

Research on Strategies for the Innovative Teaching Design of College English in the New Era Based on Case Studies



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Abstract: In this new era, the economic globalization and rapid development of science and technology are calling an innovation of college English teaching in higher education. Based on the study on the teaching designs in FLTRP Star Teacher Contest and papers relating to college English teaching innovation, this paper is trying to find useful strategies for the innovative teaching design of college English curricula, hoping to make a contribution to the exploration of English teaching innovation in higher education.

Keywords: Innovative teaching design; college English

1. Introduction

The 21st century is a new era with economic globalization and rapid development of science and technology. Internet and the digital technology are profoundly influencing higher education. In response to challenges and fierce competition brought by the new era, the talent training goal of the college English curriculum in higher education should be focused on cultivating well-rounded talents featuring in innovative spirit, practical ability, international views and intercultural competence. With the setting of higher talent training goals, higher quality education are to be expected. However, the traditional offline lecturing teaching mode where facing different classes with dozens of students in each class, a teacher relies on a unified concept and experience, uses standardized textbooks, adopts the same teaching methods and a single teaching evaluation method and keeps a unified teaching progress has been unable to meet today's students' learning needs especially in this post-pandemic era when digital transformation is inevitable. Therefore, the innovation of college English teaching is imperative.

2. Research Background

So far, the academic circle of college English education is actively exploring the innovative path of English teaching. However, teaching innovation involves many aspects including innovation in teaching theory and methods, teaching contents, activities, modes, tools and media, and evaluation methods. At present, college English teaching still lacks the guidance of an advanced teaching method and teaching theory generally. A group of researchers insist that the Communicative Teaching Theory that emphasizes on cultivating students' awareness of foreign language communication and improving students' active enthusiasm and application ability for foreign language learning should be adopted. According to Jing Minyan and He Lianzhen (2004), the Communicative Teaching Theory has changed the passive, one-way indoctrinating and closed teaching mode in the past to an active, two-way communicating and open one, bringing a series of innovations in teaching materials, teaching methods, classroom atmosphere and effects and social relations (Jing, & He, 2021). Based on this open vision, starting from strengthening the communicative approach, students' balanced development of the foreign language in terms of listening, speaking, reading and

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writing ability can be promoted and their comprehensive quality of the foreign language can also be improved. Whereas, a number of other researchers promote the “Blended Teaching” theory. It is not only a simple mixture of teaching methods, but also a deep integration of various teaching elements. It is based on certain teaching and learning objectives, comprehensively utilizes the advantages of traditional face-to-face classroom teaching and online teaching, and organizes and implements teaching activities through appropriate media technologies according to the characteristics of learning content, learning environment, learners and teachers to maximize the teaching effect and efficiency. “Blended Teaching” theory, as a typical representative of the teaching structure of “(teacher) leading - (student) main body”, which absorbs the theoretical essence of Behaviorism, Cognitivism, Constructivism and Educational Informatization, integrates the advantages of classroom teaching and computer-assisted language learning. It not only plays the leading role of teachers in guiding, initiating and monitoring the teaching process, but also reflects the initiative, enthusiasm and creativity of learners as the subject of the learning process (Li, 2017). Since the “Blended Teaching” was proposed, it has gained its popularity among universities in higher education.

The shift in teaching concepts has led to a series of reform and innovation in teaching materials, methods, modes and means and so on, among which a number of innovative textbooks of college English curricula for higher education sprang up. For example, *Over To You*, co-published by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press and Oxford University Press, is a competence-oriented series of textbooks designed with a real communication environment, featuring in creating a network space for students’ ubiquitous learning and teacher cooperative development based on Unipus, a one-stop digital teaching platform which provides mixed teaching solutions for teaching, learning, assessment, testing and researching in foreign language teaching in colleges and universities, building a student-centered experiential learning environment, advocating blended

teaching mode, and helping teachers build smarter education.

In terms of the innovation of teaching design, many competitions, i.e. FLTRP Star Teacher Contest hosted by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, and researchers have tried to explore the practices of teaching innovation by designing teaching plans based on textbooks, teaching theories, methods, modes and means of different kinds. FLTRP Star Teacher Contest^①, founded in 2013 and hosted by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, is a large-scale non-profit public competition for foreign language teachers in universities and colleges across the country. With the purpose of leading the development of teaching, innovating teaching concepts and exchanging teaching methods, and the principle of professional standards, standardized procedures and scientific evaluation, the competition features multi-languages, multi-levels and multi-modes, and is widely recognized in the field of foreign language education in colleges and universities across the country. It has been continuously listed as the data source of *Analysis Report of National College Teachers’ Teaching Competition* in “Research on College Competition Evaluation and Management System” of the Chinese Association of Higher Education. Besides, since 2019, it has been counted in the *National Teaching Development Index of Teachers in Higher Education* for three consecutive years. Every season, according to the national talent needs and the reform and development of foreign language education in colleges and universities, the competition organizer collects opinions widely, determines the competition system, and strives to respond to the propositions of the times, assume the educational mission, build a learning platform for the exchange of new ideas, new concepts and new methods for foreign language teachers in colleges and universities across the country, and make due contributions to the training of high-quality international innovative talents needed in the new era. This paper will take teaching designs prized by this contest and some other innovative teaching plans designed in papers published on the

website of CNKI as cases to explore strategies for the innovative teaching design of college English in the new era.

3. Research on Strategies for the Innovative Teaching Design of College English in the New Era Based on Case Studies

Through studying the teaching designs in FLTRP Star Teacher Contest and papers relating to college English teaching innovation, the following strategies for the innovative teaching design are summarized.

3.1 The Innovation of Teaching Concepts

In terms of the teaching objectives, compared with the traditional class which only focuses on the knowledge imparting especially the instruction of vocabulary and grammar rules, innovative teaching designs also pay much attention to the skill training and value shaping. The change of teaching goals triggers the change of teaching concepts. Firstly, to meet the skill training goal, most of the cases studied adopts Communicative Teaching theory or Blended Teaching theory. For example, in the FLTRP Star Teacher Contest in 2022, the champion team from Huaiyin National University focused on improving speech skills by asking students to tell stories on Green China to the World and revise the speech in groups, while the runner-up team from Huazhong University of Science and Technology designed activities including a podcast filming, group works and a role playing to improve three conversation skills -- topic rotating, questioning and describing. For Mao Lingyan (Mao, 2020), she designed her teaching plan by taking the "Flipped Classroom" mode under the guidance of Blended Teaching theory, using video lectures and other forms of knowledge to move the knowledge imparting part outside the classroom while making full use of the class time to interact with students and answering questions.^[3] These designs studied are all based on real materials and combined with technologies and Internet, and provide a rich variety of classroom activities ranging from pair work, group work, class activity to role play, short play, story telling and interview, allowing students to use language knowledge in a real and natural language

environment and achieving off-line studying and online learning. Secondly, to meet the value shaping goal, all the cases studied care about students' feelings and integrate theme-related values into the process of language learning and the cultivating of both intercultural competence and critical thinking competence. In the teaching design of Huazhong University of Science and Technology, the unit theme is embracing the unknown, so their teaching design aims at helping students reduce their fear for the unknown and stimulate their curiosity towards it. Meanwhile, through different materials and activities, students will find the spirit of scientific exploration and qualities possessed by scientific researchers themselves. Based on the cases' study, it can be seen that the innovative teaching concept is to integrate the language teaching with skill training and value shaping, aiming at cultivating students in an all-round way.

3.2 The Innovation of Teaching Contents

In terms of the innovation of teaching contents, cases studied mainly feature the following three aspects. Firstly, designers combine useful contents in the textbook and appropriate supplemented materials of different kinds and forms as the teaching materials and reorganize them to achieve the goals of language knowledge, intercultural competence, critical thinking ability and value shaping of the whole unit step by step. In other words, instead of teaching as what the textbook is designed, the innovative teaching should start from learners' conditions, set appropriate teaching objectives, select suitable teaching materials which are not limited to the textbook though it is the main resource and reorganize or even process them according to the teaching need. The teaching materials for the whole unit which are reorganized and processed should contribute to the fulfillment of the unit objectives with dynamic hierarchies and establish helpful links between language points. This is in line with Wen Qiufang's "Selective Learning Hypothesis" and it holds that selective learning can better optimize learning results than non-selective learning (Miyawaki, 2012). Secondly, different tasks based on different materials are arranged before, in and after class to

achieve individualized teaching effect. And thirdly, the supplemented teaching materials should be strongly expressive which can display the connotations of difficult points in the textbook in a clearer way. For example, Huang Yuechan and Wang Yanping (Huang, & Wang, 2021) innovatively designed a clip watching of the movie called *God Grew Tired of Us* in the lead-in part to help students know better about the background of the textbook story and assigned three different assignments for students to choose at will after class to better combine the knowledge learned in the class with their personal experience and perception and deepen the construction of the meaning of knowledge.^[5]

3.3 The Innovation of Teaching Activities

Through researching teaching plans involved, it can be summarized that innovative teaching is characterized by creating real situations and organizing a variety of student-centered activities which attach great importance to cooperation and interaction between students. For instance, the teaching plan from Huayin Normal University created four different situations for students to finish their speech task in groups, namely “A speech at United Nations Climate Change Conference”, “A campus speech to foreign schoolmates”, “A speech to anyone watching the TikTok video” and “An online speech to foreign teachers’ home community”; the design of Guangzhou City University of Technology placed their students in a real and formal TV show called *Youth Power* and asked them to give a speech on “Exploring the Unknown” as an invited guest to show how Chinese people explore the unknown. This teaching scene not only fits their identity of generation Z who is also the targeted audience of this TV show, but also gives them a sense of mission. Both of these two cases value students’ cooperation and encourage them to actively explore the unit theme themselves with different interaction and feedback guided by the teacher.

3.4 The Innovation of Teaching Methods

Since the emphasis of the teaching structure of “(teacher) leading - (student) main body” and

student-centered education, teaching theories that care more about students’ learning than teachers’ teaching including TBLT (Task-based Language Teaching), POA (Production-oriented Approach), PBL (Problem-based Learning) and PBL (Project-based Learning) prevail in higher education. In innovative teaching plans studied in this paper, most of them choose POA as their teaching method. In 2014, Wen Qiufang official renamed her teaching theory as POA (Production-oriented Approach) (Wen, 2014) and since then, this teaching theory has gained its popularity among colleges and universities nationwide. Mediated by the teacher who plays an intermediary role of guiding, designing and scaffolding, the teaching process of POA includes 3 stages, namely motivating, enabling and assessing. Through deliberately creating a “state of hunger” for the students at the motivating stage and scaffolding students for knowledge and ability needed for the production task at the enabling stage, the teacher help students achieve their production task and realize their progress and further problems at the assessing stage (Wen, 2015). Compared to the traditional indoctrinating way, this teaching method can greatly stimulate students’ interest and enthusiasm in study and give full play to their potential.

3.5 The Innovation of Teaching Tools and Media

Because of the development of the digital technologies for education, an increasing number of digital information resources can be applied in the teaching design. Through the cases’ analysis, three main forms can be summarized, namely online platforms for foreign language learning where teachers can organize online classes, publish tasks and learning resources, interact with students and establish learners’ profiles with evaluation from the machine such as TUP English Online, Rain Classroom, Pi Gai Wang, and Unipus and so on, assisted teaching software including Xmind, and other online resources which are not limited to various online video clips and pictures. For example, in the teaching plan from Guangzhou City University of Technology, Unipus was utilized to strengthen students’ independent learning capability and five mind maps were used to

connect all the steps before, in and after class to guide students to better master the structure of storytelling and realize their problems and progress. In Huang Yuechan and Wang Yanping's case, the use of video clip made students clearer about the textbook story's background and the display of roadmap and timeline helped students better understand the growth path of the protagonist. Therefore, as long as using various digital information resources appropriately, both teaching efficiency and learning effects will be greatly improved.

3.6 The Innovation of Instructional Evaluations

The Instructional evaluation is an important part of college English teaching. A comprehensive, objective, scientific and accurate evaluation system is essential to achieve the course goals. (Department of Higher Education of the Ministry of Education, 2007) In terms of the innovation of instructional evaluations, cases studied all reflect principles of diversifying in evaluation subjects, methods and means, and multi-dimensions in evaluation content. For evaluation subjects, apart from the traditional way of the evaluation from the teacher only, innovative evaluations also attach the importance to the evaluation from peers and students themselves. For evaluation methods, designers promote a combination of various evaluation methods such as the qualitative and quantitative evaluation, the formative evaluation and the final evaluation to make the evaluation result more objective with caring more about students' development and progress. For evaluation means, designers tend to comprehensively consider the quality of students, so a variety of methods such as questionnaires, interviews, standards-based evaluations and examination evaluations are adopted. For the evaluation content, the traditional evaluation hinders the development of students' innovative ability and restrains teachers' teaching enthusiasm seriously. Hence, the evaluation of the modern education should not only evaluate the traditional teaching effect, but also evaluate the students' learning attitude, learning habits, learning ability and specialty, and evaluate the learning support and service system.^[1](Jing Minyan & He Lianzhen, 2004)

For instance, designers from Huazhong University of Science and Technology hold that diversified evaluations are a way to improve class efficiency and each evaluation has its own advantage, so they used evaluation methods flexibly including self-evaluation, mutual evaluation, teacher evaluation and teacher-student cooperative evaluation to improve the effectiveness of learning. Each section of their teaching plan was designed with an evaluation. At the motivating stage, an evaluation was designed to help students recognize the difficulties of the production task, strengthening their learning motivation; at the enabling stage, through the cooperation between the teacher and students, the evaluation standards were built together; at the assessing stage, an evaluation was designed to examine students' learning effect and further improve the quality of their productions. More importantly, they also insist that the learning process is a process of evaluation ability cultivation. At the beginning of the class, a teacher evaluation was used for homework review, because the students had no concept of the conversation rotation and did not have the ability to evaluate effectively. In this case, the teacher made the comment, but also the demonstration. Then, the teacher and students jointly built evaluation standards, teaching students with evaluation methods, so that students gradually had the ability to evaluate themselves independently. After that, the students started a practice with the teacher leading them to conduct a teacher-student cooperative evaluation, which was an evaluation under the guidance of the teacher and a further development of the students' evaluation ability. Finally, students completed homework and conducted an independent peer assessment. In their designed teaching process, there was a gradual cultivation of students' evaluation ability.

Conclusion

Based on the cases' study, this paper found that to achieve the innovation of a teaching design, designers should strive to innovate in the following six aspects, namely teaching concepts, contents, activities, methods, tools and media, and the instructional evaluation. In this new era with

economic globalization and rapid development of science and technology, apart from improving their expertise, teachers should also keep up-to-date with the times, renewing teaching theories and being proficient in various Internet and the digital technologies so as to greatly improve the teaching efficiency and learning effects, contributing to the reform of higher education.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest to this work.

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