Innovation of Teaching Methodology Based on Maximizing Learning Opportunities--A Case Study of a Private College in Guangzhou

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Abstract: Basic English, which aims to train the basic English abilities in a comprehensive way, is one of the main courses for English majors. In teaching this course, conventional methods like the grammar translation method and the lecture method are widely employed, which have caused problems like repressed student agency, low learning efficiency, and imbalanced development of students' English abilities. In the case of the College of FF, these problems are also prominent. To solve these problems, a teacher in the English department carried out his teaching reform when he was teaching Basic English. His reform was very much like the flipped classroom, and received varied acceptance. To make further reforms in teaching Basic English and other courses which share similar features, a new teaching model is proposed. This model is based on a subjective evaluation of the reform carried out by this teacher and a thorough examination of the context of the College of FF, especially that of the English department. The fundamental rule of this model is maximizing learning opportunities in class. It is hoped that by applying this model, the efficiency and effect in English teaching can be improved.

Keywords. Basic English; maximizing learning opportunities; communicative skills; formative evaluation

1. Introduction

Teaching reform has always been a focus of the Chinese education administration departments. Emphasis and promotion on it can be found in many related articles. For example, when giving an introduction to The National Quality Criteria for Undergraduate Teaching in Universities and Colleges, Wu, head of the Higher Education Division of the Ministry of Education in China, explained that, when setting these standards, the experts followed the guideline that teaching patterns should be innovated and teaching approaches should be reformed while placing students at the center of education. [1]

Under the guidance and order of the Education Ministry, teaching reform is advocated by education administration departments in different levels and carried out by schools of different levels. The college discussed in this paper is a private one in Guangzhou (referred to as FF in this paper). In this college, teaching reform is also promoted in policy and practice. The vice-president in charge of teaching affairs would always recommend teaching reforms and introduce new teaching methods and technologies. But, to a large extent, teaching reform is not carried out in a systematical way, because of the lack of drive from the side of teachers and assessment from the side of the school.

The division discussed in this paper (hereafter referred to as YY) is one of the six schools in FF. In this school, teaching reform is also promoted but not much progress has been made. The former dean of this school was an old-fashioned professor who actually had some natural resistance against the new teaching modes, while the new dean, who has just been in office for less than two years, is not aggressive in teaching reform so far. In such a circumstance, most teachers in this school still cling to the traditional lecture method in teaching, that is, when they are giving a class to students, they would focus on transmitting knowledge to them by means of lecturing. But from the feedback

of students, this teaching method has caused the most complaints, because it is very easy for students to get bored in such classes.

Given this situation, it is imperative to implement teaching reform to enhance students' engagement and learning efficiency. To achieve this goal, a new teaching model is proposed in this paper. This model is based on the the analysis of the context and challenges of FF and designed by applying the fundamental principle of maximizing learning opportunities. At the same time, it will be student-centered, task-driven and communication-based.

2. Context

According to Wedell and Malderez (2013), the core components of context consist of time, place and people. [2] To illustrate the context of FF, the three elements of time, place and people are described respectively in the following.

2.1 The context of place

2.1.1 Visible dimension

As is mentioned above, FF is a private college. It is located in a northern district in Guangzhou. In this district, there are 9 colleges, forming a "college town", which helps to form and strengthen a collective learning atmosphere.

In FF, there are 6 schools which provide full-time undergraduate education, 2 colleges which provide professional or skill training, and two departments which provide courses for general education.

There are altogether 23 buildings in FF, 5 of which are for teaching activities, 9 for accommodation, and 2 for administration affairs. Others include the library, the gymnasium and so on. The teaching buildings are not allocated to different schools or colleges. The classrooms are arranged to different classes in a comprehensive way on the level of FF.

Almost each classroom is equipped with multimedia, one computer, one or two microphones, two or more air-conditioners and sufficient chairs and desks to serve the basic needs of teaching.

In the school of YY, there are 4 majors, two of which have stopped enrollment. The two majors that are still enrolling students are English and business English. The total amount of students this school enroll every year is between 250 and 600. The number changes conspicuously because of policy reasons.

2.1.2 Invisible dimension

On the whole, the group dynamics of FF is not strong. In FF, each school/department is independent from each other in teaching and organization, so there is few lateral connection or cooperation between them. The rare connections occur when they need to "borrow" some teachers to give lecture to their own students. In the school of YY, the group dynamics is stronger but still not strong enough. Teachers who teach the same course are grouped together to discuss some common issues, but they enjoy a lot of freedom for what they teach. Few purposed teams or groups are organized to address a specific problem. Even when they are formed, it is always not because of practical need from the side of teachers but because of administrative directives.

In terms of institutional culture, FF is devoted to cultivating students who can serve the needs of economic development of the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area--an economic center which enjoys sustained strong development. So, in the teaching practice, FF emphasizes the cultivation of the practical abilities of students instead of transmitting in-depth and high-ended professional knowledge. The research ability of students, and also of teachers, is not a priority. Now the focus of development for FF is being directed to the development of media- and art-related majors, so the college is undergoing structural changes, though not in a dramatic way.

In YY, students' practical ability is also a big concern of the faculty. In specific, much emphasis is given to the following aspects: communication abilities, job-related practical abilities.

2.2 The Context of Time

The time of FF will be introduced in a historical dimension, focusing on private college as a whole, mentality of teachers, and new teaching approaches and technologies applied in teaching.

In the past three decades, private colleges enjoyed rapid development in China. The total amount of private colleges (more commonly referred to as "independent college") grew over 300, a sharp increase compared with that of the planning economy era. The emergence of private colleges brought huge impact to the ecology of the education system in China. One such example is South University of Science and Technology, which is famous for its academic success and rapid rise in the college ranking lists.

In spite of the rare cases of success of private colleges, most of them are received as low-level colleges, as is revealed by many college ranking lists. Most private colleges are facing similar problems, such as insufficient teaching facilities, inadequate teacher resources, and sluggish teaching systems. The reasons for this difficult situation are varied. A practical reason may be that to enhance the level of a college requires a lot of financial investment, which is probably against the capacity and, perhaps, the interest of the enterprise owners.

This practical reason has left the school management and, perhaps, the teachers the impression that their colleges will never get its bottom-level situation changed, since the financial investment is always limited. Some teachers even have the feeling that they are "outcasts"-outsiders from the "more important" public education system. This desperate feeling made some of them even more reluctant to change their already old fashioned teaching mode.

When FF was established, it replicated the organizational structure and teaching mode of a state-owned university in Guangzhou, a co-founder of this college. The teaching mode of FF was very much the same with that of the co-founder university, because the first president of FF used to be the head of the English department of this co-founder university. So FF, YY in particular, inherited much of the style of the co-founder university.

The teaching method of the co-founder university then was largely the lecture method. The teachers attached great importance to the transmission of knowledge to the students. So a full-range display of knowledge is the top priority. Students were encouraged to take notes and memorize what they learned (saw or heard). Students' participation was encouraged but mainly in a way of teacher-student dialogue.

The college management is aware of this situation and is willing to change. So in the past few years, new teaching approaches, along with new technologies and online teaching platforms, are introduced to FF. The online teaching platforms introduced to FF include Moso Tech, Rain Classroom, Tencent Classroom, Tencent Meeting and so on. These online platforms are very useful in teaching. For example, the call-roll function of Moso Tech saves a lot of time compared with the old way to call roll. A typical example of the teaching reform is the flipped classroom, which was carried out by a teacher in YY, and which will be introduced in the the 3rd Part.

2.3 The Context of People

Compared with the state-owned colleges/universities, private colleges are generally less influential and less developed. As is mentioned in the Introduction, most private colleges ranked rather low in the college prestige ranking lists. In the case of FF, the situation is largely the same, but with its own traits. So in the following, the context of people of FF will be introduced in the following aspects: student, teacher and college management.

In 2020, there were about 13 thousand registered students studying in FF. Most of them are undergraduates, with only a small amount of them (about 400) from other sources.They are mainly from Guangdong province, with a small amount of them from other provinces. Apart from mandarin, most of them can speak their local dialect. Some of them are able to speak more than one dialect. But in terms of their English level, when judged from their Gaokao (National College Entrance Examination) scores, they stay at the low end of all undergraduates. In YY, there are around 2000 students altogether. They share similar features with students from other schools or

colleges. One aspect about these students that should be noted is their well-off family background. Most of them are from wealthy families. This may have some influence on their cognition and academic performance.

The number of teachers and clerks is over 600 in FF. On the whole, the academic degrees of the teachers are not as high as those in public colleges in general. FF is in lack of teachers with a PhD degree or a senior professional title.

The school management of FF has various sources. The chairman of the school board, the Party secretary, and the president are all retired teachers. The five vice-presidents of FF are all home-grown without no or little working experience in public colleges. Judging from their backgrounds, it is obvious that their academic and professional backgrounds are not as prominent as those in elite public schools. In the case of YY, the dean is a middle-aged vice-professor with working experience from a public vocational college.

3. Challenges and Reforms

As is mentioned above, the traditional teaching method in YY was the lecture method. To English majors, the courses that applied it as the main teaching method include basic English, advanced English, English writing, English literature, American literature, an introduction to the Great Britain and the United States and some other courses.

When the lecture method is applied, the whole class was just like a monologue of the teacher for much of the time, and in some cases when the teacher was giving questions to students, it would become a teacher-student dialogue which may make others feel ignored. In such a teaching process, the student agency is repressed, and the abilities students can practice are simplified to listening for most of the time. Besides, as is summarized by Kaur (2011), "It is waste of time to repeat the matter already present in books"(p. 13). [3] In the long run, this would lead to decline in learning interest and weakening of verbal skills, which is against the orientation of this college.

In facing such a situation, some changes were made. As is introduced in the context of time, the school management introduced some new teaching approaches and online teaching platforms to FF in the past few years. Teachers were organized to learn them and were encouraged to adopt them in their teaching practice.

A typical example of the new teaching approaches that was advocated officially was the flipped classroom. Initially, this new approach was adopted by a male teacher (hereafter C) in YY, and was then introduced to the other schools in FF. The new method that C adopted was very much the same with the flipped classroom.

C was a basic English teacher. Before class, C would divide each lesson to several parts according to the groups each class has, assign each group with a text-related task, and offer some teaching assistance and requirements to each group. In class, the students were required to play the roles of teachers to give lectures to their classmates. After each group had finished their task, C would give some feedback to them and correct some mistakes, if any. The innovation by C had some features of the flipped classroom, but it was hard to say that it was a real flipped classroom, because a key purpose of C was to give students more chances to practice their oral English but not the mastery of text-related knowledge.

Yet, whether C's innovation was successful became an issue which gave rise to hot debates among teachers. It was largely considered a failure by many teachers because it did not help raising the passing rate of TEM band 4, a national test for English majors. In fact, according to the statistics from YY, the passing rate was about 5 percentage point lower than the average rate, though the classes he taught were considered "better" classes by some teachers.

However, C's innovation was a challenge to the then prevalent lecture method and offered new possibilities to other teachers, especially teachers in YY. Some teachers who applied the lecture method as the main method went on with similar group-based trials in their classes, though with varied responses. A basic conclusion is that, without a full-range of detailed before-class instruction,

this teaching model would easily go astray. The following were two comments from teachers who taught the same course:

"The students got exhausted, but they didn't really get

much."

--translated from F's interview

"The class looked active, but many students repeatedly

made the same mistakes, yet they were not aware of it."

--translated from L's interview

In C's innovation, he did not fully assess the language production process of students (probably unable to, because of the limit of his personal energy and time), so the result of his innovation did not turn out the expected results. Because of this, C's innovation was abandoned basically. Teachers went backward resorting to their traditional teaching method and old problems appeared.

In a conclusion, the biggest challenge faced with YY is, if the teachers apply the lecture method, the students would easily feel bored and lose their interest gradually because of lack of involvement. But if the teachers adopt C's model, it would be easy for the class to lose the key teaching goal.

4. Innovation

In response to the present situation in YY, this paper proposes a new teaching model. The new teaching model is supposed to be practiced in my own teaching, and if successful, will be introduced to other courses which apply the lecture method as the main method. The guidelines of this model are as follows:

4.1 The fundamental principle of this model is to maximize learning opportunities.

As is illustrated by KUMARAVADIVELU (2003), learner involvement has great influence on generating learning opportunities. [4] Yet, when the lecture method is employed, the students can easily get bored. So, it is of great importance to enhance learner involvement. Apart from learning opportunities inside the classroom, KUMARAVADIVELU (2003) suggested connecting the class with local or global community. [4] But it is not practical in the context of FF. So, to build a virtual community could be a good choice. New platforms like Moso Tech and Tik Tok can be good choices.

4.2 The core goal of this model is to enhance communicative skills.

The reasons for enhancing communicative skills lie in the unique features of English major and the college of FF. Needless to say, the communication skills are of vital importance to English majors. In the job market, students with fluent oral English are welcomed. It is particularly so in the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area. To meet the needs of the job market, FF attaches great importance to cultivating the communication skills. But when the teacher is using the traditional grammar translation method, the chance for students to develop speaking (and some other) abilities is largely reduced. So, the communicative skills are neglected to a large extent. Besides, it is believed that a learner can naturally learn the knowledge of a language in the process of using a language to communicate.[5] For these reasons, the training of communicative skills should be a key goal in English teaching.

4.3 It reduces the use of lecture method while optimizing student engagement.

To maximize learning opportunities, it is necessary for the teacher to reduce the use of lecture method. In the English classrooms, especially in that of Basic English, when the lecture method is used, the teacher is basically a transmitter of knowledge and the initiative and interest of students are not given enough attention.This is particularly true in the case of FF. In FF, many students would first judge the "usefulness" of the knowledge that is taught before they take action to actually learn it. When the lecture method is used, some students would make a quick judgement that this

kind of knowledge is "theoretical" and thus decide not to learn it. So, the teacher should combine different methods in teaching so as to enhance student engagement.

4.4 It attaches great importance to formative evaluation.

As is discussed above, the reasons that account for the failure of C's innovation are that he did not offer enough guidance to students before class, and he did not pay enough attention to helping the students to present "correct" language in their teaching. For these reasons, the students could not get enough improvements in carrying out the teaching tasks. Thus, in my model, formative evaluation is emphasized. The suggested ways to form formative evaluation are: 1) to give clear instructions about the key knowledge and skills to students; 2) to check and correct the language mistakes in the teaching plan; 3) to check students' mastery of knowledge.

4.5 It is based on tasks that encourage communication.

When a task is assigned to students, they will need to communicate with each other about how to carry out the task. In this way, communication between students is enhanced. At the same time, since the communication is conducted within groups, more learning opportunities can be created.

4.6 It values the use of new technologies.

As is revealed in the study by Zhu & Wang (2020), learning platforms can indeed increase students' engagement. [6] So in this model, new technologies, especially new online platforms will be supported and encouraged. The teacher can introduce some already stable online platforms like Moso Tech, Tencent Meeting to the classroom, and, if possible, use two or more platforms in a combined way.

5. Conclusion

Based on the conditions of YY and a detailed illustration of the context and difficulties facing YY, a student-centered task-driven and communication-based teaching model is proposed. Though not already put into practice, it is hoped that this model will increase the learning opportunities of students, and reduce the boredom that the students feel to a large extent.

Since the model is not a mature one, and there is no practical evidence to prove whether this model will work or not, it's not safe to jump to a conclusion. But in the following term, this model will be put into test to see to what a level will it work. It is hoped that with some adjustments, this model can truly help the students in the school of YY to enhance their level of English.

Acknowledgments

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