

Original Paper

Research on the Impact of English Teaching Reform Based on the OBE Concept on the Cultivation of Vocational Undergraduate Students

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Abstract

Vocational undergraduate education is tasked with cultivating high-level technical and skilled talents. However, its English teaching has long suffered from the tendency of “generalization” and the separation of theory and practice. The problem lies in the fact that there has been a persistent predicament. The concept of Outcome-Based Education (OBE) and the ability-oriented training positioning of vocational undergraduate education are highly compatible. This provides a new path to solve this problem. The purpose of this study is to construct and implement an English teaching reform plan based on the OBE concept, and to empirically test its specific impact on the quality of vocational undergraduate education. The study adopts a quasi-experimental design and mixed research methods, with two parallel classes from a vocational undergraduate institution as the experimental group and the control group. The experimental group, based on the English application scenarios of job groups, reconstructed the goals, contents, methods, and evaluation system through reverse design and implemented output-driven project-based teaching; the control group maintained the traditional teaching mode. Data were collected through pre- and post-tests of English ability assessment, core literacy questionnaires, and in-depth interviews, and quantitative and qualitative analyses were conducted using SPSS and NVivo. The results showed that the students in the experimental group had significantly better comprehensive application abilities in workplace English, professional communication and collaboration skills, and learning self-efficacy compared to the control group. Clear outcome orientation and performance-based evaluation are the key mechanisms to stimulate learning engagement and ability transfer. The study demonstrates that the OBE reform can effectively bridge the gap between learning and practice in vocational undergraduate English teaching and

achieve synchronous improvement of language ability and professional accomplishment. This research provides an operational model and empirical support for the transformation of vocational undergraduate public English courses and has reference value for teaching reforms in similar institutions.

Keywords

OBE Concept, Vocational Undergraduate Education, English Teaching Reform, Talent Cultivation, Impact Research

1. Introduction

With the continuous improvement of China's modern vocational education system, vocational undergraduate education, as an emerging form of education, shoulders the specific mission of cultivating high-level technical and skilled talents. This educational positioning requires that talent cultivation must focus on the output of vocational abilities, emphasizing the comprehensive development of knowledge, skills, and professional qualities. However, when examining the current English teaching practice of vocational undergraduate colleges, it can be found that a considerable number of courses still follow the models and standards of ordinary undergraduate education, with generalized teaching goals, disciplinary content, and knowledge-based evaluation tendencies being particularly prominent. They fail to fully consider the actual language application needs of vocational undergraduate students in the working world, resulting in a structural disconnection between English learning and future job capabilities, and the teaching effectiveness urgently needs to be improved. At the same time, the outcome-oriented education concept, due to its core principles of "starting from the end and focusing on ability", forms a highly logical congruence with the educational goals of vocational undergraduate education, providing important theoretical support and practical directions for reversing the current "generalized undergraduate education" predicament and reshaping the value positioning of courses.

Based on the above background, the core issue of this research is: Can the English teaching reform based on the OBE concept effectively improve the quality of vocational undergraduate talent cultivation, and through what paths and mechanisms is its influence realized? Focusing on this core concern, the research decomposes and deepens the problem from two levels. First, from the teaching construction level, it explores which key dimensions the vocational undergraduate English teaching reform based on the OBE concept should be designed and implemented to respond to the specific focuses of output orientation in course goals, content organization, method strategies, and evaluation systems. Second, from the effect verification level, it examines what substantive impacts the above reform has had on students' language application abilities, vocational general abilities, and comprehensive qualities. Through the systematic exploration of these issues, it is expected to provide empirical evidence and operational reference frameworks for the transformation of vocational undergraduate English courses.

2. Research Design

2.1 The Research Question

In response to the practical demands of the reform of vocational undergraduate English teaching and to test the practical effectiveness of the OBE concept, this study has established four progressively related research questions, aiming to form a complete evidence chain from scheme construction, effect verification to the formation of subject experience. First, from the perspective of curriculum design, it questions what core elements the teaching reform scheme based on the OBE concept should include, aiming to clarify the definition of learning outcomes, the modular reorganization path of content, the selection principles of teaching strategies, and the reconfiguration direction of the evaluation system, in order to provide a clear operational framework for the systematic implementation of the reform. Second, from the perspective of language ability, it examines the specific impact of this teaching reform on students' comprehensive English application abilities, focusing on the changes in various skills such as listening, speaking, reading and writing, as well as their actual performance levels in using English to complete communication tasks in simulated or real workplace scenarios. Third, from the perspective of comprehensive quality, it explores the promoting effect of the reform on students' general qualities such as professional communication, teamwork, and autonomous learning, in order to test whether the OBE model can go beyond single language skill training and effectively cover the implicit quality dimensions of vocational undergraduate talents' ability specifications. Fourth, from the perspective of subject experience, it focuses on deeply grasping the attitudes, difficulties encountered, and real learning experiences and teaching reflections of both teachers and students during the reform process, thereby providing qualitative explanatory basis for the feasibility, acceptability and sustainability of the reform. These four questions are interrelated and mutually confirmatory, jointly constituting the core inquiry framework of this study.

2.2 The Research Object

In terms of the selection of the research subjects, this study adopted the non-equivalent pretest-posttest design in the quasi-experimental design. Two natural classes with the same professional background and no significant difference in English proficiency upon admission were selected from the same grade of a vocational university. These two classes were respectively set as the experimental group and the control group. The experimental group received English course teaching based on the OBE concept throughout the process, with the curriculum centered around a pre-set list of learning outcomes and mainly using project-driven and performance-based evaluation as the main teaching and assessment methods; while the control group continued to follow the original teaching syllabus and textbook system, and adopted the traditional teaching mode mainly focusing on language knowledge explanation and skill training. Both groups maintained basic consistency in terms of total course hours and teaching experience of the instructors, in order to minimize the interference of irrelevant variables. In addition to the overall comparison at the class level, the study also based on academic levels, gender and other characteristics, selected individual students from the experimental group, and selected some teaching

instructors involved in the teaching reform and some teaching managers as the subjects of semi-structured in-depth interviews. This combination of cluster sampling and purposive sampling strategy can not only answer the question of whether the teaching reform is effective through inter-group comparison, but also reveal the internal mechanism and conditional factors of the effect through individual in-depth interviews, thus forming a complementarity between quantitative conclusions and qualitative findings.

2.3 The Research Methods and Tools

To comprehensively and deeply collect data to address the aforementioned research questions, this study adopted a multi-method design combining quantitative and qualitative approaches. Attention was paid to the contextual adaptability and assessment validity of various tools during their development and selection. At the quantitative level, first, a self-developed English proficiency assessment tool was used for pre- and post-tests. This tool not only included conventional listening, reading, writing, and translation tasks but also specially added workplace scenario simulation tasks, such as writing an English email based on a given business context or conducting role-playing oral production, to enhance the ecological validity of the assessment; second, the “Self-Assessment Scale for Core Competencies of Vocational Undergraduate Students” was developed. The scale covers several sub-dimensions such as professional English communication skills, teamwork awareness, self-learning strategies, and cross-cultural understanding, all using Likert five-point scoring, and the project analysis and reliability and validity tests were completed before the formal administration. At the qualitative level, a semi-structured interview outline was designed, targeting both students and teachers, with a focus on understanding their perception of the value of OBE reform, changes in learning engagement, classroom participation experiences, encountered challenges, and suggestions for subsequent improvements; at the same time, process-related texts such as students’ project works, reflection logs, and classroom observation records were systematically collected, and the key events, cognitive changes, and emotional changes in these text materials were coded and classified using content analysis methods. The collaborative use of these diverse tools aims to form a multi-angle evidence loop for the reform effectiveness, enhancing the explanatory power and credibility of the research conclusions.

3. Design of Teaching Reform Plan and Experimental Results

3.1 The Design of Teaching Reform Plan

The teaching reform plan of this study is based on the concept of outcome-oriented education as the theoretical core. It systematically constructs around four core links: “outcome definition - reverse design - strategy matching - evaluation support”, and has formed an operational intervention plan. In the outcome definition link, the research team, based on the vocational undergraduate education training plan, compared with the typical English application scenarios of key industrial positions in the region, transformed the abstract teaching goals into classified “learning outcome lists”. This list covers several observable and evaluable specific outcome forms such as the writing and presentation of

business briefs, the translation of technical specifications between Chinese and English, oral responses in customer service scenarios, and writing of workplace letters, and is divided into basic general level, professional expansion level and comprehensive practical level according to the difficulty gradient and professional relevance, so that students with different starting points all have clear advancement paths. In the reverse design link, the course takes the completion of the final outcome as the logical endpoint, reversely deduces and organizes unit modules and learning task sequences. Each module has corresponding sub-outcome nodes preset, and supporting resources such as micro-lesson videos, project task books, case material libraries and scaffold-style templates have been developed to ensure that each step of the learning activities serves the achievement of the outcome. At the teaching strategy level, the reform introduces project-driven teaching and simulation workshops as the main form of the classroom, and students conduct language practice based on real or simulated work tasks in group collaboration. At the same time, they carry out flipped learning on the school-based SPOC platform, placing the knowledge input stage before class time, and using class time mainly for outcome practice, peer evaluation and teacher guidance, thereby significantly expanding the opportunities and depth of language output.

3.2 The Experimental Result

Table 1 presents the comparison results of the pre-test and post-test of the experimental group and the control group in the assessment of English application ability. The pre-test data shows that the baseline levels of the experimental group ($M = 72.35$, $SD = 8.62$) and the control group ($M = 71.98$, $SD = 9.14$) were basically the same. After a semester of teaching intervention, the post-test score of the experimental group increased to 83.47 points ($SD = 7.89$), and the paired sample t-test within the group showed that this change reached an extremely significant level ($t = 8.49$, $p < 0.001$); although the post-test score of the control group also improved ($M = 75.12$, $SD = 9.05$, $t = 2.55$, $p = 0.015$), the increase was significantly smaller. The independent sample t-test of the post-test scores of the two groups showed that the experimental group was significantly higher than the control group ($t = 4.46$, $p < 0.001$), and the effect size Cohen's $d = 0.99$, which belongs to a large effect level, indicating that the teaching intervention based on outcome-oriented teaching has a substantive and significant effect on improving students' English application ability.

Based on the thematic analysis results of qualitative data such as interviews, reflection reports, and classroom observation records using NVivo 14, three core themes and their sub-codes were extracted: "Change in Learning Engagement", "Improvement in Ability Perception", and "Challenges Faced by Reform". In terms of learning engagement, the coding reference point for "Active Participation Driven by Task" was the highest ($n=28$), with a coverage rate of 21.4%, indicating that the task-oriented design of outcomes is a key factor driving students' engagement; in terms of ability perception, "Enhanced Confidence in Workplace Communication" ($n=18$) and "Gained Sense of Professional Skills" ($n=14$) became the most prominent positive changes in students' experiences; in terms of challenges, "Initial Anxiety about Outcomes" was mentioned by 10 respondents, reflecting that the pressure brought by the

outcome list is a real issue that cannot be ignored during the initial stage of teaching reform. The cross-distribution of coding sources and the mutual verification among themes, combined with validity and reliability strategies such as triangulation, participant verification, and finding counterexamples, further enhanced the robustness and credibility of the above qualitative conclusions.

Table 1. Comparison of English Application Ability Before and After Testing between the Experimental Group and the Control Group (N = 82)

Group	N	Pre-test (M ± SD)	Post-test (M ± SD)	Within group t-value	Within group p-value	Post-test t-value between groups	Between group p-value	Cohen's d
Test Group	42	72.35±8.62	83.47±7.89	8.49	<0.001	4.46	<0.001	0.99
Control Group	40	71.98±9.14	75.12±9.05	2.55	0.015	—	—	—

4. Implementation Process of English Teaching Reform Based on OBE

4.1 Reconstructing Course Objectives and Content Modules

Based on job requirements and following the core concept of the OBE, the course objectives and content modules were systematically restructured. Firstly, industry experts and front-line engineers were jointly involved, through questionnaire surveys, job task analyses, and semi-structured interviews, to select and define the core professional English ability indicators that graduates of this major should possess. Then, typical work tasks were decomposed into several teachable, practiceable, and assessable ability units. On this basis, a dual-track content framework of “professional context + general English” was constructed: the general English main line was led by themes, focusing on the systematic consolidation and step-by-step improvement of language basic abilities such as listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translation; the professional context branch line selected real enterprise project cases, integrating language training into simulated work scenarios, achieving the collaborative and mutually promoting effect of the two lines in the dimensions of knowledge, skills, and literacy. Taking the “Engineering Technology English” module as an example, the teaching content was developed layer by layer around typical tasks such as the text features and reading strategies of product technical specifications, accurate translation and terminology management of equipment operation procedures, and the step-by-step analysis and standardized writing of fault reports. Each task was accompanied by corresponding process evaluation rubrics and phased output requirements; taking the “Business Service English” module as an example, the content covered core work links such as culturally appropriate

expressions in business receptions, the statement and summary writing of meeting organization, the language style norms and information coding of business correspondence, and the turn-taking and persuasive strategies in business negotiations. Students internalized language knowledge, acquired communication strategies, and strengthened professional awareness while completing various professional context tasks in a progressive manner, achieving the integrated development of language application ability and professional core literacy.

4.2 The Organization and Implementation of Teaching Activities

In the pre-class stage, the design principle is “clearing the output tasks and activating the learning reserves”. Through the teaching platform, the unit output task list and evaluation rubrics are released to students, and corresponding digital resources such as micro-lessons, industry language materials, and guidance handouts are simultaneously pushed out. Under the task-driven approach, students conduct autonomous previewing, complete the input accumulation of basic language knowledge, and initially attempt to conceive and design the output plans. Thus, the starting point of classroom learning shifts from passive listening to entering the classroom with questions and semi-finished products.

In the in-class part, teaching is organized around the student-centered approach, highlighting three activity mainlines: display, practice, and mutual evaluation. Students first present the phased output results completed before class in groups or individually, and then the teacher provides detailed explanations and guidance on typical problems, playing the role of a scaffold to guide and support; subsequently, they enter the simulation practice stage, where students use language to complete role-playing, case analysis, or project collaboration in professional scenarios. During this process, the teacher intervenes as an observer and facilitator in a timely manner, providing immediate feedback and strategy guidance. Peer evaluation runs through the entire class process. Students evaluate the displays and practices of their peers based on the rubrics, and in the two-way interaction of evaluating others and receiving feedback, they deepen their understanding of the task standards.

In the post-class stage, emphasis is placed on the refinement and reflection iteration of the works. Students modify and polish the output works based on classroom feedback, submit the final version of the learning results to the platform’s work bag, and complete personal reflection reports. They review the learning process from the dimensions of knowledge acquisition, skill application, and team collaboration, and refine their experiences and shortcomings. The teacher conducts a final evaluation of the final work and, in combination with the process records in the work bag, forms comprehensive feedback opinions. This provides a reference for the improvement of the next output task, thus forming a complete closed loop of “pre-class drive - in-class facilitation - post-class evaluation”.

4.3 The Output-oriented Multi-dimensional Evaluation Operating Mechanism

This study has established an output-oriented multi-evaluation operation mechanism that runs throughout the entire teaching process, aiming to address prominent issues such as ambiguous standards, single subjects, and lagging feedback in traditional evaluations. Firstly, detailed assessment rubrics are pre-designed for each output task, covering dimensions such as content completeness,

language accuracy, appropriateness of style, presentation effect, and teamwork. Clear standards and typical performance descriptions for “qualified” and “excellent” grades are defined, enabling students to clearly understand their direction of effort and quality benchmark at the beginning of the task. The formulation of the rubrics follows the principle of “collaborative construction by teachers and students”, with teachers providing the basic framework and organizing students to discuss and revise the rubrics. This process itself constitutes a deep understanding and internalization of the output goals. In the classroom peer evaluation part, the rubrics serve as a common language and operational tool for peer evaluation, effectively enhancing the consistency and objectivity of the evaluation. At the same time, the design of diversified evaluation subjects runs through the entire process of before, during, and after class: Before class, teachers conduct diagnostic evaluations of students’ pre-class learning outcomes through the platform, providing a basis for precise teaching in the classroom. During class, after students present and conduct simulations, teachers provide immediate comments, peer evaluations, and self-evaluations. The three voices of evaluation mutually confirm, prompting students to form a conscious monitoring of learning quality through the two-way interaction of evaluating others and receiving feedback. After class, teachers conduct final evaluations of the final work and write personalized written feedback, providing specific references for students to improve their next output tasks. Multiple subjects intervene in the evaluation at different nodes, forming an evaluation network covering the entire cycle of the task, which truly guarantees the comprehensiveness and timeliness of the evaluation.

In terms of the evaluation method, this study emphasizes the organic integration of process-based growth records and terminal evaluations, highlighting the systematic collection and in-depth application of learning evidence. Relying on the electronic portfolio function of the teaching platform, all the output works completed by each student during the semester, previous revisions, peer evaluation records, teacher feedback, and personal reflection reports are systematically archived, forming a clear and visible “learning evidence chain”. This evidence chain not only records the final level achieved by the students, but also fully presents the growth trajectory from the initially rough works to the gradually improved final products, shifting the evaluation from focusing on static results to focusing on dynamic development. Terminal evaluations do not merely rely on final exam scores or the quality of individual works for judgment, but incorporate the entire evidence accumulated in the electronic portfolio for comprehensive assessment: Teachers conduct retrospective evaluations of representative works at different stages based on the rubrics, combined with the quality of student participation in peer evaluation activities, the depth of metacognition shown in the reflection reports, and the learning engagement reflected in classroom observation records, ultimately synthesizing a comprehensive evaluation conclusion that can fully reflect the students’ English application ability and academic growth. This “evidence-driven” evaluation model makes the assessment results traceable and verifiable, significantly enhancing the scientificity and credibility of the evaluation; at the same time, students can intuitively perceive the causal relationship between effort and progress by reviewing the growth

evidence in their own portfolio, effectively stimulating the intrinsic motivation and self-efficacy of learning, and truly achieving a virtuous cycle of evaluation-driven learning and evidence-promoted development.

5. Conclusion

This research is based on the theory of output-oriented approach and is conducted in the context of vocational undergraduate university English courses. A systematic teaching reform experiment has been carried out, and the following main conclusions have been drawn. First, the English teaching reform based on the OBE concept can effectively enhance the workplace English application ability of vocational undergraduate students. The experimental data shows that the post-test scores of the experimental group are significantly higher than those of the control group, and the effect size reaches a large effect level, confirming that the output-oriented teaching intervention has a substantive promoting effect on language application ability; at the same time, the qualitative analysis results show that students have positive self-perception changes in the dimensions of vocational core competencies such as workplace communication confidence, professional skill acquisition, and team collaboration awareness, indicating that the teaching reform has also achieved the expected results at the level of core competencies. Second, clear output orientation, task-driven, and performance-based evaluation are the three key mechanisms that generate the above positive effects. Output orientation shifts the learning goals from vague knowledge coverage to clear outcome visibility. Students clearly know “what to learn and to what extent” at the beginning of the task, and their sense of direction and goal orientation are significantly enhanced; Task-driven continuously stimulates students’ internal participation motivation through real vocational contexts and stepwise output requirements, promoting them to transform from passive recipients to active constructors; Performance-based evaluation relies on the jointly constructed rubrics by teachers and students and the continuous evidence collection throughout the process, embedding the evaluation into the entire learning process, enabling students to continuously approach the learning goals in the iterative cycle of “output-feedback-improvement”, and the three elements work together to form the core driving system for the development of abilities and the generation of core competencies.

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