

Exploration of Graded and Categorized Teaching of College English Based on Empowerment

Shenghu Ma

School of International Studies, Gansu University of Political Science and Law, Lanzhou, Gansu, China

Abstract: The traditional teaching mode fails to meet the individual needs of current students. Empowerment emphasizes students' subjectivity and self-development abilities, providing new ideas and methods for the graded and categorized teaching of college English. Following the relevant requirements of the College English Teaching Guide, combined with the concept of Empowerment, Gansu University of Political Science and Law has implemented a reform in graded and categorized teaching of college English, dividing the college English curriculum into three levels: basic, advanced, and developmental. The aim is to meet students' diverse and individualized learning needs as much as possible, cultivate students' comprehensive language use abilities and autonomous learning abilities, and improve the quality of college English teaching.

Keywords: College English, empowerment, graded and categorized teaching

Introduction

With the deepening of globalization, English, as the main language of international communication, has become increasingly important. In the face of diversified educational environments and complex student groups, the significant differences in students' English proficiency have become a major challenge in English teaching. The traditional "one-size-fits-all" teaching mode has been unable to meet the individual needs of current students and has become increasingly inadequate in the current educational context. To address this challenge, graded and categorized teaching of college English emerges at the right time, aiming to improve the quality of college English teaching through individualized instruction and cultivate students' comprehensive English application abilities. As an emerging educational concept, empowerment emphasizes students' subjectivity and self-development abilities, providing new ideas and methods for the graded and categorized teaching of college English.

1. Brief introduction to empowerment

The concept of Empowerment originates from Western sociological research in the 1960s and 1970s. It mainly refers to the delegation of power and resources to the grassroots level to enhance their abilities in independent decision-making, management, and service. Thus, empowerment strengthens and improves grassroots governance and promotes local economic and social development. Subsequently, it gradually expanded into fields such as politics, administration, management, and education.

In politics, empowerment usually contains two meanings: giving power and giving rights^[1]. In the field of management, empowerment mainly emphasizes the former, i.e., the ability of individual A to influence the behavior of individual B. This power is broad, including not only formal power but also the linking and sharing of resources such as support from managers or colleagues, knowledge, information, and technology, enabling employees to develop their

abilities and use this power to solve problems for themselves, their teams, and the organization. In education, the concept of empowerment emphasizes improving teachers' understanding of their social roles and giving them more say in arranging classroom content, using teaching methods, applying teaching strategies, and conducting evaluation and assessment. Teachers are encouraged to become the leaders and actors in educational reform, and by giving them more power and responsibility, their teaching enthusiasm and innovation ability are stimulated, and their teaching effectiveness is enhanced^[2].

Professor Zhang Wenzhong, a reformer and practitioner of China's foreign language teaching, proposed the "empowerment" concept of English education and teaching based on the teaching and learning situations in China's higher education^[3], which emphasizes "unity of roles, responsibilities, and powers, integration of doing, learning, and using, and endogenous ability development." "Unity of roles, responsibilities, and powers" refers to the temporary assignment of tasks to students, the corresponding rights enjoyed by students in undertaking tasks or roles, and the responsibilities of students for the temporary tasks they undertake. "Integration of doing, learning, and using" refers to doing (practical activities), learning (acquisition of new knowledge and skills), and using (application of language, knowledge, and skills), which is traditionally known as "practice." "Endogenous ability development" refers to the generation or enhancement of multidimensional abilities, including language ability, through the implementation of "integration of doing, learning, and using" tasks in the process of engaging in practice, acquiring new knowledge, growing in talent, developing ideas, and presenting results, while also developing one's characteristics and moving towards personalized holistic development^[4]. Thus, the concept of "Empowerment" aligns well with current college education and teaching, making it suitable as a guiding principle for designing college English empowerment and capacity-building teaching.

2. Reform ideas for graded and categorized teaching of College English

For a long time, the teaching of college English at Gansu University of Political Science and Law has adopted the natural class teaching method. Due to the uneven English proficiency levels among students in the same class, teachers have been unable to fully consider individual differences when designing teaching objectives, content, and methodologies. Consequently, the personalized learning needs of students at different levels have not been met. Furthermore, the college English curriculum has not been tailored to the characteristics of various majors but has instead followed a unified teaching model, resulting in inadequate support for the professional training objectives.

With the transformation of the university towards an application-oriented undergraduate institution, it is imperative for the college English teaching to address these issues through educational reforms, enhance teaching quality, and serve the university's transformation and development. The goal of building an application-oriented undergraduate university is to closely align with the local socio-economic development, optimize undergraduate programs and talent cultivation plans, deepen reforms in talent cultivation modes, connect with industries and industrial chains, enhance students' practical and innovative abilities, and continuously cultivate highly skilled and marketable talents for society, ultimately establishing a university with regional characteristics, collaboration, innovation, and demonstrative excellence.

Adhering to the teaching principles of "student-centeredness" and "individualized instruction," and based on the "Guide for College English Teaching" (2020 Edition) issued by the Ministry of Education, combined with the empowerment and capacity-building concept, Gansu University of Political Science and Law has initiated graded and categorized teaching reforms in English since the fall of 2020. The college English curriculum has been divided into three levels: basic, intermediate, and advanced. The basic level targets the fundamental English learning needs of most non-English majors, the intermediate level is designed for students with better English foundations and higher demands upon enrollment, and the advanced level caters to the special needs of the university's talent cultivation plan and the diverse needs of some students with extra learning capabilities. The graded and categorized teaching of college English is oriented towards serving professional needs, aiming to meet student's diversified and individualized learning demands as much as possible, cultivate their comprehensive language proficiency and autonomous learning abilities, improve the quality of college English teaching, and better serve the university's transformation and development.

3. Reform measures for graded and categorized teaching of College English based on empowerment

The "Guide for College English Teaching" (2020 Edition) emphasizes that college English teaching should adhere to the principles of classified guidance and individualized instruction, reflecting the unique characteristics of each institution^[5]. To establish a graded and categorized teaching model tailored to Gansu University of Political Science and Law, the College English Teaching and Research Section has formulated the "Implementation Plan for Graded and Categorized Teaching and Examination of College English Courses," outlining specific reform measures.

3.1 Graded and categorized teaching curriculum system for College English

To ensure the progressive and continuous nature of college English learning, a series of "College English" courses are offered in the first and second years of undergraduate study, totaling 12 credits. In the first year, based on students' English proficiency (primarily determined by their high school English exam scores), English teaching is graded, with two types of courses: "Basic College English (I) & (II)" and "Intermediate College English (I) & (II)." Each course is worth 4 credits per semester and is conducted for 4 hours per week. In the second year, based on students' English learning goals, English teaching is categorized, offering two types of courses: "Intermediate College English (III) & (IV)" and "Advanced College English (I) & (II)." Each course is worth 2 credits per semester and is conducted for 2 hours per week.

3.2 Evaluation mechanism

The "College English" course adopts a tripartite online-offline blended teaching mode combining "classroom teaching + online teaching + extracurricular practice." Based on this, we have constructed an assessment and evaluation system for graded and categorized teaching of college English, emphasizing "four integration": the integration of process-based formative assessment and summative assessment, online and offline assessment, in-class and extracurricular assessment, and internal and external evaluation. The aim is to ensure diverse and reasonable assessment and evaluation methods.

3.3 Faculty development

To strengthen the construction of the university's English teaching faculty, course teaching and research sections (such as the College English Teaching and Research Section and the Advanced English Teaching and Research Group) are established according to the requirements of the classified teaching curriculum system and the teaching characteristics of each stage. The sections are led by key teachers from the School of Foreign Languages, with a director-in-charge system in place. Regular teaching and research activities are conducted, including collective lesson preparation and the provision of more in-service training both within and outside the university. These efforts aim to effectively improve teachers' professional competence and teaching abilities, help them clarify the direction of teaching research and reform, and promote their specialized development.

4. Existing issues and improvement measures

With the implementation of the empowerment and capacity-building-based graded and categorized teaching reform in college English, Gansu University of Political Science and Law has entered a new stage in its graded English teaching. However, as this teaching mode is still in the exploratory phase, numerous practical issues remain to be addressed and refined.

Firstly, the current sole criterion for grading and categorizing students in college English is their score on the National College Entrance Examination (NCEE) English test. Should other factors be considered? Can grading and categorization based solely on NCEE scores truly achieve fairness, reasonability, and suitability for individual development?^[6] These questions warrant further investigation. Ideally, grading should be based on a combination of NCEE scores, entrance tests, and students' learning outcomes over some time to achieve better results.

Secondly, direct grading and categorization may have a negative psychological impact on students in the lower grades, adversely affecting the normal and orderly conduct of teaching and ultimately leading to poor teaching outcomes and exacerbated grade differentiation, which is detrimental to student growth. Supplementary classes for graded teaching can

mitigate the resistance and imbalance felt by students in lower-level classes, and their practical effects are prominent. Teachers play a crucial role in this process, encouraging students at all times and making corresponding teaching adjustments for students at different levels to help them acquire more knowledge. Schools can also reward outstanding individuals to motivate other students' development.

Thirdly, after passing the CET-4 (College English Test Band 4), students at levels A, B, and C can choose elective courses. However, the scientific nature of final grades based on different textbooks is a concern. Teachers must exercise caution in this regard, and grade assessment should vary according to different course settings to ensure fair and impartial grading.

Fourthly, after passing the CET-4, students often rush to select elective courses, leading to a series of issues. Many students choose courses based on pre-existing knowledge of the instructors and evaluations from other students, rather than their own professional needs. This results in some students being unable to select courses suitable for them and failing to truly learn in the process. Some students may even respond passively, unwilling to follow the teacher's pace. Although the school has made adjustments to elective courses and offered diverse options, they cannot fully meet student demand. To address this, the school can introduce industry-specific English courses tailored to different majors, offering several English courses related to each major. This will help students understand professional terminology or actual foreign situations relevant to their majors, and restrict course selection to students in closely related majors. This approach can effectively prevent many students from being unable to choose English courses related to their majors, thereby enhancing classroom efficiency and student motivation.

Fifthly, the transition to graded and categorized teaching is based on CET-4 scores, with students who pass the exam eligible to choose English elective courses in the third semester. This inevitably leads to students developing a test-oriented learning motive, excessively pursuing CET-4 scores while neglecting the improvement of their English proficiency. As a result, the ultimate effectiveness of English learning is compromised, and students struggle with normal communication. The true purpose of English learning is to comprehensively enhance listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translation abilities, rather than focusing solely on CET-4 scores, which should serve as a reference. Both practical English proficiency and CET-4 scores should be used as criteria for course selection to better fulfill the original intention of graded and categorized learning.

5. Conclusion

In summary, based on the "Guide for College English Teaching" and drawing on the theory of Empowerment, Gansu University of Political Science and Law has tentatively constructed a graded and categorized teaching mode for college English, tailored to the foreign language learning realities of non-English major students. This mode aims to meet students' individualized foreign language learning needs, promote their comprehensive development, and enhance the quality of public foreign language teaching. The graded and categorized teaching mode of college English provides a reference for the current diverse teaching needs of college English and holds significant practical implications for further reforms in college English teaching.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

References

- [1] Gao, Q.Q. On the Two-way Empowerment between Political Parties and Civil Society. *Academia*, 2013, (01): 32-43+258-261.
- [2] Liu, L.Y. Empowerment Evaluation: Connotation, Implementation Steps, Limitations, and Implications. *Foreign Primary & Secondary School Education*, 2009, (04): 15-19.
- [3] Liu, H.H., Pan, Y. "Learner-centeredness": The Practical Logic of Personalized Learning from the Perspective of Empowerment Theory. *China Educational Technology*, 2018, (08): 100-106.
- [4] Zhang, W.Z., Shao, Y. The Platform-based Curriculum Creation Concept of "Integration of Learning, Doing, and

Applying" from the Perspective of National Standards. Foreign Language Education, 2017, 38(06): 47-51.

[5] The University Foreign Language Teaching Steering Committee of the Ministry of Education. Guide to College English Teaching (2020 Edition). Beijing: Higher Education Press, 2020: 2.

[6] Fang, M. Problems and Countermeasures of Graded Teaching in College English: A Case Study of Sanming College. Journal of Kaili College, 2014, 32(01): 184-186.

Fund project

2022 teaching reform research project at Gansu University of Political Science and Law, entitled "Empowerment and Capacity-Building Model and Practical Exploration of Graded and Categorized Teaching in College English."