Teaching ESP in Vocational Colleges in Net-Based Environment

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Abstract—The paper is mainly concerned with teaching English for specific purpose (ESP) in vocational schools and colleges in net-based environment under the guidance of related theories. Ways of teaching ESP have been discussed from the aspects of students’ training, teachers’ training, and course design which includes needs analysis, objective analysis, teaching-plan preparation, teaching management and performance evaluation.

Key words—ESP; vocational colleges; net-based teaching; course design

I. Background of the Study

With the development of modern technology and economic globalization, English becomes more and more widely used in many fields, which undoubtedly brings English for specific purpose (ESP) a booming industry. As China makes its way to the global marketplace, it is natural for industry to recruit workers who can not only read technical materials in English and translate them into Chinese, but who are also able to communicate fluently and accurately in the workplace with visitors, clients, overseas colleagues and investors. In addition, products sold overseas need to have well-written manuals and handbooks and promotional materials and written correspondence need to meet international standards of expression and layout.

Vocational educational schools and colleges keep serious eyes on the situation and put priority on job-oriented training rather than academic cultivation in curriculum design because vocational education has to change from supply-driven to demand-driven model in order to better serve and keep in steps with the development of industries which have increasing awareness of ESP skills of their potential technicians.

II. Definition of ESP

In the development of ESP to the present day, there has been a discussion on whether specific situations where language is used can generate situational or subject-specific language. The consensus has been that while the situations do not give rise to separate special languages as such, there is a restriction of language choice and a certain amount of specialist lexis. The acquisition of this restricted, specialized language, first of all by teachers in order to teach it, and its subsequent transversals to the learners, has created a learning dynamic very different from that of mainstream ELT. Thus, most definitions of ESP are concerned with either language or the teaching of that language. Munby gives an early definition of ESP in 1978, which runs as follows, “ESP courses are those where the syllabus and materials are determined in all essentials by the prior analysis of the communication needs of the learner” [1]. Robinson gives another definition in her book, in which she defines ESP course as “purposeful and... aimed at the successful performance of occupational or educational goals. They are based on a rigorous needs analysis of students, and needs should be, tailor-made...” [2]. Kennedy Bolitho sums up by saying “In short, ESP has as its basis in an investigation of the purposes of the learner and the set of communicative needs arising from those needs.” [3]. In these definitions, learners’ needs are paid special attention, which distinguishes ESP from general English (GE). So ESP undertakes the tasks of training students to master the skills specified in their major. That is, ESP teaching includes not only language knowledge, but also subject knowledge concerning their specific areas of study such as computer, mechanics, electronics, bio-chemistry, business and so on.

III. Problems Faced by Vocational Schools and Colleges in Teaching ESP

In recent years, vocational school teachers are confronted with a lot of problems, such as students’ poor English proficiency, their low interest and motivation in learning and passive performance in class. Worst of all, most of students haven’t even had autonomous learning ability and rely too much on teachers, thus it is teachers who do most of the work, explaining everything and talking for over 90% of the class time, therefore teachers often feel it very difficult...
to carry out their teaching plans and are eager to get out of such a difficult situation.

Meanwhile, it is supposed that ESP should be taught by teachers who are experts in a specific major with high English level, which could guarantee that an ESP instructor helps students with both technical content of a course as well as language issues. Moreover, to be a good ESP instructor, a language teacher should have a natural desire to keep a breast of the latest findings in science and technology.

So how to motivate students’ interests and autonomy in ESP learning and how to find an effective way to expose ESP teachers to more authentic professional knowledge of a certain major has become an urgent issue. At present, it seems that internet-based teaching and learning is the way out to enhance ESP teaching in vocational schools and colleges.

IV. Characteristics of Net-Based Language Teaching

Computer-assisted language learning (CALL) has been a buzz-word in language education for the past few decades. Defined as “the search for and study of applications of the computers in language teaching and learning” by Michael Levy in 1997 [4], CALL has undergone great developments and prosperity in some other countries since 1950s; while it is not until late 1980s that CALL finds its place in Chinese education. And it has experienced rapid development in our country with unprecedented speed ever since, which develops with the advancing of teaching theory and technology.

Net-based CALL, is the latest stage of CALL development. It starts from the launching of the World Wide Web in 1992. With internet reaching the general public, its various functions and enormous materials are utilized to construct meaningful learning environment and support learning activities in language learning and teaching. This is what we mean by net-based CALL, which is practiced and generalized in every institution of higher education in China, and is expected to solve all kinds of problems existing in English teaching and learning.

CALL researchers are involved in a variety of complex tasks: they set up authoring tools and applications for language instructors to produce new interactive language learning materials and they develop rich multimedia content by researching and collecting relevant documents and creating new materials that include written, oral, and visual media; they also design and program interactive learning environments.

Along with the further development of CALL, its great significance has been put forward theoretically comparing to the traditional classroom teaching models.

Firstly, computer technology and internet make it possible to expose language learners to natural, authentic and fresh language materials from visual materials to aural materials such as e-journals, e-magazines, live radio and TV, video clips, of different fields and all branch of science, which promises the improvement of language learners’ skills as well as knowledge.

Secondly, this new technology may help to provide language learners “real situations”--- environment for more meaningful language use, which is more beneficial for language learners.

Thirdly, it challenges the traditional “teacher-centered teaching model” and motivates autonomous learning, opening space for different pace and needs--- a reaction to "Individual Differences" theory [5].

What’s more, it creates on-line interaction among learners. Synchronous or “real-time” communication can be accomplished either by using special software programs for local area networks or via the Internet, using a variety of chat media such as MOOs (technically, “Multi-user domains Object Oriented”), Internet Relay Chat, or Web chat programs. Computer-assisted discussion seems to be a good vehicle to help students to push their language to greater levels of complexity.

This list seems to be able to go on and on, and net-based teaching has become a direction for high education.

V. Theoretical Basis of Net-Based Language Teaching and Learning

It is well-known that some theories play a key role in supporting network-based instruction. Among them, cognitive psychology, constructivism theory provide sound guidelines for web-based language teaching and learning. All these learning theories maintain that knowledge and understanding are not acquired passively but in an active manner through personal experience and experiential activities. Besides, language instruction is viewed not just in terms of providing comprehensive input, but rather as helping students enter into the kinds of authentic social discourse situations and communities that they would later encounter outside the classroom. These characteristics can be easily adapted for Web-based language learning. “As interactive communication becomes the call of language teaching, communicative processes become as important as linguistic products, and instruction becomes more learner-centered and less structurally driven.” (Warschauer ) [6]. There are three main guidelines in net-based language teaching based on the
above theories: first, plan activities that require learners to construct meaning from the information presented. Second, design activities that allow students to communicate with others. Third, monitor students’ interactions and provide students with guidance in order to obtain an appropriate depth to learning. Finally, provide students with opportunities to engage in authentic problem-solving activities.

VI. Teaching ESP in Net-Based Environment

Based on the above discussions, some suggestions about ESP teaching are put forward to facilitate students’ learning, thus solving the present problems faced by vocational colleges in ESP class.

A. Students’ Training

As we know most students have fuzzy understanding of net-based language learning, some of them lack self-control ability. To meet the challenges of education reform, teachers should, first of all, get their students fully prepared for the change in learning habits.

Firstly, students should have clear learning goals when they are online because learning objective is the starting point of a learning program. Hedge points out that “making the stating of objectives in course planning has many advantages: it enables us to assess the appropriateness of course materials; to make explicit aims of the course and how these have been determined, and to encourage students to develop their own agendas for the course” [7]. Only when students have definite and clear learning aims in their mind, can they resist the temptations such as computer games, music and video clips, chatting rooms, etc. in class. So teachers should give their students specific assignments, such as writing an E-mail to their key pals, designing a project, getting certain statistics and data about a research on their area of study, discussing a topic with their partners, interacting on a listserv, etc. in class. After they accomplish the tasks, they should provide a report or some products of their learning activities. These tasks must be completed before the deadline so that students have to concentrate on the learning activities.

Secondly, students should have effective online learning methods. On the one hand, in online learner-led learning, students are expected to be more self-directed in contrast to traditional teacher-dominated class. They are not passive recipients of information any more but active information workers and program participants, which means that students can access appropriate authentic information, participate in communicative activities, draw conclusions and solve problems by themselves.

On the other hand, cooperative learning is encouraged among students because on-line learning environment provides opportunities for students to collaborate and interact in small groups in the classroom, or with students on other parts of the world who also work on the same projects together online, through which students can benefit a lot such as acquiring social skills, fostering sense of teamwork and decreasing their dependence on teachers, experiencing different viewpoints. To work cooperatively in their groups, students should learn some essential skills:

- giving response to ideas of their teammates;
- posing and discussing questions with group members;
- helping each other by offering advice, suggestions or assistance;
- sharing ideas and thinking by reporting their findings and synthesizing each other’s results into final group product;
- participating actively to make contribution to the outcome of the project.

B. Teachers’ Training

Years ago some people wondered “Would the advanced technology or the Internet take the place of teachers?” The recent studies have proved that the answer is “No”. Now teachers are making attempts to apply internet resources to language teaching. However, their net skills and instructional skills should be improved further, so teachers’ training has become a call in Web-based language teaching and learning nowadays.

First of all, teachers should have a clear idea of their roles in net-based language teaching environment where they are not dominators and controllers, but act as designers of learning tasks, organizers and participants of learning activities as well as guides and facilitators offering help and support throughout the learning process. Compared with the conventional language classroom, teachers not only carry out the same duties such as relating units of the program to students’ needs, identifying students’ different levels, helping them to select tasks, organizing learning activities but have more challenging work in a Web environment. For example, teachers should select appropriate learning materials from immethodical online resources, design learning platform, use different softwares to prepare teaching, assist students in the early stage of using computers, prepare task-based projects, monitor programs and offer continuing guidance.

Secondly, faculty collaboration should be emphasized among teachers. Just as the web offers so many opportunities for students’ interaction, it also provides a number of possibilities of collaboration among teachers, such as e-mail, conference, discussion lists and newsgroups, etc., which really offers an environ-
ment for teachers to learn from and help each other. They can talk to or discuss problems or ideas related to their teaching with experts. They can get successful teaching experience from other colleagues in different countries. Therefore teachers should frequently contact researchers about their work and make use of these interactions in their teaching activities so that students can benefit from faculty collaboration.

Thirdly, teachers should develop their technological skills and online learning skills. As Clifford Ray says, “Technology will not replace teachers…. Teachers who use technology will probably replace teachers who do not.” (Hu Long) [8]. Gaoda He, one of the avant-gardes of using new technology, proposes that the modern English teachers are required to master not only the basic media tools, such as slide projector, but also the comprehensive media, the network, which consists of computer skills and communicative skills and teachers must also know how and when to effectively integrate technology into curriculum [9].

C. Effective Net-based ESP Course Design

An effective course design should be guided by considering the following two basic factors: needs analysis and objectives analysis

1) Needs Analysis

Needs analysis is the first stage in ESP curriculum design before syllabus, materials and teaching activities are decided. Types of needs include objective needs and subjective needs. Objective needs refer to needs which are derivable from different kinds of factual information about learners’ major, their language level and requirements of the school or college about their students. Subjective needs refer to cognitive and affective needs of the learners such as personality, attitudes, wants and expectations, individual cognitive style and learning strategies.

2) Objective Analysis

Setting objectives is a necessary step to design effective net-based courses. If we just add random online materials into a class or a program, the aim of teaching cannot be achieved as expected. Only when web resources are used properly can they supplement instruction and facilitate learning. Without thinking deeply about the course objectives, net-based materials will lead to chaos and hinder learning. Warschauer proposes some guidelines concerning this point. The first and foremost one is to “consider carefully your goals” [10]. To start with, teachers should think about one question: Is the course suitable to develop in a Web environment? If so, we may continue the next step: Clarify goals according to different course objectives. For example, if the goal is to teach basic business knowledge, teachers should select the right web pages for students to read. If the goal is to teach business correspondence writing, teachers should consider some e-mail projects between their students and English-speaking natives.

3) Teaching-plan Preparation

If the course requires students to learn through web sites, browse and search for useful information, teachers should surf on the Internet first, choose websites suitable for teaching (considering elements as accessibility, page setup, page layout, content, language level, and difficulty of exercises), and set relevant assignments.

To carry out student-centered learning mode to involve students to make decisions, it’s advisable for teachers to provide students more learning materials. Even if the students are arranged to study the same materials, the assignments should be multiple. Since the Web is under constant development with addresses sometimes changing, websites sometimes closing down temporarily or permanently, the teacher had better check that the sites he has selected still exist shortly before the lesson starts, which will leave the teacher time to prepare alternatives in case of problems.

4) Teaching Management

After careful preparation for learning resources and activities, teachers have to make course objectives, contents of learning; assignments clear to students so that the goal can be achieved either on individual basis or through collaboration with peers, depending on the characteristics of the subjects. Most of the time, students can be divided into groups to work out solutions. Since students in one group may vary in computer experience, language level and cognitive ability, they must be encouraged to share responsibility, consult and help each other to fulfill the course tasks because collaborative learning is essential in assisting students in advancing through their Zone of Proximal Development.

5) Performance Evaluation

The last step is to evaluate students’ performance according to their learning attitudes, participation, time spent on online-learning, net recording, assignment completion quality and progress. This could be done by observation, anonymous surveys, questionnaires, class discussions and so on to assess the effectiveness of net-based ESP teaching and learning. If possible, there should be a final examination in the end of the course to test the learning results such as students’ language proficiency, specific knowledge of their major gained and learning skills.

So far, Network-based ESP teaching is still at the initial stage in many vocational schools and colleges, but bear fruitful result in some experimental ones. It is time for all ESP teachers to be aware of the advantages of net-based teaching and to have a grasp of skills that
is essential to implement the new information technology in their teaching to keep up with the latest education demands of the society.

References