

A SURVEY OF ADVANCED ENGLISH TEACHING

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ABSTRACT

Advanced English is one of the core courses for English majors at undergraduate level. There are always problems such as unclear teaching focus and unscientific teaching methods. In order to accurately locate the key problems of Advanced English teaching and put forward scientific teaching methods, this study conducted a qualitative and quantitative survey on 3 English teachers and 137 students of English majors in a university in Sichuan, China. The survey results show that vocabulary acquisition plays an important role in Advanced English learning. Teachers should strengthen the input, training and activation of students' vocabulary in teaching content setting, assignment arrangement and teaching method reform.

Key Words: Advanced English; vocabulary acquisition; reform in education.

1. INTRODUCTION

Advanced English (formerly known as "intensive reading") is one of the core courses of English majors in senior grade in Chinese colleges and universities. It is a course that trains students' comprehensive English skills, especially reading comprehension, grammar, rhetoric and writing ability.

Ji (1981) first pointed out that there were two problems in intensive reading teaching: unclear teaching focus and unscientific teaching methods. Since then, researchers have tried to solve the two problems through introspection (such as Lu, 1994; Liu, 1995; Su, 1996; Zhu, 2002; Li, 2005; Wu, 2009; Zhang, 2010; etc.), relevant theories (such as Li, 1998; Sha, 2007; Cai, 2008; Li, 2008; Wan, 2011; Li, 2012; Luo, 2014; Deng, 2015; Fan, 2020; etc.) or various methods (such as Mo, 2003; Yang, 2003; Liu, 2006; Chu & Liu, 2007; Zhao, 2007; Yang, 2008; Chen, 2009; Hu, 2020; Feng, 2011; Li, 2011; Lai, 2014; Xu & Wei, 2018; etc.). After 40 years' exploration, many new teaching methods have been poured into Advanced English teaching. However, the problems of unclear teaching focus and unscientific teaching methods of advanced English have not been effectively solved.

This study attempts to conduct a targeted survey on the current situation of Advanced English learning for English majors, then analyzes students' various difficulties in learning this course and finally puts forward the teaching emphasis and corresponding teaching methods of this course, with a view to providing beneficial educational policies and teaching suggestions for the education management departments and related teachers and students.

2. RESEARCH DESIGN

2.1 Research Questions

This study mainly attempts to answer the following three questions:

- (1) What is the current English proficiency level of English majors?
- (2) What difficulties do English majors have in Advanced English learning?
- (3) What are the causes of the difficulties in learning Advanced English for English majors?

2.2 Participants

The participants are 3 teachers and 137 students in the third year of English major in a university in Sichuan province of China. Among them, the three teachers who participate in the interview have been engaged in Advanced English teaching for many years, with comprehensive professional knowledge and rich teaching experience. The basic information of 137 students participating in the questionnaire survey is shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Basic Statistics of Student Participants

Questions	Answers	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	21	15.33
	Female	116	84.67
Specialty	Economic and Trade English	61	44.53
	Educational English	73	53.28
	Translation	3	2.19
English scores for college entrance examination	Less than 100	5	3.65
	100-110	13	9.49
	111-120	28	20.44
	121-130	52	37.96
	131-140	36	26.28
	More than 140	3	2.19

According to table 1, Most student participants have excellent English scores in the college entrance examination, and their English level is equivalent.

2.3 Research Instruments

2.3.1 Interview

In order to provide references for compiling students' questionnaires, A depth interview toward 3 teachers is firstly implemented. The interview consists of 10 open-ended questions, which are divided into three dimensions, namely, teaching contents (questions 1-2), teaching methods (questions 3-6) and teaching satisfaction (questions 7-10). See Table 2 for details.

Table 2 Advanced English Interview Outline (Teacher)

Questions	Dimensions
1. What are your teaching contents?	Teaching contents
2. Which content do you think is the most important and difficult?	
3. Do you have a long time to prepare lessons?	Teaching methods
4. What are your current teaching methods?	
5. How do you think of your current teaching methods?	
6. English teaching is gradually adopting the Internet-based blended teaching method. What do you think of this opinion?	
7. Are you satisfied with the interaction between teachers and students in class?	Teaching satisfaction
8. Are you satisfied with the completion of teaching tasks in each class?	
9. Do you think the current teaching task is heavy?	
10. Do you reflect over the past class?	

2.3.2 Questionnaire

Through the depth interview and repeated discussions with experts, a student questionnaire is finally formed. The questionnaire consists of 24 questions (mainly closed questions with a few open questions), which are divided into two parts. Question 1-3 is the first part, which involves the basic information of the respondents. Question 4-24 is the second part, which involves the main part of the questionnaire, including English proficiency level of English majors, the current situation of Advanced English learning and suggestions for Advanced English teaching.

Table 3 shows the specific correspondence between questionnaire contents and question numbers.

Table 3 Specific correspondence between contents and numbers

Division	Dimensions	Questionnaire contents	Question numbers
Basic information			Question 1-3

The main part	English proficiency		Question 4-8
	Learning situation	Learning motivation	Question 9-11
		Comprehensive English skills	Question 12-17
		Difficulty and its causes	Question 18-23
	Teaching suggestions		Question 24

The test results of the questionnaire show that the scale has good reliability and validity.

2.4 Data Collection

The interview in this study was completed by meeting with three senior English teachers at an appointed time and place. The researcher collated the interview contents and summarized the main points, which were used as an important basis for compiling the students' questionnaire.

Questionnaires were distributed online, and 137 questionnaires were recovered, with an effective rate of 100%. By using Questionnaires and SPSSAU, this study mainly made descriptive analysis and cross analysis on the questionnaire data, and probed into the English proficiency level of the third-year English majors, the present situation of advanced English learning and teaching suggestions.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Results and Discussion for Interview

With regard to the teaching contents of Advanced English, the teachers interviewed agree that they pay great attention to the cultivation of students' comprehensive English application ability of “listening, speaking, reading, writing and translation”. They mainly adopt traditional offline teaching methods to train students for the above abilities. The most important way to cultivate students' listening and speaking ability is to explain in class and play English videos. In reading ability, teachers take students' reading materials as the key link. In terms of translation ability, teachers mainly let students rewrite and narrate texts, or practice writing and translation with paper and pen.

With regard to the teaching methods of Advanced English, the interviewed teachers agree with the mixed online and offline teaching methods, and take online teaching as an auxiliary way of offline teaching in actual teaching. For example, when students are trained in listening and speaking, they are often assisted by oral training systems through computers or mobile phones. In reading, reading websites on computers and mobile phones are frequently used to arrange reading assignments. In terms of translation, teachers usually arrange writing or translation assignments with the help of computer or mobile.

As for the teaching satisfaction of Advanced English, the interviewed teachers have different satisfaction with the interaction of different classes, but they are basically satisfied with the degree and manner of completion of their teaching tasks and students' participation in class.

In a word, through interviews, it is found that English teachers pay much attention to cultivating students' English skills in listening, speaking, reading, writing and translation, and mainly implement different teaching methods for different abilities under traditional offline teaching, and they are basically satisfied with the degree and manner of completion of teaching tasks. In addition, English teachers also advocate that teaching methods should be actively updated, such as adopting online and offline mixed teaching methods, which not only helps to expand students' information input, but also reduces teachers' burden.

3.2 Results and Discussion for Questionnaire

Based on the results of interviews with teachers, this study further conducted a questionnaire survey among students, in order to accurately expose the students' English proficiency level, the present learning situation and teaching suggestions for Advanced English. The results and discussion for questionnaire are as follows:

(1) Students' English proficiency level.

Students' English proficiency level is exposed through CET scores. After that, not-good-at CET questions and the reasons for not-good-at CET questions are furtherly investigated.

Figure 1 and 2 show the distribution of CET scores. As shown in the figures, half of students are in the qualified level (425-500 points) of CET tests; Very few students are at the excellent level (above 551 points). In other words, most of students are not having qualified English proficiency level.

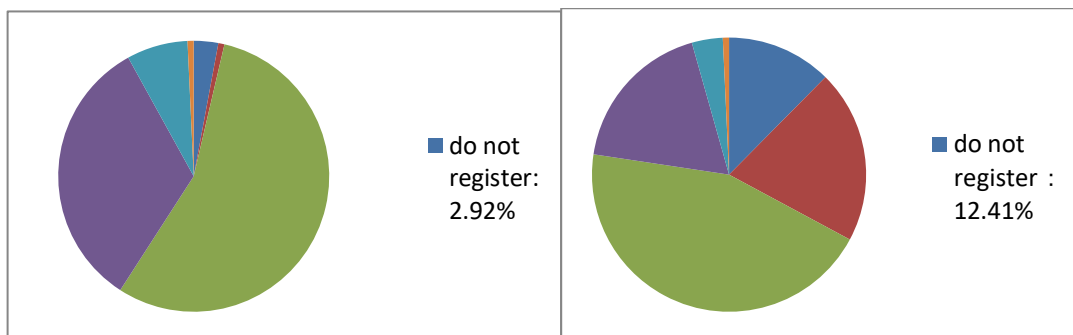


Figure 1: CET Band-4 Scores

Figure 2: CET Band-6 Scores

The types of CET questions that students are not good at are shown in Figure 3 and 4. As shown, 27.24% of the participants consider listening questions to be the most not-good-at questions. As to the reasons, they think that lack of vocabulary is the primary one, followed by lack of cultural knowledge and weak grammar, accounting for 29.25%, 23.40% and 21.45% respectively.

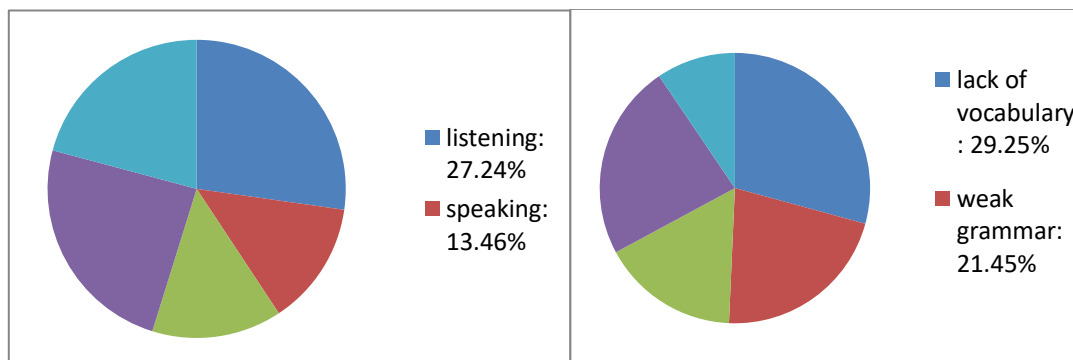


Figure 3: Not-good-at Questions **Figure 4:** Reasons for Not-good at Questions

By investigating the CET scores of third-year English majors, this study finds that most of the students' CET scores are not having qualified English proficiency level. This shows that the third-year English majors' comprehensive English application ability is not very strong, and only a few students can skillfully use the English language. After an in-depth analysis of students' not-good at question types and their reasons, it is found that listening questions rank first, while the primary reason for losing scores in listening is lack of vocabulary. This shows that the vocabulary mastery of third-year English majors is not very optimistic.

(2) Current situation of Advanced English learning.

The questionnaire investigates the present situation of the participants' Advanced English learning from the following three aspects: the learning motivation; the classroom learning gains and the completion of ordinary assignment.

Among the motivation of learning Advanced English, the top three are improving English ability, getting credits and preparing for Tests for English Major (TEM). It can be seen from figure 5 that the participants have strong instrumental motivation to learn Advanced English, which is mainly to improve their comprehensive English application ability. In other words, students can actively realize the importance of improving their English application ability such as listening, speaking, reading, writing and translation.

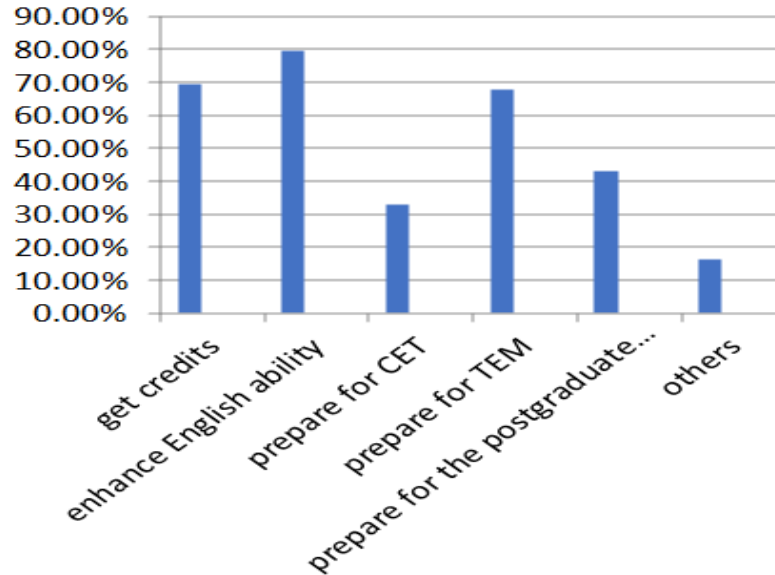


Figure 5: Learning Motivation for Advanced English

The classroom learning gains of Advanced English mainly involves students' subjective cognition of the degree of helpfulness in listening, speaking, reading, writing and translation, etc. The results of discreteness analysis are shown in Table 4. According to the table, the average value of reading, writing and translation is above 3.5. The average value of listening questions is less than 3. The results show that most of the participants think that learning Advanced English is helpful to the cultivation of reading, writing and translation ability, but not so to the cultivation of listening and speaking ability, especially listening ability. So, the problem of listening weakness in CET test has not been well compensated in Advanced English learning.

Table 4 Discreteness Analysis for the Helpfulness of Advance English Learning

Questions	Sample size	Minimal value	Maximal value	Average value	Standard deviation	Median
Listening	137	1.000	5.000	2.993	1.033	3.000
Speaking	137	1.000	5.000	3.102	0.949	3.000
Reading	137	1.000	5.000	3.723	0.802	4.000
Writing	137	1.000	5.000	3.606	0.861	4.000
Translation	137	1.000	5.000	3.569	0.830	4.000

Table 5 and figure 6 investigates the most difficult tasks and their causes in the daily assignment of Advanced English. As shown in Table 5, 54 respondents think that paraphrasing is the most difficult, accounting for 39.42% of the total number. The major reasons are insufficient understanding ability and lack of vocabulary, accounting for 31.75% and 28.57% respectively. It can be seen that the lack of vocabulary is one of the main reasons why the paraphrasing is the most difficult in their daily work.

Table 5 Frequency Analysis of Difficult Assignments

Assignments	Frequency	Percentage	Cumulative percentage
Rhetoric	34	24.82%	24.82%
Vocabulary	13	9.49%	34.31%
Paraphrase	54	39.42%	73.72%
Translation	14	10.22%	83.94%
Reading comprehension	22	16.06%	100%

By investigating the learning motivation, the classroom learning gains and the daily assignments of Advanced English, this study finds that third-year English majors can take the initiative to realize the importance of improving their English proficiency, notice that Advanced English learning is the least helpful to the cultivation of listening ability, and paraphrasing is the most difficult problem in daily assignments. The main reason for those difficulties is lack of vocabulary.

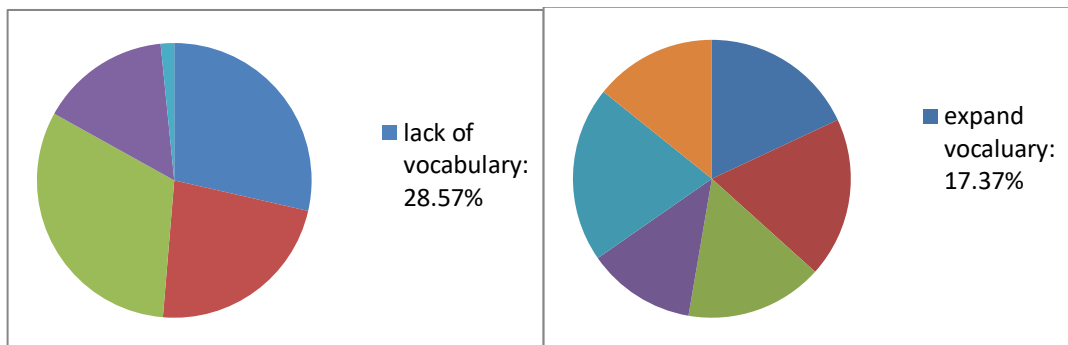


Figure 6: Reasons for Difficult Paraphrasing

Figure 7: Teaching Suggestions

(3) Suggestions on Advanced English teaching.

On the Advanced English teaching, it is suggested that all options present a balanced proportion. However, as shown in Figure 7, enhancing translation and paraphrasing skills, reading skills, and vocabulary expansion have significantly higher response rates and penetration rates, accounting for 19.69%, 17.37%, and 17.95% respectively. This shows that students pay more attention to these three aspects of knowledge input in advanced English teaching.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Facing the main problems of unclear teaching focus and unscientific teaching methods in Advanced English teaching, this study conducted an in-depth interview with 3 teachers and a questionnaire survey with 137 students to expose the English proficiency level for English majors, the current situation for Advanced English learning and the causes for the difficulties in this course, and the main conclusions are as follows:

(1) Most of the students' CET scores are not having qualified English proficiency level.

(2) The listening ability of the third-year English majors is the weakest among the five abilities, and the primary reason lies in the lack of vocabulary. However, Advanced English learning is the least helpful to improve students' listening ability.

(3) Paraphrasing is the most difficult assignment for third-year English majors, and lack of vocabulary is one of the main reasons for the difficulty.

(4) Students subjectively realize that enhancing the teaching of translation and paraphrasing and expanding vocabulary are the top priority in Advanced English teaching.

In a word, the lack of vocabulary is the main reason why the third-year English majors are weak in listening, speaking, reading and translation, especially in listening and translation. Vocabulary learning plays a key role in cultivating students' English abilities.

In view of the importance of vocabulary acquisition to third-year English majors, this study puts forward the following teaching suggestions on advanced English classes.

(1) When setting the teaching content of advanced English courses, teachers should increase vocabulary input and explain the skills of paraphrasing.

(2) Teachers should increase the training of vocabulary and strengthen students' attention to vocabulary expansion.

(3) In the reform of Advanced English teaching methods, teachers can integrate artificial intelligence into advanced English classroom teaching. By this, students' interest in learning can be greatly stimulated and students' vocabulary learning can be highly assisted.

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