and reduce their English learning initiative.

1.3 Teaching Methods Are Obsolete

In vocational English classroom teaching, due to the impacts of traditional basic English teaching method, there is still the problem of single and obsolete teaching method, mainly in:

(a) Classroom-based teaching

Teachers are used to teach a fragment of industry knowledge, follow the traditional teaching model of “interpreting texts, leading students to read words, texts or sentences and correcting homework”. Students’ task is to carefully listen to lectures, write notes, complete classwork or homework in accordance with the teachers’ requests. This is a teacher-led one-way teaching method of indoctrination which serious divorces from the reality.

(b) Merged class and large class are the main forms of teaching

With the expanding enrollment of vocational colleges, the number of students entering vocational colleges is increasing, which directly leads to the shortage of teachers. In order to alleviate this pressure, many vocational colleges carry out teaching in merged class or large class of dozens of students. This has the following drawbacks: (i) Effective exchanges between teachers and students and individualized teaching cannot be achieved. Under the circumstance of a large number of students, the classroom can not guarantee that all students have an opportunity to practice, and can not help all students maximize their potentials. (ii) Classroom activities and students can not be effectively managed. First of all, the lack of understanding of students makes it difficult for teachers to fully consider the reasonable grouping of students; Secondly, how to maintain a normal teaching order among a large number of students and how to mobilize their enthusiasm in classroom become the problems which trouble English teachers a lot. (iii) The teaching quality cannot be guaranteed. Due to the large number of students, most students can not have an opportunity to practice effectively.

(c) Passive participation of students in teaching activities

In case that a classroom is teacher dominant, the students are likely to be ignored and at the “passive” side. Too much emphasis on acceptance and mastery of knowledge, neglect and denigration of students’ discoveries and explorations of students, ignorance of their emotions, attitudes and values will make learning a process of passive acceptance, mechanical memorization and tedious repetition. It will suffocate students’ thinking and wisdom, destroy their interest and enthusiasm, lead to the loss of learning interest and poor performance, and fail to mobilize their enthusiasm and creativity.

The old teaching method, to a certain extent, restricts the breakthroughs and development of vocational English teaching reform. Therefore, our goal of vocational English teaching is seriously divorced from the reality. The only effective way is to strengthen English practical teaching based on various specialties.

1.4 Lack of Scientific Research on Curriculum and Teaching

Should vocational English course be offered in vocational colleges and how should be it offered? The answer should be based on the actual needs of the target position, and requires an empirical investigation and analysis on the English requirement of the position. However, at present, the researches on vocational English courses and teaching have been carried out top-down from a macroscopic point of view, not involving employers and students who are the object of education, and lacking a scientific research on curriculum and teaching.

(a) Lack of course demand investigation

Course demand investigation aims to understand the demands of industries and enterprises for a course, and to provide decision-making support for vocational English course teaching. Course demand investigation is the prerequisite of course setting. It can guide the course setting and understand the needed occupational skills and employment demands from the angle of employer. Many vocational colleges do not carry out course demand investigation before offering vocational English courses, which is apparently unscientific.

(b) Lack of learning demand investigation

Learning demand investigation aims to, according to the learning demands of target learners, provide references for vocational English course design and teaching for students in different majors. However, many vocational colleges do not conduct learning demand investigation before carrying out English teaching, which is also unscientific.

In short, only by carrying out scientific investigations on course demand and learning demand for employers and students, we are able to lay a solid decision-making basis for vocational English teaching and make the practical teaching model more targeted and more efficient.

2. COUNTERMEASURES TO SOLVE THE PROBLEMS IN VOCATIONAL ENGLISH TEACHING IN HIGHER VOCATIONAL EDUCATION

Practicality is the fundamental symbol of higher vocational education. We can only develop students’ practical ability by implementing practical teaching. As an important part of basic courses and specialized courses in higher vocational education, practical teaching serves as the key to transform knowledge into ability and

quality in the whole teaching process. Therefore, the main objectives of this paper are: We shall explore the practical teaching model of vocational English courses in higher vocational education through practical research, serve the goal of cultivating high-skilled talents required by the first line of production, construction, service and management, lay a good foundation for the improvement of students' employment competitiveness and sustainable development in the future. In the course of our study, we shall mainly identify the problems of the lack of vocational English ability training and lack of practice teaching, hoping to establish a more complete practical teaching system of vocational English based on the concept of vocational education.

2.1 Establish a Curriculum Syllabus and a Curriculum Scientific System

We must formulate the *Vocational English Course Teaching Outline* which is suitable for our actual needs according to *The Basic Requirements of English Course Teaching in Vocational Colleges*, and provide more individualized vocational English training programs for students in different majors. We must establish a new vocational English curriculum system which focuses on practical teaching and the improvement of students' vocational English proficiency. We must understand that what knowledge, skills and qualities constitute the students' vocational English practical abilities, apply these factors into the English curriculum system of vocational college, and develop a more systematic, normative and reliable vocational English training system for the students in vocational colleges.

2.2 Standardize Curriculum Setting

Vocational English course system should not only be designed to reflect the law of students' future career development, but also to reflect the specific requirements in English to practitioners at different stages of their career development. According to students' different requirements at different stages, vocational English teaching can be divided into two stages of basic English and vocational English, namely, English for all occupations and English for the typical working process of a specific occupation. We must naturally integrate the teaching content of basic English with that of occupational English, and highlight the practical characteristics of vocational English. We must avoid a high proportion of language skills and too little time for practical teaching, but make the curriculum setting keep up with the times, and cultivate students' practical working abilities. We must develop a vocational English curriculum syllabus and vocational English practical teaching syllabus suitable for the students in vocational colleges.

2.3 Explore a Diversified Teaching Model

On the teaching mode, we shall strive to introduce and make use of computers and other modern teaching

methods, establish a personalized teaching model to encourage independent learning, cultivate students' ability to learn, practice and use English in their occupations. The teaching model is designed to better fulfill the teaching contents and teaching objectives. The new teaching mode should pay more attention to the training of vocational English ability, and gradually promote students' ability to use English in real life and work. We need to gradually realize the combination of learning with working, that is, to cultivate work-related English application ability in classroom teaching. English teachers and teachers of specialized courses should cooperate to conduct bilingual teaching or teach English in rooms of practical operation. We shall transform the traditional teaching form of teachers' indoctrination supplemented by students' rote memory to a practical teaching form of combination of classroom teaching and job training assisted by multimedia teaching.

2.4 Establish a Diversified Evaluation System

The characteristics of vocational English courses in vocational college determine that its evaluation method is different from basic English. In the evaluation model, we must introduce a diversified evaluation system which combines formative evaluation and summative evaluation, and encourage students to obtain relevant vocational English proficiency certificates. The evaluation system should shift the focus on formative evaluation from summative evaluation. Formative evaluation runs through the whole process of teaching every semester. According to teaching progress and teaching content, we need to increase the proportion of usual performance in overall performance, refine the criteria of formative evaluation, help students develop necessary learning strategies to modify learning methods and improve learning efficiency. The establishment of a diversified evaluation system can guide students to focus on the process of learning vocational English and pay attention to English application and the relationship with their occupations, can highlight students' performances in completing professional projects, improve their practical ability to use English, and help them meet the actual needs of industries and enterprises as soon as possible after graduation.

2.5 Cultivate "Academic-Practical" English Teachers

Teacher's quality is the key to the success of vocational English teaching in vocational colleges. English teachers in vocational colleges not only have to master the knowledge of English major, but also must broaden their knowledge structures, strive to learn students' majors, integrate other majors' knowledge into English teaching so as to target their teaching better. At present, English teachers in vocational colleges are mainly the graduates majored in English. In teaching practices, although they have solid English language accomplishments and good

oral and writing skills, which is very helpful to make students lay a foundation, they find they are powerless to grasp the students' specialties. This is an indisputable fact. Therefore, there is a certain gap between them and the "academic-practical" teachers required by vocational colleges. The lack of "academic-practical" teachers is not conducive to the improvement of vocational English teaching in vocational colleges. In view of the present situation of "academic-practical" teachers, we need to construct a team of "academic-practical" English teachers by learning from each other's strengths and complementing each other's deficiencies. Only by cultivating the "academic-practical" quality of English teachers, strengthening the training of teachers' teaching ability, and building a teaching team with "academic-practical" quality and strong professional capacity, we can adapt to the teaching requirements of English courses in vocational colleges.

2.6 Strengthen the Construction of Teaching Materials

As an important factor in classroom teaching, teaching material has an important position in language teaching and affects the content and manner of teaching and learning to a large extent. In view of the weak applicability and poor practicability of the present vocational English textbooks in higher vocational education, we should develop a series of teaching materials which adapt to the vocational English teaching in vocational colleges and have better applicability and practicability. At the same time, the construction of teaching materials should not only pay attention to the content and system reform, but should also attach importance to the method reform so as to keep up with the development of scientific and practical needs of production. Improvement of teaching materials should be undertaken mainly from the following two aspects:

(a) Strengthen the applicability of teaching materials

The development of vocational English textbooks should be based on the actual situation of vocational colleges, reflect the level of textbook system, structure and content, make the content conform to the students' cognition level and ensure the best effect of language input.

(b) Strengthen the practicality of teaching materials

Teaching materials should adapt to the actual situation of higher vocational education, and design language practices to improve students' English applying ability under the guidance of practicality. During the construction of teaching materials, we need to carry out demand analysis. Only by doing well in demand analysis, the development of teaching materials can be targeted, operable and effective. Demand analysis should be based on information survey, and then we can select the most appropriate teaching materials after analyzing and summarizing the information acquired.

CONCLUSION

In recent years, with the national policy of striving to develop vocational education, China's higher vocational education has developed rapidly. However, due to various conditions, vocational English teaching in vocational colleges has had many problems. This paper has objectively analyzed the problems of the teaching philosophy, teaching mode, teaching method and course setting of vocational English teaching in vocational colleges, and has put forward comprehensive countermeasures to identify the problems, including establishing a curriculum syllabus and a curriculum science system, standardizing course setting, accommodating a diversified teaching model, establishing a diversified evaluation system, cultivating more academic-practical English teachers and improving the quality of teaching materials. In the process of our study, we have solved the problems of the lack of vocational English ability training and lack of practical teaching, and have proposed to establish a more improved practical teaching system of vocational English based on the concept of vocational education.

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