

An Analysis of the Countermeasures of English Teaching Reform in Higher Vocational Colleges

Song Yongfang

School of Foreign Languages, Hubei Business College, Wuhan, China
songyongfang@hbc.edu.cn

Keywords: Higher vocational colleges, English teaching reform, Countermeasures, Cluster analysis

Abstract: The reform of English teaching in higher vocational colleges should not only solve the problems of poor student quality and poor learning enthusiasm in the teaching process, but also pay attention to the education of students' professional quality, skills, and comprehensive ability, to help students enhance their professional competitiveness. Through literature analysis, we understand the current research status of scholars on the reform of English teaching in higher vocational colleges. By making statistics and systematic clustering on the frequency of the reform countermeasures of English teaching in higher vocational colleges, we can identify the core, necessary, and general countermeasures. After conducting a comparative analysis of the reform countermeasures, we know that curriculum, classroom teaching, and teaching conceptual reform should be paid attention to in the process of English teaching reform in higher vocational colleges.

1. Introduction

As the job market for English majors becomes more crowded, their employment rates are declining. Consequently, many higher education institutions are modifying their academic programs by cutting back or even eliminating English major enrollments. For example, the University of Science and Technology of China, a leading institution, has suggested phasing out English majors. Similarly, numerous private colleges and universities have stopped accepting English major students. However, this does not mean that learning English is irrelevant to college students. English remains an essential skill in the competitive job market, but the alignment of the English major with universities' objectives for talent development and growth is not well balanced.

Currently, the job prospects for those with English degrees are not promising, and the reform of vocational English education presents new challenges. This reform must tackle issues like the low quality of student intake and the lack of motivation during the educational process. The teaching approach should be more closely aligned with vocational education goals, focusing on improving students' vocational literacy, professional skills, and overall competencies to boost their competitiveness in the job market^[1]. This paper reviews and analyzes literature from the past decade to identify common issues in English instruction within vocational education and explores strategies for reforming English teaching in this context, offering a reference for future reforms.

2. Current Situation and Challenges of English Teaching in Higher Vocational Colleges

2.1. Variability in Student Proficiency Levels

Students in higher vocational colleges come from both general high school graduates and those who have completed middle school. These students typically have a limited foundation in English, characterized by insufficient grammatical knowledge, restricted vocabulary, and weak oral communication skills. This presents significant challenges for English instruction in higher vocational institutions. Educators are required to invest additional time and effort to address the diverse learning needs of students with varying proficiency levels.

2.2. Students' Low Motivation for Learning

Students attending higher vocational colleges frequently lack enthusiasm for learning. This issue partly arises from the perception that studying English is not pertinent to their specific fields, leading them to disregard its significance. Additionally, these students often lack effective methods or habits for learning English, resulting in confusion when faced with English language studies, as they do not have a structured approach to mastering the language.

2.3. Students' Traditional and Singular Teaching Methods

Even with the presence of Internet technology, English instruction in higher vocational colleges largely depends on conventional, lecture-based methods. In this scenario, the importance of students taking a central role has not been adequately emphasized. Although teachers strive to change this situation through various methods, they face difficulties in effectively sparking students' enthusiasm for learning. Additionally, there is a gap between the teaching materials and their practical use, making it challenging for students to apply classroom knowledge in real-world and professional settings.

2.4. The Enhancement of Teacher Competencies

There is a notable lack of "dual-teacher" educators in the English departments of higher vocational colleges. Many of these educators do not have business experience and possess limited practical skills, which hinders their ability to effectively fulfill the demands of English teaching reform. Furthermore, there are few opportunities for professional training and development, which impedes the continuous updating of teaching concepts and methods in this area.

2.5. Incomplete Teaching Evaluation System

The current evaluation system for higher vocational English education mainly focuses on the results of final examinations, which limits the scope of assessment. This approach does not effectively or objectively reflect the students' learning journeys and achievements, thus failing to encourage students' enthusiasm and proactive engagement in learning. Additionally, the evaluation process is largely teacher-driven, with minimal input from students' self-assessments and peer reviews, resulting in outcomes that lack thoroughness and precision.

3. Clustering on the Countermeasures of English Teaching Reform

3.1. Establishment Process of Teaching Reform Measures

In order to thoroughly understand the existing academic research on the reform of English teaching in higher vocational education, the author performed a search in the CNKI database using the keyword "reform of English teaching in higher vocational colleges." This search, with the keyword as the central theme, resulted in over 1,000 related literature pieces in the past ten years. Among these, five were master's theses, while the rest were articles published in scholarly journals. Furthermore, the author gathered two relevant monographs: "Reflection on Higher Vocational English Teaching and Research on Future Trends"^[2] and "Research on the Development and Innovation of Higher Vocational English Teaching"^[3]. From the literature, the author identified 19 strategies for reforming higher vocational English teaching and conducted a statistical analysis of the frequency of their appearance in the literature.

3.2. Clustering Process of Teaching Reform Measures

In this study, SPSS21.0 software was employed to systematically cluster the frequency of 19 countermeasures aimed at reforming higher vocational English education. Initially, the countermeasures were divided into two, three, and four groups. However, a thorough analysis revealed that a three-group classification was more representative of the data. Ultimately, the significance of each group was determined by the frequency of the countermeasures, with higher frequencies indicating a greater perceived importance by scholars for reforming higher vocational English education. These countermeasures were categorized as core, important, and general measures.

In the context of reforming English teaching in higher vocational institutions, it is crucial to accurately evaluate the importance of different strategies. Systematic cluster analysis aids in a more scientific classification of these strategies. Core strategies are essential for the progress of higher vocational English teaching, while significant strategies greatly improve teaching quality. General strategies provide additional support to the reform efforts. In practical teaching reform, it is vital to strategically plan and execute strategies based on their characteristics and importance to ensure that the English teaching reform in higher vocational colleges achieves significant results.

4. Analysis of countermeasures for English Teaching Reform

4.1. Core Countermeasures

After thoroughly examining the literature, it becomes clear that most researchers emphasize that improving assessment systems, boosting the professional abilities and expertise of English teachers, transforming teaching approaches and techniques, and refining teaching content are far more important than other strategies for reforming English education in higher vocational colleges. Implementing these strategies not only improves the quality of teaching but also effectively supports the comprehensive development of students, thereby laying a strong foundation for the modernization, professionalization, and rationalization of English teaching in higher vocational institutions.

4.1.1. Improving Assessment and Evaluation Mechanisms

Improving assessment and evaluation mechanisms is a crucial element of the English teaching reform in higher vocational colleges. The evaluation system plays a vital role in English teaching

within vocational education, and a scientifically sound evaluation framework is essential for promoting educational reform^[4]. Due to the current challenges in the existing evaluation system, a comprehensive optimization is required, focusing on the evaluation participants, content, methods, and standards. Concerning evaluation participants, the traditional teacher-centered model should be replaced by a multidimensional approach that includes student self-assessment, peer evaluation, and administrative review. Regarding content, the evaluation should cover both the quality of teaching and student learning outcomes, thereby encouraging the development of teaching skills and the holistic growth of students. The evaluation process should be integrated throughout the teaching cycle by combining formative and summative assessments. As for evaluation standards, in addition to traditional metrics such as teaching objectives, content, methods, and attitudes, innovative criteria like curriculum ideology, disciplinary competitions, and the alignment of English instruction with industry needs should be included.

4.1.2. Improving the Professional Skills and Abilities of English Educators

Improving the professional skills and abilities of English teachers is essential for advancing reforms in vocational English education. As key participants in the educational process, teachers' expertise and practical abilities are critical to the quality of teaching and the success of reform efforts. However, many English teachers in vocational settings currently lack dual-teacher resources and industry experience, which creates obstacles in achieving reform goals. To tackle this issue, institutions can establish collaborations with businesses, invite industry professionals to give lectures and lead practical activities, or arrange for teachers to gain hands-on experience through placements in enterprises. This two-way exchange can boost teachers' practical skills and professionalism while supplying businesses with skilled talent and services. Furthermore, institutions should consistently organize training and professional development opportunities for teachers to keep their teaching methods current, enhance their instructional skills and reinforce their professional identity.

4.1.3. Revamping the Teaching Model

Revamping the teaching model is crucial for updating English teaching practices in China. Experts recommend actively incorporating catechism, new media, microclasses, flipped classrooms, and other technological advancements to promote the modernization and progress of English education. Teachers should leverage information technology to diversify teaching resources, adopt both online and offline multidimensional teaching approaches, and improve students' classroom experiences and engagement. For example, the "Teachermate" online teaching platform provides teachers with tools such as online questioning, data analysis, attendance tracking, and homework grading, while offering students interactive learning opportunities through quick responses, discussions, and interactive queries. Additionally, recognizing the individual differences among students, educators should apply customized and personalized teaching methods. For instance, in a class where students gain college admission through an easier route than the National College Entrance Examination and may have a weak foundation in English and limited speaking skills, it is important to reinforce basic vocabulary and grammar in daily lessons and help students strengthen their foundations through repeated practice and review. Moreover, for difficult textbook content, key points should be emphasized in advance for students to study. By enhancing teaching methods, the English proficiency of students in this class has significantly improved.

4.1.4. Revamping the Teaching Methods

Revamping teaching methods is a direct approach to spark students' enthusiasm for learning.

Teachers need to acknowledge the pivotal role of students, move away from the conventional teacher-focused, one-directional teaching style, embrace a variety of instructional methods, innovate in structuring lessons, consistently energize the classroom, and ignite students' interest in learning English. Presently, teaching approaches like experiential learning, situational instruction, project-based learning, problem-solving activities, and cross-disciplinary integration are highly esteemed^[5]. For instance, simulation-based instruction in the classroom, which includes replicating professional knowledge and vocational skills training and education in authentic work environments, as well as interactive exchanges in everyday scenarios during English dialogue learning^[6], allows students to participate in role-playing. This not only makes learning English more enjoyable but also enhances students' language communication and practical application skills.

4.1.5. Optimizing Teaching Content

Enhancing the effectiveness of classroom instruction hinges on optimizing teaching content. Educators in higher vocational settings should focus on textbooks, thoroughly explore their content, broaden teaching resources, and develop exemplary courses. When crafting teaching content, it should be tailored to meet students' professional needs to boost their English application skills. It can also include contemporary topics to spark students' interest in learning, and replicate real work environments to facilitate practical English training, thereby enhancing students' vocational literacy and overall abilities. Moreover, within the framework of "Curriculum Civics," educators should prioritize incorporating civic elements into the teaching process to improve students' humanistic qualities and value their education.

4.2. Important Countermeasures

Significant countermeasures primarily concentrate on both the pedagogical and student levels, encompassing teaching objectives, teaching content, curriculum structure, educational philosophy, and fostering students' intrinsic motivation in English learning.

4.2.1. Reevaluating Teaching Aims and Goals

Higher vocational colleges must reevaluate their educational aims and goals to nurture talent. These institutions strive to boost students' knowledge and skills to enhance their vocational abilities and cultivate specialized talents that meet the needs of society and businesses. English instruction in higher vocational colleges should focus on relevance and practicality, ensuring that the curriculum aligns more closely with societal demands to lay a strong foundation for students' future careers. Institutions should guarantee that students not only achieve a suitable level of English proficiency, but also concentrate on improving their practical English application skills by combining both basic and professional English. Considering the diverse talent requirements for various roles, it is crucial to reflect these differences in the development of teaching objectives to maintain teaching quality.

4.2.2. Diversifying and Enhancing Teaching Content

In higher vocational colleges, English teaching heavily relies on instructional materials. The textbook used at the author's college, "New Practical English Course" from the Higher Education Publishing House, has faced criticism from educators for its lack of organization, engagement, and vocational focus. Despite this, creating institution-specific English textbooks and choosing foreign ones are complicated by various internal and external challenges. Thus, it is crucial to select English teaching materials that emphasize vocational aspects, diversify and improve teaching content, and advance the reform of English teaching materials in higher vocational education.

4.2.3. Curriculum Design for Talent Development

The curriculum is typically structured to nurture talent. Acknowledging the distinct goals of talent development in higher vocational and undergraduate settings, some higher vocational colleges have adjusted the ratio of classroom teaching to extracurricular activities in English courses to boost students' English skills. Certain institutions introduce public English courses in the first year to lay a groundwork, followed by major-specific English courses in the second year to enhance students' competitiveness in the job market. Furthermore, initiatives have been undertaken to develop a framework for English instruction in higher vocational education and a system for cultivating English vocational skills, ensuring that classroom knowledge aligns with job-market demands.

4.2.4. Focusing on Vocational Growth in English Teaching

The educational framework emphasizes the significance of teachers motivating students to learn and aiding them in achieving learning outcomes that are customized to their individual needs during the teaching process. Researchers have called for the updating of English teaching models, incorporating ideas from constructivism, Outcome-Based Education (OBE), Production-Oriented Approach (POA), inclusive education, and lifelong learning. It is essential to assert that the method of teaching English in higher vocational education should be based on the vocational growth of students, forming a teaching philosophy that prioritizes vocational literacy over mere language acquisition^[7]. The reform of English teaching in higher vocational institutions must recognize the core essence of vocational education. Higher education institutions should accurately define the role of English courses and carefully set teaching goals and curriculum structures to improve the employability of vocational students in the future.

4.2.5. Fostering Creativity and Motivation in English Learning

Students play a pivotal role in classroom learning. In higher vocational colleges, students often encounter obstacles such as insufficient academic preparation, poor foundational English skills, limited self-discipline, and a lack of motivation. Educators can assist them by encouraging the adoption of project-based cooperative learning, inquiry-based learning, reading circles, and jigsaw learning to enhance their learning abilities and creative thinking. Furthermore, educators can boost students' learning skills and creativity by setting suitable learning goals, offering timely feedback and assessments, and organizing engaging English activities. This approach allows students to experience the satisfaction of learning success, thereby sparking their interest in learning English and boosting their intrinsic motivation.

4.3. General Countermeasures

The general countermeasures encompass strategies primarily implemented at the institutional level, such as ensuring policy compliance, improving informatization teaching techniques, upgrading basic teaching infrastructure, school-enterprise collaborations, integration of competitive learning, and cultivating an English cultural atmosphere in higher vocational colleges.

At present, many higher vocational colleges are meeting the needs of informatization by consistently upgrading and improving their facilities. Traditional multimedia slides have been replaced by interactive online teaching platforms, offering students a more effective classroom experience. To meet the demand for developing professional talent, these colleges continue to strengthen school-enterprise collaborations, enhancing students' job prospects by bolstering both on-campus and off-campus practical training and creating specialized entrepreneurial practice

platforms. The integration of competition and learning involves organizing or conducting subject competitions in a deliberate and planned way, using the content of English teaching in higher vocational colleges as a guide, and focusing on students' employment needs as the goal^[8]. This blend of competition and study encourages the shift in higher vocational English teaching from theory to practical application, achieving a fusion of theoretical knowledge instruction and course practice in the teaching process. For example, when colleges offer English speech courses, instructors not only impart theoretical knowledge but also encourage students to participate in English speech competitions, thereby improving students' English speaking skills and overall abilities. Finally, the development of a unique higher vocational campus culture in English aims to provide students with a high-quality English learning environment by regularly organizing activities such as English corners, English culture festivals, English clubs, and English salons, thus increasing opportunities for students to engage in second-classroom practice.

At the instructional level, key areas of focus include diversifying teaching resources, forming a new teacher-student dynamic, and merging basic and industrial English. Presently, higher vocational colleges face issues such as the limited relevance of English teaching materials and a lack of high-quality resources. A comprehensive repository of teaching resources has yet to be established. By engaging in collaborative teaching and research efforts, higher vocational institutions can develop an ideal resource base. This could include micro-teaching, high-quality classes, videos, courseware, and other varied content and formats to aid in instruction. Teachers can be motivated to build on this foundation through secondary creation. Establishing a new teacher-student relationship emphasizes the student's primary role, with teachers providing guidance in learning, practice, and competitions. The two-way interaction between teachers and students improves learning outcomes through effective and emotional communication. The integration of basic and industrial English is reflected not only in curriculum enhancement but also in the focus on career-oriented English teaching content. This strategy ensures that English instruction is seamlessly combined with vocational guidance, helping students to continually enhance their vocational skills.

5. Conclusions

The comparative analysis of the significance of reform measures for English teaching in higher vocational colleges indicates that certain factors should be prioritized during the reform process.

First, reforming the curriculum is crucial. Attention must be directed towards teaching resources, content, and the curriculum as a whole. When it comes to teaching materials, it is vital to choose resources that align with the goals of nurturing talent in higher-vocational students and meeting employer expectations. As for teaching content, educators need to delve deeply into the materials to effectively incorporate "Curriculum Civics" and communicate aspects of Chinese culture, national circumstances, and values. This strategy is designed to build cultural self-assurance and strengthen students' patriotic feelings. Second, efforts should be made to improve the classroom teaching environment. Beyond concentrating on the main participants, which are teachers and students, it is important to enhance educators' teaching skills and personal abilities through training and activities like "teaching, scientific research, and competitions." Teachers should also be aware of the varied needs of their students, consistently inspire their learning motivation, and nurture positive teacher-student relationships. Additionally, it is vital to consider the entire teaching process comprehensively to encourage learning by diversifying teaching evaluation methods and fostering students' patriotism. Traditional evaluation methods that focus mainly on assignments and exams need to be updated. Students' performance in classroom activities, such as individual speeches, PowerPoint presentations, and English debates, should be included in regular grades, and more

open-ended assessment tools are necessary to improve students' overall abilities. Finally, it is important to focus on conceptual reforms. The teaching philosophy greatly impacts teaching goals, curriculum design, and content. Higher vocational colleges should emphasize improving students' English skills and developing application-oriented abilities^[9]. Students participate in higher vocational education not only to acquire cultural knowledge or obtain a certificates but also to enhance their vocational skills and improve their job prospects.

References

- [1] Chen, F. (2018). *Reflections on the Reform of Public English Teaching in Higher Vocational Education from the Perspective of Professional Competence Development*. *Journal of Heihe University*, 9(11), 85-93.
- [2] Zhang, A. L. (2019). *Reflections on Vocational English Teaching and Future Trends*. Qingdao: China Ocean University Press.
- [3] Zi, C. (2020). *Development and Innovation of Vocational English Teaching*. Xi'an: Southwest Jiaotong University Press.
- [4] Liu, X. Y. (2015). *The Construction of the Evaluation System for Vocational English Teaching*. *Heilongjiang Education: Higher Education Research and Evaluation*, (5), 34-36.
- [5] Li, J. (2021). *Research on the Application of Task-driven Teaching Method in Higher Vocational English Teaching*. *Modern Vocational Education*, (33), 148-149.
- [6] Li, S. M. (2015). *Exploration and Innovation of Vocational English Teaching Reform*. *Contemporary Educational Practice and Teaching Research (Electronic Edition)*.
- [7] Yang, Y. M. (2016). *Research on the Reform of Higher Vocational English Teaching Guided by Professional Quality*. *Journal of Yellow River Conservancy Technical Institute*, 28(01), 66-68.
- [8] Yang, C. X., & Liu, E. H. (2020). *Research and Practice on the Reform of Higher Vocational English Teaching to Enhance Students' English Proficiency through Blended Teaching and Integration of Competition and Education*. *Modern English*, (16), 8-11.
- [9] Ma C. J. (2021). *Reform of English Teaching in Higher Vocational Education under Application-oriented Talent Cultivation Mode*. *Liaoning Journal of Higher Vocational Education*, 23(7), 44-46, 86.