

Development and Implementation of a Stratified Pedagogical Approach for College-level English Language Instruction

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Abstract: The stratified teaching of College English courses is designed to cater to the diverse levels of English proficiency, intelligence, and learning abilities among college students, ensuring that each student can make significant progress. This paper provides a brief overview of the theoretical underpinnings of stratified teaching and discusses the development and implementation of a stratified teaching mechanism for college English courses at the author's university. Specifically, it addresses student stratification, objective setting and planning, selection of teaching materials, as well as the establishment of a scientifically sound evaluation system for stratified College English teaching. Additionally, it highlights both challenges encountered in teaching practice and potential areas for further improvement.

1. Introduction

The traditional mode of college English courses often follows a "Big pot" approach, where students with varying levels of English proficiency are grouped together and taught using a uniform curriculum. This rigid teaching method is not well-suited for high-achieving students, yet overwhelming for those who struggle with the language, resulting in a significant achievement gap. Therefore, it is crucial to reform this traditional approach and introduce a stratified teaching model that focuses on personalized objectives in order to effectively address issues related to time consumption and inefficiency. This paper will delve into the relevant theories and explore the development and implementation of a stratified mechanism for college English instruction.

2. The theoretical foundation for implementing stratified approaches in college-level English instruction

Domestic and international pedagogical theories, such as "Stratified Instruction", "Humanistic Education" and the "Input Hypothesis", offer a robust theoretical foundation for implementing stratified college English teaching based on the individual differences of students, guiding its reform to a more profound level.

2.1. The pedagogical approach of "tailoring instruction to the individual aptitudes of students"

Confucius, the renowned ancient Chinese educator, initially proposed and implemented the concept of tailoring education to individual aptitude. He emphasized the importance of selecting appropriate methods and conducting targeted activities based on students' unique differences in order to achieve optimal outcomes. Similarly, Mr. Tao Xingzhi, a prominent modern Chinese educator, likened educating individuals to cultivating flowers, highlighting the necessity of first understanding their distinctiveness and then providing tailored nurturing and support accordingly. Sukhomlinskii, the first scholar outside of China to propose a similar theory, posited that every individual possesses unique talents and advocated for educators to identify students' interests and strengths in order to provide tailored instruction for their optimal development. This theory has

become one of the fundamental principles in educational practice. Teachers are expected not only to discern the diverse characteristics of their students but also to effectively stimulate their interests, recognize their strengths, address their weaknesses, bolster their confidence and motivation, and foster balanced development across various domains^[1].

2.2. The concept of “Humanism”

The concept of "Humanism" emerged in the United States during the 1950s and 1960s, with Maslow and Rogers serving as prominent figures within this movement. This theoretical framework prioritized innovation and self-realization, placing a strong emphasis on human dignity and value while advocating for a learner-centered approach that fully considers the specific needs of individuals. Maslow proposed that humans possess a hierarchy of multi-faceted needs, forming a triangular sequential system from lower to higher levels based on their pursued and fulfilled objectives. Meanwhile, Rogers posited that individuals inherently strive for "self-realization", exhibiting an innate inclination towards continual self-improvement and development in order to reach their maximum potential^[2]. According to this framework, each student harbors unique needs and motivations for achieving "self-realization". It is only through teachers' comprehensive understanding and analysis of students' personalized needs and learning motivations, as well as the implementation of tailored instruction, that more efficient and targeted guidance can be provided.

2.3. The theoretical framework of the "Language Input Hypothesis"

Stephen Krashen, an esteemed American linguist, has defined the current language level of learners as "i", and their subsequent level as "i+1". In this context, "1" denotes the disparity between the learners' present and forthcoming language levels. It is only through learning at the "i+1" level that learners can effectively enhance their language proficiency. Otherwise, it will prove to be exceedingly challenging for them to make substantial progress if they solely rely on what they have already mastered within their comfort zone or attempt to learn material that surpasses their current capacity. The purpose of language input is to stimulate the language acquisition mechanism in the human brain, which requires a proper understanding of the input. Therefore, comprehensible language input plays a crucial role in language acquisition, and educators should encourage students to have access to as much comprehensible language material as possible. The level of comprehensibility varies from individual to individual, making it both feasible and necessary to implement stratified teaching based on personalized instruction.

3. Development and implementation of a stratified teaching mechanism for college English courses at the author's university

3.1. Student Stratification

The scientific and rational stratification of students is essential for the smooth implementation of English teaching at the college level^[3]. Upon admission, our university conducts a freshmen entrance English test to comprehensively evaluate students' proficiency in listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translation. Based on the results of this test and in combination with their scores from National College Entrance Examination, new students are categorized into three levels: A, B, and C. Those who rank within the top 15% based on their average scores from both tests are placed in Level A. These students have a strong foundation in English, having mastered over 2000 English words as well as basic pronunciation, grammar, and other linguistic knowledge. They demonstrate outstanding proficiency in English and are well-suited to tackle challenging content in order to further enhance their language abilities. While the middle 70% of students are placed in Level B. These students possess a foundational understanding of general English, with a vocabulary ranging from 1200 to 2000 words, and a certain level of proficiency in pronunciation and grammar. However, there is room for further improvement in their English abilities. The bottom 15% are placed in Level C. New students who have passed the spring or art college entrance examinations are also classified into Level C. These individuals have a weaker grasp of English fundamentals,

with a vocabulary of fewer than 1200 words and deficiencies in pronunciation, grammar, and other aspects of language knowledge that prevent them from meeting current stage requirements. Stratification involves dynamic management based on subsequent test results, allowing for promotion or demotion accordingly. Additionally, student autonomy is respected with support provided to objectively select the most suitable level based on individual circumstances.

3.2. The formulation of scientifically stratified teaching objectives and plans

The main principle of stratified teaching is to tailor instruction to the individual aptitude of students, which involves determining teaching objectives and content based on students' foundational knowledge, IQ, motivation, and other relevant factors. Additionally, appropriate teaching methods should be selected and scientific, reasonable teaching plans formulated in order to facilitate significant learning outcomes for every student and promote collective progress and improvement across different levels of ability. Therefore, prior to implementing multi-level teaching activities, it is essential to establish specific teaching objectives, contents, and plans tailored to the diverse characteristics of students at different levels. Subsequently, teachers should organize discussions, make modifications, and finalize these materials before seeking approval and execution from the school's competent department. Teachers can change the previous one-size-fits-all "big pot rice" teaching mode and conduct more targeted teaching activities based on the characteristics of students at different levels.

3.3. Choosing the appropriate teaching materials for stratified instruction

Selecting appropriate teaching materials is a fundamental requirement to ensure the effective progression of college-level English instruction. These materials play a crucial role in shaping the content and delivery of educational activities, directly impacting their success. Tailored teaching resources should adhere to the inherent principles of language acquisition, facilitating knowledge and skill development across all proficiency levels, establishing a strong linguistic foundation, and enhancing communicative competence to meet diverse societal demands. Before implementing multi-tiered instruction, our university convened experienced educators to conduct comprehensive assessments and discussions based on students' English proficiency and learning capabilities at varying levels, ultimately we chose iEnglish, which is the New Generation College English series textbooks in Chinese, published by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press. This series of textbooks comprises general English materials developed in accordance with the guidelines outlined in the Ministry of Education's reform document on college English teaching and informed by the practical experiences of colleges and universities nationwide. iEnglish 3, which was released in 2015, caters to students with a strong foundation in English and high proficiency requirements. Over the past years, iEnglish 3 has demonstrated commendable teaching outcomes due to its innovative pedagogical approach and superior quality. iEnglish 1 and 2 draw from the successful practices of iEnglish 3, integrating insights from regular undergraduate university teaching to offer high-quality educational resources for a wider range of students seeking to enhance their English language skills. The iEnglish series effectively implements the principle of "guidance and teaching according to classification and aptitude" and adapts to the personalized teaching needs in colleges and universities. According to the *College English Teaching Guide*, the textbooks propose that stages should be designed with the basic, improvement, and development objectives. This reflects different emphases, ensures gradual progress, and supports colleges and universities in arranging teaching based on actual situations and students' characteristics. The teaching materials are designed to enhance students' English proficiency, as well as foster their critical thinking and intercultural communication skills, in accordance with the objectives outlined in the *College English Teaching Guide* for basic, improvement, and development stages. The content is developed with reference to China's Standards of English Language Ability, catering to the diverse needs of non-English majors in various colleges and universities. Our university has determined that A-level students will focus on "development," B-level students on "improvement," and C-level students on "basic" learning objectives, taking into consideration the distinct characteristics and contextual factors of each level.

3.4. Implementing a standardized, stratified system for evaluating teaching effectiveness

Based on the English scores from freshmen entrance English test and National College Entrance Examination, our university categorizes students into A, B, and C levels considering their English foundation and learning characteristics. Afterwards, we develop scientifically sound teaching objectives and plans at multiple levels, select suitable teaching materials for different levels, and design assessment and evaluation methods that are also tailored to multiple levels. Furthermore, a comprehensive evaluation system has been established to combine formative and summative assessments, encompassing diverse subjects, contents, methods, and standards for evaluation. The assessment process relies primarily on evaluation from teachers, supplemented by self-assessment and peer evaluation. Teachers conduct a comprehensive analysis of students' classroom performance, autonomous learning both online and offline, stage tests and final examinations. Students engage in self-evaluation of their learning attitude, progress, and effectiveness. Additionally, they are involved in evaluating each other on situational dialogues, role play activities, as well as audio and video assignments. The evaluation content encompasses language knowledge at various proficiency levels, and comprehensive language skills such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing abilities. It also includes communicative skills, learning purpose, motivation, learning methods and strategies, as well as critical thinking ability^[4]. For example, based on stratified teaching evaluation criteria aligned with different levels of instructional content delivery to students for varying difficulty assessments, Level A students are expected to pass the college English CET-4 and CET-6 exams successfully. Level B students are expected to achieve a minimum score of Band 4 on the College English Test or Level A on the College English Proficiency Test. Level C students should aim for Level B on the College English Proficiency Test. In terms of assessment methods, a combination of formative and summative evaluations^[5], self-assessment and peer assessment, etc., is utilized. The evaluation criteria include an integration of standardized and personalized assessments. The unified evaluation objectively quantifies students' academic performance through standardized test questions in both interim and final exams at each level. On the other hand, personalized evaluation takes into account students' classroom participation, independent learning efforts, and other qualitative factors. The integration of these two forms of assessment ensures a comprehensive evaluation and enhances students' motivation to learn. The multi-level college English teaching evaluation system has effectively stimulated students' interest in learning at all levels, fostering their enthusiasm and initiative while also boosting their confidence in their academic pursuits.

4. Challenges encountered in the context of stratified instruction for college English

The implementation and management of stratified college English teaching is a complex endeavor, fraught with numerous challenges in the practical application. The primary issues are as follows: Firstly, Methodological concerns related to stratification. Currently, the predominant methods utilized in college English stratification teaching usually encompass the two-or-three-stratification methods, and stratification + module method. These approaches are based on students' English scores from the National College Entrance Examinations, the freshmen entrance English test, or a combination of both. They emphasize reading and writing while neglecting listening and speaking skills, thereby overlooking variations in students' abilities and language skill requirements for listening and speaking activities. Therefore, further discussion and practice are necessary to determine the scientific and reasonable nature of these stratified teaching methods and modes. Secondly, the optimization and development of teachers and teaching resources play a crucial role in addressing the challenges associated with stratified teaching. The establishment of a stable teaching team and implementation of teamwork are essential for motivating teachers and stimulating their creativity^[6]. Furthermore, the improvement and development of teacher resources depends on enhancing teachers' professional levels and skills, highlighting the significance of developing and optimizing teachers and teaching resources. Thirdly, stratified teaching management presents a complex process that imposes high demands for scientific and standardized teaching administration. The intricacy of the management process often leads to

discouragement or incomplete implementation of the stratified teaching reform in many colleges and universities. Therefore, the reform must be conducted with perseverance in face of the challenges.

5. Conclusion

The author's university has developed a multi-level college English teaching mode, which includes three levels (A, B, and C) of students, teaching objectives and plans, teaching materials, as well as evaluation methods and systems. This approach aims to cultivate language proficiency tailored to students' varying course levels, ultimately improving the pass rates for national College English CET-4, CET-6, and Postgraduate English entrance examinations. The implementation of this approach effectively stimulates students' interest in learning English and enhances the overall quality of college-level English instruction. However, it is important to acknowledge that there are still numerous obstacles and complexities inherent in the ongoing reform process. Therefore, it is imperative for all members of the instructional team and relevant administrative bodies within the school to persistently engage in exploration and practical application, surmounting challenges while innovating new strategies, ultimately propelling the advancement of college-level English education to unprecedented levels.

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