Research and Practice of Higher Vocational English Courses Based on Core Competencies

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Abstract: This study investigates and explores the teaching of higher vocational English courses for non-English majors from the perspective of core competencies. First, it outlines the current research status of core competencies and analyzes the national-level requirements for English core competencies. Subsequently, based on professional training objectives and curriculum standards, a questionnaire on the core competencies of English courses has been designed to understand students' perceptions and experiences regarding the development of their competencies in areas such as workplace communication, cross-cultural exchange, language thinking enhancement, and autonomous learning improvement. The survey results showed that the majority of students had a positive attitude towards the effectiveness of English courses in cultivating the aforementioned core competencies. However, some students also suggest improvements, such as increasing practical opportunities and strengthening cultural exchange. Based on this, the study further explores how to integrate the cultivation of core competencies into classroom teaching, including the use of a combination of formative and summative assessments, the design of teaching content and activities related to the workplace and cross-cultural communication, and the guidance of students to actively explore and apply their knowledge, thereby enhancing their English language application abilities. This study has certain reference value for the optimization of the higher vocational English curriculum system and the reform of teaching methods.

Keywords: Core competencies; Vocational English courses; Research and practice

1. Overview of core competency research

Since the beginning of the 21st century, "core competencies" have received increasing attention within the field of education. Core competencies are the comprehensive embodiment of students' knowledge, skills, emotions, attitudes, and values. They represent the essential qualities needed by every student to achieve a successful life, adapt to lifelong personal development, and meet the needs of society [1]. In recent years, assessment based on core competencies has become an important trend in education [2]. The fundamental purpose of research into core competencies is to fully implement the Party's educational policies, practice socialist core values, and

fulfill the fundamental task of fostering virtue through education. The English Curriculum Standards for Higher Vocational Education (2021 Edition) clearly states that the core competencies for vocational English focus on four main aspects: workplace-related foreign communication, intercultural communication, the enhancement of linguistic thinking, and the development of autonomous learning.

The Overall Plan for Deepening Educational Evaluation Reform in the New Era clearly states the need to promote the fundamental task of fostering virtue through education, reform student evaluation, and encourage the all-round development of students in morality, intelligence, physique, aesthetics, and labor. The English Curriculum Standards for Higher Vocational Education (2021 Edition) also points out that learning assessments should be based on core subject competencies, aiming to establish a scientific teaching evaluation system and fully leverage the multiple functions of educational assessment. The release of these documents clearly signals that reform in evaluation is imperative, emphasizing a shift from single-dimensional knowledge assessment to comprehensive competency evaluation, and focusing on students' growth and progress across different fields to meet the needs of education development in the new era.

Especially with the rapid development of information technology, students' learning modes have undergone dramatic changes, and the integration of online and offline learning has become the norm. These changes not only alter the ways in which students acquire knowledge but also pose new challenges to teaching methods and evaluation systems. Therefore, it is necessary to adapt to the characteristics and changing learning modes of students, integrate elements of core competencies into teaching and evaluation systems, better align with new trends in educational development, and cultivate highly qualified talents capable of meeting future social demands.

2. Survey on core competencies in the English curriculum

Based on the professional talent training program and the English Curriculum Standards for Higher Vocational Education (2021 Edition) issued by the Ministry of Education, and relying on the "14th Five-Year" national planning vocational education textbooks—Advanced International English Audio-Visual Speaking Course for Vocational Colleges, Practical Comprehensive Course (Third Edition), —a self-compiled questionnaire was designed considering students' professional needs. There are 12 questions in this questionnaire. This questionnaire aimed to investigate participants' perceptions and experiences regarding the role of the English curriculum in workplace-related foreign communication, intercultural communication, enhancement of language thinking, and improvement of autonomous learning. The participants were students of Grade One from a higher vocational college, with approximately 300 non-English major students taking part in the survey. We collect and analyze the data via Sojump, an online survey platform (Wenjuanxing). The questionnaire uses a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 represents "strongly disagree" and 5 represents "strongly agree."

According to the survey results, we summarize and analyze the effectiveness of the English curriculum in terms of workplace foreign communication, intercultural communication, language thinking enhancement, and autonomous learning improvement (**Tables 1** to **4**).

2.1. Workplace foreign communication

Table 1. Workplace foreign communication questions

Questions	1	2	3	4	5
1. Do you think the current English courses help you understand and express English information in workplace situations?	37.14%	45.71%	16.19%	0.95%	0
2. What is your level of satisfaction with the oral and written communication exercises in your English courses?	39.05%	46.19%	13.33%	0.95%	0.48%
3. Are there enough simulated workplace communication activities (such as role-plays and workplace case analyses) in your courses?	30%	38.57%	26.67%	2.86%	1.90%

Question 1 shows that participants generally find that English courses are quite helpful for workplace intercultural communication. For example, 37.14% of respondents believe the English courses are "very helpful," 45.71% think they are "quite helpful."

Question 2 shows that most students are satisfied with the oral and written communication practice provided in English courses. Specifically, 39.05% of students stated they are "very satisfied," 46.19% are "quite satisfied," and 13.33% feel "neutral." Only a small number of students are dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with the practice.

Question 3 shows that over 68% of the respondents believe the course provides enough simulated workplace communication activities. Among them, 38.57% think there are "quite a lot," and 30% consider them "sufficient." Only 2.86% think there are "few," and 1.9% believe there are "none."

2.2. Intercultural communication

Table 2. Intercultural communication questions

Questions	1	2	3	4	5
4. Do you think the English courses have helped you enhance your understanding and respect for world multiculturalism?	40.95%	43.33%	15.71%	0	0
5. Have you learned intercultural communication skills in the course?	36.67%	49.52%	13.81%	0	0
6. Do you think the course contains enough content on the dissemination of Chinese culture?	41.43%	49.05%	9.05%	0.48%	0

Question 4 shows that 40.95% believe the courses are "very helpful," and 43.33% think they are "quite helpful," making a total of 84.28% who have a positive view of the courses' effectiveness in this regard. This reflects that English courses contribute to improving understanding and respect for world multiculturalism.

Question 5 shows that among the students, 49.52% say they learned "some," and 36.67% say they learned "a lot." Another 13.81% feel they learned an "average" amount, and no one reported having learned "very little" or "nothing at all." Overall, most participants hold a positive view of the effectiveness of learning intercultural communication skills in the course.

Question 6 shows that most people believe the course contains enough content related to the dissemination of Chinese culture. Specifically, 41.43% think the course "fully" includes Chinese culture dissemination, 49.05% think it is "comparatively included," and 9.05% think it is included "to an average extent." Only 0.48%

think it is "rarely included," and no one thinks it is "not included at all."

2.3. Language thinking enhancement

Table 3. Language thinking enhancement questions

Questions	1	2	3	4	5
7. Do you think the English courses have improved your ability to discern and understand the ways of thinking of English speakers?	37.62%	45.24%	16.19%	0.95%	0
8. Has learning English in the course enhanced your logical thinking, critical thinking, and creative thinking skills?	39.05%	40.95%	18.57%	1.43%	0
9. Do you have opportunities for in-depth discussions and reflective activities in class?	29.52%	44.29%	24.76%	1.43%	0

Question 7 shows that 37.62% believe the courses have "greatly improved" this ability, 45.24% believe they have "improved it to some extent," and 16.19% consider the improvement "average." Only 0.95% think the courses have "barely improved" this ability, and no one chose "not improved at all." Overall, most respondents believe that English courses have enhanced their ability to discern and understand the ways of thinking of English speakers.

Question 8 shows that the vast majority of students believe that learning English in the course has strengthened their logical, critical, and creative thinking abilities. Specifically, 82 students (39.05%) think their abilities have been "greatly enhanced," 86 students (40.95%) think they have been "somewhat enhanced," and 39 students (18.57%) think the enhancement is "average." Only a few students, 3 (1.43%), feel the enhancement is "slight," and no one thinks there has been "no enhancement at all."

Question 9 shows that the proportion of students who have opportunities for in-depth discussion and reflective activities in class is 29.52% ("very often"), 44.29% ("quite often"), and 24.76% ("average"). Only 1.43% reported "rarely" having such opportunities, and no one selected "never." Overall, more than 70% of students indicated they have opportunities for in-depth discussion and reflective activities in class, with the largest proportion indicating "quite often."

2.4. Autonomous learning improvement

Table 4. Autonomous learning improvement questions

Questions	1	2	3	4	5
10. Do you think the English courses have helped you develop good habits of autonomous learning?	34.29%	49.05%	15.24%	0.95%	0.48%
11. In the course, are you able to obtain diverse learning resources and support?	38.57%	46.19%	14.76%	0.48%	0
12. Do you think the course has helped you develop the awareness and ability for lifelong learning?	37.14%	44.76%	17.62%	0.48%	0

Question 10 shows that more than 80% of respondents believe that the English courses have, to some extent, helped them develop good autonomous learning habits. Specifically, 34.29% think the courses have "greatly helped," 49.05% think they have "helped to some extent," and 15.24% think the effect is "average."

Only a very small number believe the courses have "barely helped" or "not helped at all."

Question 11 shows that the majority of people (38.57%) are fully able to obtain diverse learning resources and support during the course, and nearly half (46.19%) say they are "quite able" to access such resources and support. Only a small proportion (14.76%) feel they are "average" in this regard. Very few (0.48%) say they can "barely" obtain diverse learning resources and support, and no one says they are "not able to obtain them at all."

Question 12 shows that more than 80% of respondents believe the course has helped them develop the awareness and ability for lifelong learning. Specifically, 37.14% think the course is "very helpful," 44.76% think it is "quite helpful," and 17.62% believe it is "generally helpful." Only 0.48% believe it is "not very helpful," and no one thinks it is "not helpful at all."

In summary, most students affirm the effectiveness of the English curriculum in workplace foreign communication, intercultural communication, language thinking enhancement, and autonomous learning improvement. However, some students have put forward suggestions for improvement, such as increasing practical opportunities and strengthening intercultural content. These suggestions will help further enhance the quality of the vocational English courses and better meet students' needs in the workplace and intercultural communication.

3. Implementation of core competencies in English classroom teaching

Based on the questionnaire survey and considering students' actual situations, core competencies have been integrated into classroom instruction. In the classroom, a combination of formative and summative assessments is primarily used, which respectively account for 60% and 40%.

Formative assessment can help improve students' learning performance [3]. Formative assessment is often administered during instruction to answer questions such as "What are the strengths and weaknesses of students' understanding of the course content?", "How should I (as an instructor) adapt the lesson to make it more beneficial to students?" and "Is there any student who is falling behind in the class?" [4]. Especially as an assessment method capable of evaluating and developing a range of complex cognitive and non-cognitive abilities—such as problem-solving, communication and collaboration, critical thinking, and creativity—performance-based assessment aligns more closely with the intrinsic rationale of core competency development [5].

Formative assessment is carried out based on students' performance before class (such as independent preview of vocabulary and texts according to task sheets assigned by teachers), during class (group discussions and practice of key points guided by the teacher, as well as group output tasks like oral presentations and written exercises), and after class (review, consolidation, and extended learning activities, such as uploading and displaying class notes on the Rain Classroom platform, or reviewing vocabulary on the Word Master platform).

Summative assessment is adopted at the end of the semester, mainly in the form of a closed-book examination.

Take intensive reading classes as an example: Before class, students preview workplace-related vocabulary and expressions, helping them accumulate English knowledge for professional scenarios and laying the groundwork for future workplace communication. In class, by reading the text, students compare differences between Chinese and Western cultures, cultivating their cross-cultural understanding and global perspective. During class, teachers analyze the language structures and expressions in the text, and students complete written expression tasks in groups to enhance their language thinking skills. After class, students complete self-directed preview tasks, which help them develop learning planning and self-management abilities. Formative assessment

is integrated in "before class, in class, after class."

Classroom implementation details:

Learning materials:

Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press "14th Five-Year" National Planning Textbook for Vocational Education, Practical Comprehensive Course 3, Unit 4 "The Business World," reading passage "A Smart Move or an Error?—The Story of New Coke."

Teaching theme:

Market Strategies and Their Impact in the Business World

Teaching objectives:

(1) Mastering key vocabulary and expressions: Students can accurately understand and use key vocabulary related to the text (such as marketing, advertising, classic product, consumer response, etc.).

(2) Analyzing key events and causes: Students can sequence key events mentioned in the text in chronological order; discuss and analyze the background and reasons for Coca-Cola's launch of a new formula, as well as the consumer response it generated.

(3) Applying classroom knowledge in simulated scenarios: Students can play different roles in simulation activities, propose and present strategies to address consumer dissatisfaction, and use focus vocabulary and sentence structures from the text to express themselves in English.

(4) Enhancing cross-cultural promotional awareness and skills: Students can use what they have learned to create an English PPT for promoting a product with Chinese characteristics to overseas markets.

[Pre-class activity]

Preview core vocabulary: Complete vocabulary study and testing tasks on the Word Master platform, such as marketing, advertising, classic product, consumer response, etc.

[In-class activities]

Activity 1: Context introduction

The teacher briefly introduces the brand history and market position of Coca-Cola and Pepsi, and shows video materials.

Activity 2: Text learning and discussion

Initial understanding: Exercise on sequencing the key events in the text.

Language knowledge learning and practice: Learn the key English expressions in the text and complete related exercises on the Rain Classroom platform; establish a vocabulary bank, summarizing the text's theme-related vocabulary and collecting additional related vocabulary.

In-depth analysis and discussion: Carefully read the text in sections, engage in group discussions to answer questions in English, such as the background and reasons for the new formula launch, the consumer response to the new formula, and the measures the company ultimately took.

Activity 3: Scenario simulation

Students are divided into groups to role-play different characters, such as Coca-Cola's department managers (e.g., marketing, public relations, sales), market analysts, and consumer representatives. They simulate a meeting and present strategies to address consumer dissatisfaction. Based on the text content, they use the key vocabulary and sentence structures from the vocabulary bank. Each group writes an outline of their strategies and delivers a 5-minute presentation to the class, explaining their solutions in English. Under the teacher's guidance, students use a presentation evaluation form to provide peer feedback. The teacher offers comments and shares workplace communication skills, such as polite expression strategies ("We appreciate the

feedback...” etc.).

Summary:

The teacher summarizes the lesson and assigns post-class tasks.

[Post-class activities]

Activity 1: Language knowledge test:

Use Rain Classroom to complete the review and testing of the text's key language knowledge.

Activity 2: Cross-cultural extension task:

Applying knowledge learned in class, students select a Chinese characteristic product (such as Wang Laoji herbal tea, BYD automobiles, etc.) and an overseas market (such as the US, Japan, South Africa, etc.), and create an English PPT to promote the product to potential customers in that market.

After two semesters of study in the first year, among the four small classes, each with 34 students, a total of 27 students successfully passed the College English Test Band 4 (CET-4). This is the students' best level ever.

4. Conclusion

This paper shows research and practice based on core competencies. From the questionnaire survey, we can see that it is necessary to integrate the core competencies into the higher vocational English course. By the implementation of core competencies in English classroom teaching, it is very effective in enhancing the effects of classroom teaching. Through the research and practice of this paper, we can see that the majority of students believe that the integration of core competencies has to some extent helped them improve their English performance, expand their knowledge of Chinese and Western cultures, enhance their autonomous learning abilities, and provide support for their future career development, thus improving their English language application skills. Some students have achieved good results in the Word Master vocabulary competition, English writing competition, or oral English competition. This not only strengthens their confidence in English learning but also inspires them to be more active and proactive in further improving their English proficiency. As a result, they have become more actively engaged in exploring and applying the knowledge they have learned, further enhancing their English language application abilities.

Funding

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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