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Original Paper

Research on the Application of Competency-Based Teaching Method in English Teaching Courses

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Abstract

In the context of the transformation of English teaching from "knowledge imparting" to "ability cultivation", how to effectively integrate the ability-oriented teaching method into the design of English courses has become an urgent issue to be addressed. This study, based on the ability-oriented educational theory and the output-oriented approach, constructed an English course application plan that encompasses the hierarchical setting of ability goals, modular content reconfiguration, and the "driving-facilitating-evaluating" cyclic teaching process. Through a one-semester teaching practice, this study comprehensively utilized language ability tests, classroom observations, questionnaires, and teacher-student interviews to examine its application effect. The research found that the ability-oriented teaching method significantly enhanced students' comprehensive language application ability and autonomous learning ability, and significantly increased classroom participation and learning engagement. The role of teachers has gradually shifted from knowledge impartation to ability promotion. The research indicates that a teaching model driven by clear ability standards, carried by real tasks, and leveraged by formative evaluation has a positive effect on improving the effectiveness of English courses.

Keywords

Competency-based teaching method, English teaching, Curriculum design, Applied research, Competency assessment

1. Introduction

For a long time, English teaching in our country has been dominated by the knowledge-based concept. The core of classroom teaching has been vocabulary explanation, grammar analysis, and text translation. Teachers are accustomed to systematically imparting language knowledge to students,

while neglecting the essential attribute of language as a communication tool. This teaching model has produced learners who are often highly capable in examinations but exhibit embarrassing situations of not being able to understand, express, or write in real communication scenarios. With the acceleration of globalization and the continuous improvement of China's openness level, the demand for English talents in society has shifted from being able to understand documents and pass exams to being able to communicate effectively in English and express professional opinions in international settings. The "University English Teaching Guidelines (2020 Edition)" clearly states that English courses should cultivate students' English application skills and enhance their cross-cultural communication awareness and communication abilities. This indicates that the transformation of English teaching from a knowledge-based model to a competence-based model has risen to a national-level educational strategic requirement. Against this backdrop, exploring teaching methods oriented towards competence development and their implementation paths in English courses holds significant practical significance.

The competence-based teaching method emphasizes that the teaching goal is the ability required for students to complete specific tasks. It organizes teaching content, designs learning activities and implements evaluations based on competence standards. Its concept is highly consistent with the current direction of English teaching reform. However, effectively transferring this teaching paradigm from vocational education to English courses still faces many theoretical and practical challenges, including the scientific division and setting of English subject competence standards, the modular reconfiguration of existing textbooks and teaching content around competence goals, the design of task chains in classroom teaching to achieve integration of learning and application, and the transformation of the evaluation system from a single paper-and-pencil test to a multi-dimensional performance-based evaluation. The solutions to these problems require both systematic theoretical construction and in-depth exploration in the practical field. This study starts from focusing on the application design and implementation effect of the competence-based teaching method in English courses, attempting to provide reference paths and strategies for English teaching reform.

2. Research Design

This study selected 106 first-year students from two natural classes of an ordinary undergraduate institution affiliated with a provincial university as the research subjects. Both classes were taught by the researcher himself, and were respectively designated as the experimental class (52 students) and the control class (54 students). The pre-test results showed that there was no significant difference in the students' overall English proficiency between the two classes. In terms of gender ratio, academic background, and learning experience, they also had a high degree of homogeneity, meeting the basic conditions for inter-group comparison. The research field was the compulsory course "College English II" of the university, which was offered in the second semester of the first year and lasted for 16 teaching weeks, with 4 class hours per week. A unified textbook and teaching schedule were adopted. In the experimental class, the ability-based teaching method was integrated into the course design,

classroom teaching, and evaluation at all levels; while the control class followed the conventional teaching mode, focusing on knowledge explanation and skill training. The research was conducted in the same teaching environment throughout, effectively controlling the interference of teacher variables and course variables.

This study employed a quasi-experimental research method supplemented by qualitative analysis to comprehensively examine the application effect of the ability-based teaching method in the English course. At the quasi-experimental design level, the study set up the experimental class and the control class, implemented the course plan based on the ability-based teaching method in the experimental class, and maintained the conventional teaching mode in the control class. By comparing the differences between the two classes before and after the teaching implementation through language ability test data, the actual effect of the teaching intervention was verified. At the same time, the study introduced qualitative research methods to make up for the insufficient explanatory power of quantitative data, and continuously tracked the dynamic changes in the teaching process through classroom observations, in-depth interviews, and teacher reflection logs, exploring the operation mechanism of the ability-based teaching method in the real classroom context, teachers' experiences, and the actual difficulties they face. The combined research design of quantitative comparison and qualitative in-depth description can not only answer the question of whether the teaching intervention is effective from a macro perspective, but also reveal the internal mechanisms of why it is effective or restricted from a micro perspective, thereby enhancing the comprehensiveness and explanatory power of the research conclusions.

3. The Application Design of Competency-Based Teaching Method in English Courses

3.1 The Hierarchical Setting of Ability Goals and Alignment with Standards

The construction of the ability target system is the logical starting point of ability-based instructional design. Its core task is to transform abstract teaching goals into clear, measurable, and teachable ability indicators. This study, based on the ability description phrases corresponding to each level in the "Chinese English Ability Grading Scale" and the application ability cultivation requirements proposed in the "University English Teaching Guidelines (2020 Edition)", decomposed the overall course goals into a three-level ability indicator system. The basic level covers the basic application abilities of listening, speaking, reading, and writing, requiring students to be able to complete information acquisition and simple expression in familiar daily topics; the application level focuses on language comprehensive application ability and cross-cultural communication ability, requiring students to complete tasks such as information integration, viewpoint explanation, and interactive negotiation in simulated or real communication scenarios; the expansion level points to autonomous learning ability and critical thinking ability, requiring students to be able to independently plan learning paths, reflect on learning strategies, and make justified judgments on the language materials they encounter. Each level of ability goals is accompanied by specific behavioral descriptions and performance examples,

such as “can grasp the key information in the listening material and complete information transmission” for the basic level, and “can clearly express positions on social hot topics in group discussions and respond to doubts” for the application level. These provide clear learning expectations for students and an operational basis for the design of subsequent teaching activities and the formulation of evaluation standards.

3.2 The Reconstruction of Modular Teaching Content for Artificial Intelligence

Under the leadership of the ability target system, this research reorganized the content of the regular textbooks in a modular manner, breaking the original linear arrangement of units, and reorganized the teaching content around the core ability modules. Organizing the courses around the core ability modules means that each teaching module no longer centers on the text, but is led by a clear ability theme, such as “expression and argumentation of viewpoints”, “information extraction and retelling”, “response to cross-cultural situations”, etc. The listening, speaking, reading, and writing materials in the textbooks are screened, reorganized and supplemented based on the degree of relevance to the ability, so that the teaching content truly serves the achievement of the ability goals. The content in the textbooks that is irrelevant to the ability theme or has a low degree of relevance is compressed or adjusted to after-class self-study materials, while the real materials that are highly matched with the ability theme, such as TED speech segments, news reports, and excerpts from academic lectures, are included in the classroom teaching resource library to enhance the authenticity and timeliness of language input. In the design of real communication tasks, this research follows three basic principles. The first is the authenticity principle, the task context should be as close as possible to the communication scenarios that students may encounter in their academic and future careers, such as simulating international conference speeches, writing study abroad application documents, participating in cross-cultural team discussions, etc., so that the tasks completed by students in class can find real counterparts outside the classroom. The second is the gradient principle, the tasks within the same ability module are arranged in a stepwise manner according to the increasing cognitive difficulty and language complexity, from closed tasks gradually transitioning to semi-open tasks and then to completely open tasks, ensuring that learners of different levels can obtain appropriate challenges within the recent development zone. The third is the interactivity principle, the task design focuses on creating information gap, viewpoint gap or role gap, prompting students to conduct real meaning negotiation and language interaction during the completion of tasks, thereby developing language skills in communicative practice.

3.3 The Teaching Implementation Process

The implementation of the competence-based teaching method does not completely replace the conventional English curriculum; instead, it integrates and permeates within the existing curriculum framework. The effectiveness of this implementation largely depends on whether the bridging strategies are appropriate. This study has constructed a bridging mechanism at three levels. At the target bridging level, the hierarchical setting of competence goals is not a separate initiative but rather a

transformation and reorganization of the original knowledge and skills goals of the curriculum towards a competence-oriented approach, ensuring an organic connection rather than mutual exclusion between competence development and basic knowledge learning. The teaching of vocabulary and grammar is embedded in the completion of ability tasks, and students naturally acquire language forms when using language to solve problems. At the content bridging level, modular reconfiguration does not completely abandon the textbooks but selectively uses and expands the content of the textbooks. Texts with high matching degree to the competence modules are included in the core teaching content of the class, while those with low matching degree are used as after-class extension reading materials. Real language materials are also supplemented to form a complementary pattern with the existing textbook resources. At the time bridging level, this study retains the school's uniformly stipulated teaching weeks and total class hours, only adjusting the distribution within the class hours, using the first two classes of each teaching unit for task-driven and scaffolding facilitation, and the last two classes for output presentation and cooperative evaluation, ensuring that the competence-based teaching process can be completed without increasing the burden on teachers and students. This bridging strategy enables the competence-based teaching method to be integrated into the existing university English curriculum system without causing rejection reactions, providing a practical path for the regular implementation of teaching reforms.

3.4 The Integration Strategies for Blending with Regular English Courses

The implementation of the competence-based teaching method does not completely replace the conventional English curriculum; instead, it integrates and permeates within the existing curriculum framework. The effectiveness of this implementation largely depends on whether the bridging strategies are appropriate. This study has constructed a bridging mechanism at three levels. At the target bridging level, the hierarchical setting of competence goals is not a separate initiative but rather a transformation and reorganization of the original knowledge and skills goals of the curriculum towards a competence-oriented approach, ensuring an organic connection rather than mutual exclusion between competence development and basic knowledge learning. The teaching of vocabulary and grammar is embedded in the completion of ability tasks, and students naturally acquire language forms when using language to solve problems. At the content bridging level, modular reconfiguration does not completely abandon the textbooks but selectively uses and expands the content of the textbooks. Texts with high matching degree to the competence modules are included in the core teaching content of the class, while those with low matching degree are used as after-class extension reading materials. Real language materials are also supplemented to form a complementary pattern with the existing textbook resources. At the time bridging level, this study retains the unified teaching weeks and total class hours stipulated by the school, only adjusting the distribution within the class hours. The first two classes of each teaching unit are used for task-driven and scaffolding facilitation, while the last two classes are used for output presentation and cooperative evaluation, ensuring that the competence-based teaching process can be completed without increasing the burden on teachers and students. This bridging

strategy enables the competence-based teaching method to be integrated into the existing university English curriculum without causing rejection, providing a practical path for the regular implementation of teaching reforms.

4. Application Results and Discussion

4.1 The Changes in Students' Comprehensive English Abilities

The result of comparison of pre- and post-assessment scores of English comprehensive ability for two classes is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Comparison of Pre- and Post-Assessment Scores of English Comprehensive Ability for Two Classes (M±SD)

Test dimension	Group	Pre-test	Post-test	Within-group difference	Between group t-value	p value	Cohen's d
Total Score	Test Class (n=52)	73.84±8.15	82.46±7.32	+8.62	3.87	0.000	0.75
	Control Class (n=54)	74.12±7.98	77.30±8.41	+3.18	—	—	—
Listening	Test Class	18.56±3.42	21.08±2.95	+2.52	1.96	0.053	0.41
	Control Class	18.74±3.28	19.86±3.17	+1.12	—	—	—
Reading	Test Class	19.32±3.15	21.67±2.88	+2.35	1.78	0.078	0.38
	Control Class	19.45±3.21	20.74±3.06	+1.29	—	—	—
Writing	Test Class	17.24±3.86	27.07±3.54	+9.83	4.52	0.000	0.88
	Control Class	17.38±3.75	21.14±3.98	+3.76	—	—	—
Speaking	Test Class	16.72±4.21	27.97±3.78	+11.25	5.14	0.000	1.02
	Control Class	16.85±4.08	20.27±4.15	+3.42	—	—	—

Based on the results of a semester-long teaching experiment, the overall English proficiency of the students in the experimental class showed a significant improvement. As shown in Table 1, the average total score of the post-test in the experimental class increased by 8.62 points compared to the pre-test, reaching 82.46 points, while the pre-test score of the control class only increased by 3.18 points. The independent sample t-test results indicated that the difference in post-test scores between the two classes was statistically significant ($t = 3.87$, $p < 0.01$), with an effect size of Cohen's $d = 0.75$, which belongs to a medium to high effect level. From the perspective of individual skills, the experimental class showed the most significant improvement in the two output skills of speaking and writing, with the post-test means increasing by 11.25 points and 9.83 points respectively compared to the pre-test, while the control class only increased by 3.42 points and 3.76 points respectively. The differences between the two groups reached a significant level ($p < 0.01$). In terms of receptive skills such as listening and reading, the improvement in the experimental class was also higher than that in the control class, but the effect size was relatively smaller (d values were 0.41 and 0.38 respectively). This result indicates that the ability-oriented teaching method has a holistic effect on promoting students' comprehensive language proficiency, but the effect on the improvement of output skills is significantly better than that of receptive skills. The reason may be that the communicative tasks set in the "driving - facilitating - evaluating" cycle in the teaching process mainly target oral and written output, and learners gained more opportunities to extract language and call strategies through repeated output practices, thereby accelerating the transformation of implicit knowledge into explicit application. At the same time, students in the experimental class also showed positive changes in their autonomous learning ability. The questionnaire data showed that the self-assessment means of the students in the three dimensions of "formulating learning plans", "monitoring the learning process", and "evaluating learning effects" after the experiment increased from the pre-test's 3.21, 3.08, and 2.89 to the post-test's 4.12, 3.91, and 3.76 respectively. The paired sample t-test results showed that the differences between the pre-test and post-test were all significant ($p < 0.01$). In the interviews, some students mentioned: "Before learning English, I just followed the teacher's instructions. Now I know what goals I need to achieve for this unit, and when doing tasks, I fill in what I'm lacking. My sense of direction has become much stronger." This indicates that the hierarchical setting of ability goals and clear evaluation standards provide students with a clear autonomous navigation framework, enabling them to shift their metacognitive strategies from an unconscious state to a conscious and regulated state.

4.2 The Changes in Students' Learning Engagement and Classroom Participation

The implementation of the competence-based teaching method not only led to changes in students' language abilities, but also significantly improved their level of learning engagement and classroom participation patterns. This study tracked and recorded the students' classroom participation in the experimental class from three dimensions: behavioral engagement, cognitive engagement, and emotional engagement. As shown in Table 2, in the behavioral engagement dimension, the frequency of students' active participation in class rose from an average of 1.82 per class hour at the beginning of the

experiment to 3.64 at the end, increasing by approximately double; the proportion of students taking on the leading role in group discussions (such as serving as presenters or discussion organizers) increased from 28.85% to 63.46%. The classroom observation records revealed that in the control class, the proportion of teacher speech time accounted for 68.4%, while student speech only accounted for 31.6%, while in the experimental class at the end, the proportion of teacher speech dropped to 42.7%, and the proportion of student speech rose to 57.3%, indicating a substantial transformation in the distribution of classroom discourse power. In the cognitive engagement dimension, the depth of students' task completion also underwent a qualitative leap: at the beginning of the experiment, 65.38% of students' task completion remained at the lowest threshold level of "completed and submitted", and only 11.54% of students could engage in "expansive exploration"; by the end of the experiment, the proportion of students engaging in "expansive exploration" had risen to 40.38%, indicating that a considerable number of students were no longer satisfied with merely completing basic tasks but actively sought higher-quality expression and deeper content exploration. In the emotional engagement dimension, the average score of students' English learning anxiety decreased from 3.62 in the pre-test to 2.84 in the post-test (on a 5-point scale), and the average score of their intrinsic motivation increased from 3.18 to 4.05. Many students in the interviews stated: "Previously, I was always afraid of being called on in English class. Now, there are specific tasks to complete in each class, and we know what to do and to what extent it is considered good, so we are no longer so nervous." This change is attributed to the transparency of the evaluation criteria in the competence-based teaching method and the establishment of a teacher-student cooperative evaluation mechanism. Under the guidance of clear behavioral indicators, students gained a sense of control over their learning process, thereby reducing anxiety caused by uncertainty.

Table 2. Changes in Classroom Participation Indicators of Students in the Experimental Class

Observation indicators	Pre-experiment period	Mid-experiment period	Post-experiment period	Change trend
Average number of active speaking times per student (times/lesson)	1.82	2.75	3.64	Continuously rising
Proportion of students taking the leading role (%)	28.85	45.19	63.46	Significantly improve
Proportion of teacher speaking time (%)	68.4	54.8	42.7	Significant decline
Proportion of student	31.6	45.2	57.3	Substantial

speaking time (%)				increase
Completion and submission level (%)	65.38	42.31	25.00	Marked decrease
Deepening processing level (%)	23.08	36.54	34.62	First rise then stability
Expansive exploration level (%)	11.54	21.15	40.38	Substantial increase
Mean of learning anxiety (on a 5-point scale)	3.62	3.24	2.84	Continuous decline
Mean of intrinsic motivation (on a 5-point scale)	3.18	3.67	4.05	Continuously rising

4.3 The Transformation of Teachers' Teaching Concepts and Practices

During the sixteen-week experiment, the researchers' teaching concepts and practices underwent a gradual transformation from ideological conflict to strategic adjustment and then to conscious innovation. In the initial stage (weeks 1-4), although the researchers agreed with the ability-based concept, they were still constrained by the habit of "emphasizing explanation over practice". The planned 15-minute driving session often extended due to excessive explanation, reflecting the tension between the deep belief of "worrying about students not learning enough" and the principle of "learning and application integration". In the middle stage (weeks 5-12), the researchers began to consciously flexibly build scaffolds based on students' performance. The duration of classroom explanations decreased from about 28 minutes in the previous four weeks to within 15 minutes in the twelfth week. The evaluation role also shifted from the laborious mode of "point-by-point criticism" to the empowering mode of selecting typical samples and guiding students to independently diagnose and evaluate each other. In the later stage (weeks 13-16), the ability-based design had been internalized as an automatic thinking process. The researchers could switch freely between the textbook and real language materials, and could keenly capture the generation of immediate communication difficulties to create new scaffolding activities, such as temporarily using information diagrams to help students build an expression framework. This process indicates that the development of teachers' practical knowledge is not a simple abandonment of old concepts, but rather an integration and reorganization of new and old experiences through continuous cognitive conflicts, behavioral trial and error, and reflection and regulation.

5. Conclusion

The competence-based teaching method constructs a learning ecosystem that is "target visible, process controllable, and result measurable" through task design based on output orientation, clear and transparent evaluation criteria, and a teacher-student collaborative evaluation mechanism. It not only enhances students' comprehensive language skills, especially their output skills, but also effectively improves their learning engagement and autonomous learning ability, and promotes a profound transformation in teachers' teaching concepts. This study only uses two classes from a single school as samples, with an experimental period of one semester. The generalizability of the research conclusions awaits further verification on a larger scale; the strategies for improving receptive skills also need to be further optimized in subsequent studies. Nevertheless, the findings of this study provide empirical evidence and practical references for the competence-oriented transformation in university English teaching reform.

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