

A Study of Creative Models of English Competence Training for Undergraduate Students of Sports Studies

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Abstract

Based surveys among the undergraduate students of Sports Studies in universities, this research covered the status quo of English language teaching them, the problems needs to be solved by employing case/field studies, data analysis as well as reviewing relevant research and studies. It is argued that current issues in this filed are lack of quality teaching materials, rigid schedule of English lessons, tedious teaching approaches and the need of renewing and updating the concept of language teaching to students of Sports Studies. New creative models were therefore suggested such as categorizing undergraduates of Sports Studies into groups of Physical Education, Traditional Sports & Games as well as Professional Sports & Athletics, plus English language teaching to be integrated with their specialty of sports, so that the overall level of English competence of those students could be raised to a higher level.

Key Words: Sports Studies, College English, Competence, Creative Models

In an era of globalization, English has never been more important as a tool and medium of communication between countries. A good command of English is a new necessity for people to succeed in his or her own realm. Likewise, sports and games, as a major part of culture and communication, is being integrated with the daily life of everyone more closely than before. Therefore, it is fairly important to enhance the education and development of talents of sports and games, especially the undergraduate students majoring in Sports Studies. Unfortunately, these students' English level were generally lower than that of students of other courses or universities. Apart from the lower starting level, undergraduates of sports have to spend most of their time for training and practices in addition to their work on other foundation and theory subjects, which leads to the problem of limited time and energy for their English

learning, much less than their peers of other courses. In the meanwhile, the requirement and expectations for the English level of those sports undergraduates have never stopped rising. Therefore, it is quite an urgent and pressing need of reforming the approaches and models of English teaching for those students so that they could improve their English and increase their overall employability for their career.

This research aims to explore for a new model of English teaching for undergraduates of Sports Studies into groups of Physical Education, Traditional Sports & Games as well as Professional Sports & Athletics, by taking advantage of online resources and other media, following the general theories of ELT.

Status Quo of ELT for Undergraduates of Sports Studies

It can be argued that the traditional style and approached of ELT is still dominating the teaching and learning of English, or College English as it is referred to in China, i.e. a one-dimensional style of language input (Zhang, 2010), which focuses partially on the learners' direct remembering language fragments such as words, phrases or sentences, etc. Such kind of rigid old style can hardly provide a mechanism for the learners to understand the formality and structure of language to be used freely, making the language lessons boring and irrelevant for the learners' practical use of the language. In order to change a scenario like this, it is necessary, in the whole process of College English teaching, to follow the principal of combining the language content with different formalities so that the students are able to use the language freely without being restrained by rigid grammar rules, etc. For a quite long period of time, different universities have never stopped trying new styles and approaches of English teaching based on their own particular students' needs, overall target and students' level of English. There are some new strategies being suggested such as Task-based, Culture-oriented, Interactive Learning and Computer & Multi-media Aided Language Learning. Compared with students from other provinces, students studying in School of Sports & Games, Henan University have an English level below average. In addition, those undergraduate students spend most of their time in their professional athletic training and practices apart from their other compulsory and foundation subjects of theories etc., which result in limited time and lack of energy for their English learning, much less than their peers of other courses. In the

meanwhile, the requirement and expectations for the English level of those sports undergraduates have always been rising. Therefore, it is a strong and pressing need that College English teaching to be changed and improved.

Current Problems of English Teaching to Students of Sport Studies

Suitable Teaching Materials Unavailable

There is a huge difference between suitable textbooks and those which are not compatible with the English level of the students. Textbooks beyond the students' English level will be stressing and frustrating for the students, imposing a strong feeling of failure and depriving the students of their desire to study. If the textbooks and teaching materials too easy for the students, they will lose their motivations of learning as they feel that they cannot learn anything from those textbooks. There are several types of English textbooks available for undergraduate students of sports major. Take again Henan University for example, the textbook in use is Intensive Reading, and Listening from the series of the third edition of College English by Dong Yafen, published by Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press. These textbooks are fairly difficult for students of sports due to their limited starting level of English. Besides, there is hardly anything on the topics of sports, games and/or athletics, nothing really relevant to their major course of studies. An irrelevant textbook of improper level of difficult make the students even less motivated to learn English. Improving their English competence is apparently out of question.

Rigid schedule of English Lessons

At the moment in most universities, students of Sports Studies are put into different groups for English lesson based on their level of competence. Students with a better command of English take their English lessons with students from other departments, while other students majoring in Traditional Sports & Games and Professional Athletics, usually with an English level lower than average, will use less challenging textbooks. It is reasonable trying to cater for the students' different levels of English, there is still a problem due to the normal schedule of English same as that of students of other courses. The main reason is that those students of Professional Athletics have more hours in their schedule for training and taking part in different races and sport events. Therefore, lack of flexibility in their English lesson schedule is another factor making it more difficult to teach English and improve their

competence of English.

Monotonous Teaching Style

As the essential and fundamental way of conveying knowledge, teaching in class should employ a proper approach, which is the key to a successful English teaching. As it is required in the National Syllabus of College English, teachers are supposed “to apply flexible and feasible teaching methods based on different levels and/or needs of the subjects being taught”, so that “the effectiveness of teaching can be maximized”. The current teaching style of English for students of Sports Studies are rather monotonous and jamming, as the teacher keeps talking during most of the time in class with few activities organized for the students. There is not much interactivity between the teacher and the learners in such a tedious and boring atmosphere. It can be imagined that the overall effectiveness of teaching is very poor and the students are bored and not motivated at all. Monotonous as this will finally result in the students’ resentment against learning English.

Out-dated Principal & Mindset of ELT

In most universities or institutions of Traditional Sports & Games, students are more often than not taught by the old style of teacher-oriented “jamming”, in which case the teacher plays no other roles but a provider of information, not taking enough care of the balance between progression and effectiveness. This out dated style of teaching neither ensures the quality and effect of teaching, nor does it help in fostering talents of good English competence (Wang, 2009). Furthermore, some colleagues are rather passive and slow to update their mindset and ideas of ELT. They always focus on knowledge imparting in the teacher-oriented way, without thinking about using interesting and motivating approaches. Such monotonous and old-fashioned teaching style inevitably deprives the students of their interests in and enthusiasm of learning English, especially for the students of Sports Studies.

Creative Models of English Competence Training for Sports Studies Undergraduates

The National College English Syllabus (2007) compiled by the Ministry of Education makes it very clear that the teaching of College English should following the principles of “different guidance for different students” and “catering for different needs of the students” so as to meet the “various requirements of different groups of students”(Chen 2007). Targeting at the individual level of and need for English learning among different groups of students, teachers are supposed to put their students into different groups based on a reasonable analysis

of the students' level and to conduct the teaching at different levels. This is the general trend of development of College English teaching, which has seen some successful cases in a few universities in China. As students of a peculiar major course, undergraduates of Sports Studies have the tasks of competing for their universities and/or the provinces they come from. These factors should be taken into considerations when making arrangement of their English lessons, such as a suitable series of textbooks of appropriate difficulties, flexible schedule of English lessons as well as smaller groups based on their particular English level and their availability to attend the lessons when not competing in any sports events.

Improvement and integration: New Models to Enhance the Competence of Sports Students

Education is one of the basic properties of sports and games, and Sports Studies and Physical Education were among the earliest undergraduate courses in the history of higher education in China. Students will not be admitted to those courses unless they reach a certain level in sports, and in academic subject, too, when they finish their high school studies. The academic requirements in terms of admission to those courses are more or less the same as the requirement of other courses, which means an improved average level of English of those sports students. This makes it possible for some universities, such as School of Sports & Games of Henan University, to integrate the English lesson of sports students with that of students of other courses. When working and learning together with students of other major courses, sports students show an increased motivation. As revealed by statistics data, passing rate of students in College English Test Band 4, or CET-4 as it is referred to, has been higher than the past few years. Being encouraged by the national policy of English teaching in different groups or bands of students, ELT for sports students can well be integrated with that of students of other courses so that the sports students could do better.

Different Teaching for Different Students, the Creative Model of ELT for sports students

Analyzing the overall development of courses of Sports Studies, it can be found that students will have to reach the National Athletic Level II to be admitted to the courses of Traditional Sports & Games or Training & Development for Professional Athletics. Most students are selected via extra interviews and trials, too. Therefore, these students have a higher level of athletics but a lower level of academic performance when compared with undergraduate students of general school or department of Sports Studies. After being admitted to the universities, they do have to take part in some sports events and competitions as

representatives of the university. Therefore, English learning arrangement for students of Traditional Sports & Games and those of Training & Development of Professional Athletics are based on teaching materials of one level lower than the standard, starting from Preliminary Level of College English, rather than College English Book I. But it is still up to further research to decide whether these materials of preliminary levels are appropriate for these students since they have not had proper and systematic English learning in high school. Many students do complain about the disparity between their level of English and standard of difficulties of the teaching materials, which decreases their interests and enthusiasm of learning English. (Li, 2011). Therefore, it is quite urgent for the time being that a new series of English textbooks should be developed for these students, providing materials of proper level of difficulties to stimulate the students' desire of learning before it is possible to enhance their competence of English.

Flexibility and preciseness: New Model of Creativity for the Student

After being admitted to universities as professional athletes, those students will have to spend most of their time and energy in physical training, exercises as well as preparation for their tests of National Athletic Levels. As Zhang & Sun (2011) put it, the students use most of their time for physical stuff, leaving them limited time and less focus on English learning. This is why the students remain at a rather basic level in terms of their English competence, with a poor level of listening, speaking, reading and writing. But from another prospective, it can be argued that these students have a strong desire for academic competence, otherwise they do not have to quit from professional sports team to study in universities. If their desire as such can be properly maintained and guided, it will be possible to offer them more flexible and precise English learning opportunities based on their schedule of physical training and taking part in sports events. Shanghai University of Technology has a good reputation in the development of their athletic teams and they have also been very bold and creative in provision of academic courses for those athletes, proved by a very high passing rate of CET-4 among their newly admitted athletes. Their team of table tennis, in particular, are benefiting from some creative models of English lessons. As early as since 1996, the university has been providing special English lessons for the table tennis team, who took part in the University representing China as well as competing in the national premium league of table tennis. They put all the members of the table tennis team into one big group for their English lessons to follow a 4-

year plan, under which they raise their level of English while fulfilling all their sports tasks and assignments. In the year of 2000, the university put all the students of Professional Athletics and those of Sports Studies under the management and administration of the Department of Sports, covering all their physical training and academic studies (Zhu & el, 2010). As employed by Shanghai University of Technology, such new arrangements of flexibility without compromising quality of teaching have been proven to be effective and efficient for the management of similar institutions of sports and athletics, who could also follow suit by providing their student athletes a more flexible schedule of English lessons and a more practical syllabus. Students should be allowed to put their academic studies on hold for a certain period of time to focus on their training and competitions. More time slots can be made available in between those sport events so that they could work for more academic credits. This will provide a better solution to the problem of time conflicts between their physical training and academic studies, which will eventually result in their better performance and an enhanced English competence.

Summary

Sports Studies has always been an important sector of courses of higher education in China. Its importance is being strengthened under the current national strategy of developing a nation of strong sports and civilized culture. Sports Studies as an undergraduate course shows its significance in terms of a harmonious atmosphere on campus as well as a better reputation of the university. English competence as one of the major indicator of the overall qualities of the undergraduate students has always been a weak aspect among students of sports. This is why such a research is conducted to analyzing the status quo and the current problems. Based on relevant literature and research of pedagogy, linguistics as well as sports studies, new creative models of College English teaching are being suggested as the major finding of the research in the hope of providing better training and learning experience for the undergraduate students of Sports Studies as well a reference for other researchers working on the similar topic of improving the English competence of undergraduate students.

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