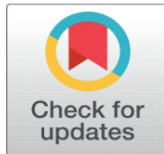


RESEARCH ON ENGLISH TEACHING REFORM IN HIGHER VOCATIONAL COLLEGES BASED ON NATIONAL VOCATIONAL COLLEGE ENGLISH SPEAKING CONTEST

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ABSTRACT

The National Vocational College English Speaking Contest has been playing a leading role in the English teaching reform in higher vocational colleges in China. The Contest mainly consists of five sections, i.e. Presentation, Interview, Debate, Role-Play and Speech. By analyzing each section, it is clearly shown that the competencies examined in the Contest align closely with that of the English teaching reform. However, the problems exposed by the contestants also deserve our attention, which helps identify the challenges in current higher vocational English teaching, including weak English foundation, insufficient communication awareness, limited critical thinking ability, inability to adapt effectively in real-time, etc. Combining the positive effects the Contest brings and the problems the contestants exposed, the article suggests updating teaching philosophies, improving teaching methods, expanding teaching resources and optimizing teaching assessments to promote higher vocational English teaching reform.

Keywords: The National Vocational College English Speaking Contest, Higher Vocational Colleges, Teaching Reform

1. INTRODUCTION

The National Vocational College English Speaking Contest (abbreviated as "the Contest"), originated from the "Higher Vocational College Practical English Speaking Contest", which was first held in Beijing in 2004. In 2011, the Contest was incorporated into the National Vocational College Skills Competition, becoming the only language-related contest selected for the higher vocational colleges category [Chen \(2013\)](#). By 2024, the Contest had further evolved into one of the events under

the World Vocational College Skills Competition. As the contest has progressively elevated its level, expanded its scale, and enhanced its influence and appeal, it has not only provided a high-level platform for teachers and students in higher vocational colleges to exchange and refine their English speaking skills but also offered a broad platform for experts and scholars in the field of higher vocational English education to explore reforms in English teaching.

2. CONTENT ANALYSIS OF THE CONTEST

As an important guiding document for the implementation of English teaching in higher vocational colleges in China, the English Curriculum Standards for Higher Vocational Education (2021 Edition) (abbreviated as "the New Curriculum") clearly indicates that teachers should enhance students' four core competencies, i.e. competency in international communication in vocational settings, competency in multicultural exchange, competency in advanced thinking and competency in higher-level learning autonomy throughout their teaching activities [Chang \(2021\)](#); [Wen & Zhang \(2021\)](#). Now the Contest mainly consists of five sections, i.e. Presentation, Interview, Debate, Role-Play and Speech. By analyzing the requirements of each section, it is clearly shown that the competencies examined in the Contest align closely with the core competencies required in the New Curriculum.

2.1. PRESENTATION

In this section, contestants are required to describe and give their own points of view according to charts or tables. The competencies tested in this part are highly consistent with the "competency in international communication in vocational settings" and the "competency in advanced thinking" required in the New Curriculum. Firstly, the contestants must have excellent English language skills to express themselves fluently based on the information in the chart or table. During their expression, they have to distinguish the similarities and differences in thinking patterns between Chinese and English languages. Secondly, the contestants are required to use basic thinking methods such as analysis and synthesis, comparison and classification flexibly to interpret the data, find out the deeper information behind the chart, and then put forward practical solutions or clear personal insights accordingly.

2.2. INTERVIEW

In this section, contestants are required to play various roles in the workplace and have one-on-one instant dialogues with the foreign examiner, covering daily communication, corporate introduction, product introduction, international business, etc. This section focuses on testing the contestants' "competency in international communication in vocational settings". On the one hand, the contestants should have a solid foundation in English listening, without which they can't accurately understand the examiner's questions, not to mention making corresponding responses. Meanwhile, they should adapt to the expression habits of the English language so as to ensure the effective transmission and reception of information. On the other hand, the contestants should have a good sense of communication, which means they should be good at listening in communication and be able to adopt appropriate communication strategies flexibly.

2.3. DEBATE

In this section, contestants are required to debate one-on-one according to a topic. This part contains two stages, the argument-presenting stage and the free-debate stage. First in the argument-presenting stage, each contestant presents his argument for 1 minute, and then they will have a 3-minute free-debate. Debate is known as the most difficult part of the contest, which places high demands on the contestants' "competency in advanced thinking". Both the argument-presentation stage, which encompasses the comprehension of the topic, the formulation of viewpoints, and the structuring of arguments, and the free-debate stage, which involves identifying logical flaws in opponents' arguments and delivering effective rebuttals, pose significant challenges to the contestants' critical and creative thinking abilities. In addition, the contestants also need to make accurate and appropriate expressions, supplemented by proper body language, to strengthen the output effect of their viewpoints. In the process of debating, contestants need to flexibly choose appropriate communication strategies. It's important for them to show the spirit of competition and at the same time the respect for their opponents.

2.4. ROLE-PLAY

In this section, contestants recreate real life and vocational situations through group performances of short plays, with each group consisting of 4 to 5 members. Each participant choose a role and act out the situations that might occur in a workplace. This section focuses on examining the contestants' ability of creative thinking and teamwork. When preparing, the contestants need to brainstorm the content of the short-play, discuss the allocation and understanding of the roles and create the scripts. When rehearsing, all team members need to respect each other and work closely together. In the face of emergencies during the live performance, the contestants need to quickly adjust themselves and support each other. At the same time, the "competency in multicultural exchange" of the contestants is also required. The contestants should be able to tell Chinese stories and spread Chinese culture in English. In the future, with the participation of more vocational colleges around the world, the contestants need to further improve their intercultural communication skills, and accept the diversity of the world's cultures with an attitude of equality, inclusiveness, and openness.

2.5. SPEECH

In this section, contestants need to tell a Chinese story according to the given topic. To excel in this section, they must possess the following core competencies. Firstly, contestants must possess a solid foundation in English, enabling them to accurately and fluently express complex ideas and emotions. Secondly, when selecting a theme for the speech or constructing a framework for the statements, critical thinking and creativity are indispensable. In order to make the speeches profound and captivating, contestants should interpret from novel perspectives and present unique insights of their own. Additionally, in order to facilitate effective cultural exchange, contestants have to possess necessary intercultural competence. They should take the interests and thinking patterns of audiences from different

cultural backgrounds into consideration. Only in this way can the content and delivery of their speeches make sense.

It is noteworthy that all of the above-mentioned sections require the contestants' "competency in higher-level learning autonomy". Within limited preparation time, the contestants need to manage their study time and tasks efficiently, choose learning resources effectively, and apply English learning strategies appropriately to make timely adjustments. Furthermore, they should have the ability to engage in lifelong learning through English, with which they can update their knowledge systems and broaden their horizons continuously.

3. PROBLEMS REFLECTED IN THE CONTEST

Adhering to the principle of "promoting learning, teaching, and reforms through competitions", the Contest is conducted in a mode where "all schools participate, all classes participate, and all students participate" across the nation. Conducting an in-depth analysis of the problems exposed by contestants during school, provincial, and national contests can help identify the current challenges in higher vocational English teaching.

3.1. WEAK ENGLISH FOUNDATION

Due to insufficient prior accumulation and a lack of learning motivation, higher vocational college students often exhibit relatively weak foundational knowledge and skills in English. For instance, when describing charts or tables, they may struggle to use accurate vocabulary and expressions. Issues such as inaccurate pronunciation, limited vocabulary, and single sentence patterns are common, leading to a lack of diversity in their language expression. When interacting with the foreign examiner, some contestants encounter awkward silences or irrelevant responses, primarily due to their weak listening skills. When debating, there are instances where contestants fail to comprehend what the opponents are saying and keep repeating themselves. In the speech, some contestants could only use simple and basic vocabulary, making it difficult for them to vividly depict the plot and characters in the story.

3.2. INSUFFICIENT COMMUNICATION AWARENESS

Influenced by factors such as a long-term lack of language environment, limited opportunities for communication, and insufficient self-confidence, the contestants' communication awareness is weak. For example, when interviewing with the foreign examiner, some contestants merely provide factual answers to the questions without attempting to further expand on the topic. They remain in a passive position throughout the dialogue, lacking interaction. In the debate, most of the contestants only focus on elaborating their own views without responding to or refuting the views of their opponents, which makes the debate a one-sided presentation without exchanges or collisions of ideas. What's worse, some contestants use overly harsh language when rebutting opposing views, which disrupts the positive communicative atmosphere.

3.3. LIMITED CRITICAL THINKING ABILITY

Due to the fact that English teaching has long been overly focused on knowledge transfer while neglected thinking training and the fact that higher vocational college

students' knowledge reserve is limited, the contestants have obvious shortcomings in their critical thinking abilities. For example, when describing the charts or tables, most of them could describe the trend of data changes, but when it comes to analyze the causes, effects and future direction of the data, it will be a big challenge. In the argument-presenting stage of Debate, some contestants' arguments lacked strength and the supporting arguments are insufficient, making it difficult to convince both the judges and their opponents. In the free-debate stage, some contestants are unable to accurately identify the loopholes, and thus failing to develop effective counter-arguments or, even if they do, their logic is confusing.

3.4. INABILITY TO ADAPT EFFECTIVELY IN REAL-TIME

Due to the lack of competition experience and excessive psychological pressure, the contestants' on-the-spot responsiveness during the Contest urgently needs improvement. In the sections such as Presentation, Speech, Role-Play and the argument-presenting stage of Debate, where preparation is allowed in advance, the performances of the contestants are generally stable, with fewer instances of pauses or forgetting lines. However, once they enter the sections which require two-way instant interactions, like Interview or the free-debate stage of Debate, the frequency of contestants' faltering significantly increases. Moreover, competition settings are fraught with uncertainties and unexpected situations from time to time. Some contestants experience prolonged pauses, severely disrupting the contest rhythm. Others provide responses that lack logical coherence or are semantically ambiguous. Some mechanically repeat previously stated content or viewpoints, failing to adapt flexibly and immediately.

4. IMPLICATIONS FOR HIGHER VOCATIONAL ENGLISH TEACHING REFORM

4.1. UPDATING TEACHING PHILOSOPHIES

For a long time, the Contest have adhered to the guiding principle of "focusing on practicality and application" [Li & Min \(2013\)](#). However, the New Curriculum for the first time points out that English is more than just a tool. It also undertakes the fundamental task of cultivating students' moral character and fostering their all-round development. So after the release of the New Curriculum, the Speech section, focusing on telling Chinese stories, was added into the Contest, which provides valuable reference for teachers to apply in their daily teaching. Specifically, teachers can encourage every student to tell his own Chinese story before class. It is important to note that directly using the contents of the Contest as the teaching materials is not advisable. Instead, the themes of the stories should be tailored to students' interests and majors. Additionally, the ways of presenting the speech should not be limited to traditional ways. Diverse forms of presentation, such as short videos, should be encouraged to help those who fear public speaking to overcome their psychological barriers. In this way, more students will get involved in the activity.

Every year a group of students with fluent English speaking skills and outstanding expressive abilities emerge at the Contest, which is a strong proof that higher vocational students have the potential to learn English well [Chen \(2013\)](#). However, the significance of the Contest is not only to set up a stage for a few outstanding students to show their talents, but also to awaken the enthusiasm of the vast majority of students to learn English. Currently, it is inevitable that the overall quality of the incoming students at higher vocational colleges has declined and that

there is a wide disparity in students' English levels. Therefore, the implementation of tiered teaching is particularly necessary and urgent. Specifically, teachers should first find out the differences in students' English foundation, learning ability, learning interest and other aspects through entrance tests, questionnaires, classroom performance and other ways. Then, they can set different teaching objectives and requirements according to the level of the students, which helps each student to gain something from the class and thus enhance their interest and motivation in learning English.

4.2. IMPROVING TEACHING METHODS

The Contest has witnessed the improvement of students' language skills over the years, but the problem of weak communication awareness revealed should not be ignored. While improving students' language skills, it is also crucial to enhance their ability to use proper communication strategies. First, teachers can integrate the Interview section with the theme of the unit of the existing textbooks. Where conditions permit, immersive simulated environments can be constructed using specialized training rooms or virtual simulation labs in order to enhance the authenticity and interactivity of situational communication. Secondly, teachers can adopt diversified ways to integrate the Role-Play section into daily teaching. As a common teaching activity in English class, the overuse of Role-Play may cause students to lose interest in participation. Instead, teachers can learn from the creation mode of TV series and guide students to write their own role-play scripts according to the theme of the unit. In the process of script creating, students have to learn the English expressions needed, design the plot, and try to keep the consistency of the plot, which can not only deepen students' understanding and use of language, but also enhance their communication awareness effectively.

4.3. EXPANDING TEACHING RESOURCES

Online resources can not only better meet students' individualized learning needs, but also effectively enrich and optimize teaching content. Teachers should recommend suitable online resources based on students' learning characteristics. For example, for those who are afraid to speak up in public, dubbing software and AI conversation tools can be recommended to help them enhance their confidence through practice. For students with limited English vocabulary, vocabulary-learning apps can be suggested to expand their word bank through diverse memorization methods. Moreover, teachers can invite the students to develop online learning resources together. The above-mentioned short videos created by the students in sections like Speech and Role-play can be a part of the e-learning resources. In this process, teachers need to give professional advice on the resources provided by the students, help them optimize their works, and then upload and share the resources to the online platform for all the students to learn from.

4.4. OPTIMIZING TEACHING ASSESSMENTS

The contestants participating in the Contest are often full of enthusiasm for English, but it can not be ignored that a considerable portion of students in higher vocational colleges are afraid of English, letting alone take part in competitions. The reason is their lack of motivation in English learning. In order to solve this problem, it is imperative to optimize the current assessment system. On the one hand, teachers should focus on comprehensive assessments. The indicators of

assessments should not be limited to vocabulary diversity, grammatical accuracy, and completeness of content, but also on other dimensions, such as the willingness to explore in learning, a good sense of teamwork, etc. On the other hand, formative assessment is of great importance. Taking the students' different starting points into consideration, the teachers should figure out the problems the students encountered as well as the efforts and progresses they have made in the process of learning, and then give them targeted guidance accordingly so as to help them build up confidence and ultimately help them realize all-round development.

5. CONCLUSION

As a concluding remark, this study takes the content analysis of the National Vocational College English Speaking Contest as the entry point, exploring its guiding role in higher vocational English teaching reform. At the same time, through analyzing the problems presented by the contestants in the Contest, this study identifies the challenges in current higher vocational English teaching, including students' weak English foundation, insufficient communication awareness, limited critical thinking ability and inability to adapt effectively in real-time. To address these issues, this study proposes countermeasures such as updating teaching philosophies, improving teaching methods, expanding teaching resources and optimizing teaching assessments.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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