

# Challenges and Opportunities for Vocational College English Teaching in the Context of MOOC

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## Abstract

Currently, the mushroom growth of MOOC (Massive Open Online Course) increasingly enforces the informatization of teaching modes. Consequently, English teaching in higher vocational schools is faced with many challenges and opportunities as well. Taking advantage of MOOC will benefit the innovation and efficiency of classroom teaching in vocational colleges.

**Key words:** MOOC; English teaching; Vocational college; Challenges and opportunities

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## INTRODUCTION

At present, China attaches great importance to higher vocational education and increasingly accelerates the speed of its development. With the rise of Internet and new media, great changes have taken place in the educational codes and methods. Under the background of teaching informatization, the traditional classroom teaching dominated by multimedia and teachers is confronted with strong impacts and great challenges. Especially, MOOC, a new multimedia, brings many opportunities as well as challenges to higher education.

And vocational education is no exception. Hence, this paper applies MOOC to vocational English teaching, analyzing the educational background of MOOC, the challenges and the opportunities for vocational education, and hoping to enhance the innovation and efficiency of vocational college English teaching.

## 1. THE DEFINITION OF MOOC AND ITS DEVELOPMENT

MOOC is short for Massive Open Online Course, originally deriving from the course on Connectivism and Connective Knowledge, which was set up by George Siemens and Stephen Downes in the University of Manitoba. Initially, the course attracted 25 students from the University of Manitoba and 2,300 other online learners outside the university, and later it was given the name of MOOC by David Cormier and Bryan Alexander. The word of "Massive" means that the numbers of the students and courses are not restricted, and the expression of "open online" signifies that teaching will be more flexible and out of control of time and space. The registered students are granted the certificates of the courses by the teachers if they really meet the standards of MOOC appraisal. Up to now, the validity of the credits by MOOC has already been accepted by some schools.

Nowadays, there are three platforms of MOOC abroad: Udacity, Edx and Coursera, all of which are innovative attempts at teaching methods with some prestigious universities. Currently some famous universities in China are developing their own curriculum on the basis of these three platforms. For example, Tsinghua University has opened Tsinghua University Online by means of Edx, and Peking University has started up various Chinese-English courses by aid of Coursera and Edx. In succession, Fudan University and Shanghai Jiao Tong University, both have set up the courses based on the platform of Coursera. Meanwhile, there appears an obvious trend, the localization

of MOOC. For example, Chaoxing MOOC, NetEase Cloud Classroom, Chinese University Mooc and Love Class network have emerged in a row. By drawing the experience of the three foreign MOOC platforms and taking full consideration of Chinese education situation, these local large-scale MOOC platforms have developed and released a series of quality MOOC platforms with Chinese special characteristics, thus making their great contributions to the informatization of teaching forms in China.

## 2. THE BOTTLENECKS FOR VOCATIONAL COLLEGE ENGLISH IN THE CONTEXT OF MOOC

Different from the teaching modes of other colleges and universities, English teaching in vocational colleges focus more on professionalization, practicability and specialization. However, in the context of MOOC, it encounters many bottlenecks, such as the limitation of high quality resources, the lower level of informatization and less infiltration of professionalization. Only when the challenges for vocational college English teaching are realized will the MOOC platforms be fully utilized to improve the teaching quality.

### 2.1 The Limitation of High Quality Resources in Vocational Colleges

Under the background of university and college enrollment expansion, there are too many students in a class in many vocational colleges. For English teaching, the high quality resources are too limited in spite of the low teaching cost. Take Essential English for instance, which requires many teaching hours and has to meet the needs of diverse grading tests. However, English teaching staff there is mostly young people, who are inexperienced and lack varied teaching methods as well as the ability of taking control of the classroom. Apart from the problem of teaching staff, the excessive pursuit of various English certificates strengthens the examination pressures for students, which hinder the further study and curriculum optimization of Essential English. As a result, the most important task for Essential English teaching changes into language training for examination, which limits the exploration of the course and developing teaching materials. Consequently, the integrity of Essential English can't be realized.

### 2.2 The Lower Level of Informatization

Up to now, the classroom teaching patterns have gone through several different stages in China. Traditionally, teaching is mainly via chalk plus blackboard. Later, multi-media and PPT teaching are developed. And nowadays complex media and social networks are widely applied in the Internet age. All these changes improve the informatization of curriculum. For this reason, the computer and internet application ability is demanding

and urgent for English teachers. Many of young teachers are short of professional Internet knowledge and operation ability although they grow up in the company of the information and entertainment from the Internet. Therefore, the informatization of vocational college English is necessary and vital. For example, the course of Essential English is made up of the five traditional language skills: Listening, speaking, reading, writing and translating, and it is also involved with the humanities knowledge including British and American culture, literary knowledge, and the overview of English-speaking countries and so forth. The materials from *Essential English* itself are limited and can't meet the need of the students, so the informatization of the course is necessary and imperative. There are teaching resources sharing platform in different vocational colleges, including quality courses at all levels, online course presentation, digital learning platform, micro-lectures presentation, online library and video learning network. Whereas, the utilization of these resources is not efficient, and the students there are lack of initiative and motivation. As a result, the course presentation is oriented to appraisal and specialty construction, not for the purpose of classroom teaching.

### 2.3 Less Infiltration of Professionalization

The aim and goal of teaching are different for vocational colleges and undergraduate universities. For undergraduate universities, they pay more attention to academic nature while vocational colleges lay stress on professionalization and applicability. Many English teachers of vocational colleges graduated from conventional colleges and universities, which lay emphasis on technicality and systematicness, while not fully realizing the characteristics of vocational education and the need for vocational college students. In addition, the teaching process of these colleges and universities are not targeted, without the awareness of vocational education. What the English teachers of vocational colleges have changed is only their status, graduating from conventional colleges and going to vocational colleges. They are short of working experience in enterprises. Hence, it is difficult but necessary for them to take the future career needs of vocational college students as the starting point and integrate some practical professional English into college English teaching. For example, some materials, which are useful to improve professional accomplishment, can be added to the teaching practice of *Essential English*, the purpose of which is to strengthen the professional comprehensive qualities, such as professional ethics, morality, dedication to work, awareness of responsibility, good communicational capability, team spirit and entrepreneurial consciousness of vocational college students. Moreover, some basic skills which are required for professional needs are also supplemented in the process of English teaching, such as writing English resume, oral English for interview, western protocol culture and so on.

### 3. OPPORTUNITIES FOR VOCATIONAL COLLEGE ENGLISH TEACHING

Although vocational college English teaching is confronted with many problems and challenges in the context of MOOC, there are still many opportunities as well. Firstly, the key points of innovating English teaching modes are people's thoughts and ideas to adapt to the age of new media and we the media. As the dominant power of classroom teaching, the English teachers will deliberately avoid or actively take part in MOOC teaching platform, which will result in quite different consequences. It will play a very active and significant role in improving teaching quality and enriching teaching methods, as long as the advantages and unique features of MOOC are fully made use of in vocational college English teaching (Wang, 2014, pp.86-87). The following are the suggestions.

#### 3.1 Micro Video Lectures Chosen Freely

The main characteristics of the teaching by the platform of MOOC are reflected through the mode of micro video lectures. According to information processing theory, the attention span for an average learner is approximately ten minutes or so. Therefore, what micro video lectures concentrate on are knowledge points, and they also explain and instruct each knowledge point to the students within the limited time. This segmented and dispersed teaching method is conducive to the absorption and master of knowledge for the students. Compared with the traditional teaching method, which is more systematic and theoretical, this approach is much easier to be accepted and comprehended. For vocational college English teaching, *Essential English* is the basis of all professional courses, which is concerned with the training of different English skills. But the classroom teaching of *Essential English* is short of personalized tuition, and the English foundation of vocational college students is also different. To a large extent, the micro video lectures can help overcome such obstacles and disadvantages. By virtue of micro video lectures, the students can choose freely the video lectures to watch and learn. Wherever there is difficulty in comprehending for the students, they can stop and see it again and again. For the listening comprehension practice, the students can practice up autonomously in their free time on the materials, which will not take up their class time. In addition, on the platform of MOOC, some questions can be set up and inserted in the process of the students' watching micro video lectures, which is similar to *Beat the Game*. In this way, the attention of the students is strengthened, and their interest in learning English is enhanced as well. The questions set up in the micro video lectures can be answered autonomously by the system. Thus, the students can learn about the accuracy rate of their answers, find their questions and have the solutions to them. Accordingly, the efficiency of English learning is increased remarkably. For the teaching of vocational comprehensive English,

the explanations and analyses of the relevant exercises are refined, incorporating the materials for grading tests, in order to fully start up and motivate the potential of their automatic learning. And likewise, the teachers can gradually refine the course design of each knowledge point as well so as to improve their teaching standards.

#### 3.2 Open and Flexible Interactive Discussion

The second feature of the platform of MOOC is its module of interactive discussion, where there are sub-modules of question-answering space, situational teaching and achievement evaluation. In the question-answering space, open-type, interactive and tumbling-type communication concerning all kinds of questions is developed between the teachers and the students, and among the students themselves. In this way, the inspiration is gained from the discussion, and the methods and solutions to solve the problems are also obtained. And finally, the problems are settled. At the same time, their feelings and experiences are shared with each other. In the situational teaching, the mock tests are performed by means of video, audio, picture and literature, which is a process of practicing and applying each knowledge point. The system of achievement evaluation is open, fair and various in forms, including peer assessment, self assessment of the system, open assignments and so on. Such a discussion is not limited by the time and the space. And learning and communication is developed in a flexible way. All the bottlenecks encountered in vocational English teaching that interactive time between teachers and students is restricted and there are so many people in a class can be resolved by virtue of the platform of MOOC. In this way, English teachers have more time to communicate with their students online and at any time, thus clearing up the dividing line of different classes. In the process of teaching *Essential English*, the teachers can learn about the students' learning process, learning difficulty and learning ability without any delay. In turn, they can make changes of teaching contents and schedules, and upload the relevant auxiliary teaching materials. All of these will be conducive to improving teaching validity.

#### 3.3 The Application and Practice of Flipped Classroom

The focus of vocational college English teaching is to cultivate applicable-type English talents, which requires that the practical ability of English should be strengthened combining with the future fields of employment. For this reason, many vocational colleges have set up such English course as *Business English*, *E-Commerce English* and *Foreign-Affair English*, which are all module-based professional English, with the purpose to give full play to the superior points of vocational college students and enhance their competitiveness.

As a new mode of teaching, flipped classroom provides much guarantee for the application of vocational college English teaching, whose guideline is applicability

and professionalization. Flipped class aims at offering more class time to the students in order to transform the traditional class patterns. And it lays more emphasis on learning, and paying attention to learning experience and interaction between teachers and students (Bergmann, 2012, pp.27-32). For example, the parts of pre-lesson and introduction in *Essential English* can be uploaded on the platform of MOOC, with the purpose of telling the students what are the topics, focus and difficult points and requires them to finish the relevant assignments. For this reason, in the classroom teaching practice much more time is used to internalize the knowledge from the pre-lesson, asking the students some questions, by means of discussing and debating in class. Under this pattern, the teachers change their status from the previous dominant power into the participants and organizers of the course, who return the classroom to the hands of the students, inspires and makes comments on the point of views and contents from the students. In this way, that to teach is to learn can be really realized. In this mode of teaching, the students' critical thinking and the ability of raising questions are aroused, which is quite different from the way of traditional class where the students listen to teacher passively and silently.

#### 4. INSPIRATION OF VOCATIONAL COLLEGE ENGLISH TEACHING IN THE CONTEXT OF MOOC

The analysis of the opportunities and challenges of vocational college English teaching under the background of MOOC is conducive to exploring the innovation of online learning, blending learning with flipped class. Accordingly, the new perceptions and experiences can be obtained from this new mode of learning. For the school, the teacher and the student, it is important and necessary to make full use of the platform of MOOC, bringing into play the main feature of MOOC and applying it to the practice of teaching (Zhang, 2013, p.21). The school should view the formatization as a focus of teaching reform, organizes the relevant functional departments to draft the documents of the policies, encourages and guides the teachers and students to apply MOOC teaching to the application of its class teaching in a planned way, step by step and pragmatically. Vocational colleges should develop MOOC teaching modes with its own characteristics, combining the features of vocational education. As full-time English teachers in vocational colleges, we should renew our teaching concepts, depart from the traditional teaching pattern, combines the features of specialties set up in their vocational colleges. And finally, we must learn and master the use of MOOC platform. Each of us can learn by practicing and improves teaching by learning. It is a good trial to register a MOOC course of English, and experience this new mode of learning, adopting MOOC as an auxiliary way of teaching. As the students of vocational

colleges, they may try using the teaching pattern of MOOC, breaking the barriers of traditional class teaching. With a sense of masters, they actively participate in the discussion online, ask questions constantly in class. They acquire knowledge in discussion and make innovations in learning. English teaching on the platform of MOOC will provide more optional rights and self-learning resources for the students so that they will enhance their English learning ability and applying competence.

In the process of vocational English teaching, the application of the MOOC platform should be fully integrated into the current education and teaching theory, especially when the teaching course wares are being developed. In this case, the subjective initiative of the teachers will be put into great play. And the interest and activeness of the students will be enhanced, which is beneficial to the English learning of the students. Only in this way, can the students master and skillfully put the knowledge points to use by aid of the Internet. Thus, the students can renew their knowledge without delay, proficiently utilize English vocabulary and practice their oral English, which is conducive to improving the comprehensive ability of applying English to practice for vocational college students.

The flourishing of MOOC predicts the forthcoming of the age of big data, which also means the traditional classroom teaching is faced with great challenges. On one hand, MOOC exerts very positive influences. For example, it brings convenient and easy way of learning, quality curriculum resources. The allocation of teaching resources is more reasonable and balanced. And the working mode of the teachers has more active and flexible. On the other hand, the problems resulted from the application and development of MOOC can't be ignored. First, there is no face-to-face communication between the teachers and the students on the platform of MOOC due to its nature of online learning. Second, it is lack of the corresponding controlling measures for those who are not self-disciplined. And the relevant resources are blindly developed and scattershot. Facing up with the above mentioned problems, we should take active steps to explore the meeting point between MOOC teaching and the traditional classroom teaching. In this way, the improvement of informatization can promote vocational college English teaching to the greatest extent. Therefore, a new type of English teaching system, which is more scientific, more systematic and more humanistic, is developed and established.

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