Academic Journal of Humanities & Social Sciences
ISSN 2616-5783 Vol.3, Issue 10: 16-25, DOI: 10.25236/AJHSS.2020.031003

Reflection on Online Teaching of Advanced English and Exploration of Blended Teaching of the Course

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ABSTRACT. *With China's foreign language education now entering a brand-new stage, its reform becomes inevitable. One way of reform is to make use of the Internet technologies in the transformation of its teaching contents and methods. This paper compares the major online teaching models of cMOOC, xMOOC and SPOC, reflects on the online teaching of the Advanced English Course in this special semester of 2020, and designs a blended teaching model for it. This model makes reference to flipped classroom based on SPOC while at the same time trying to incorporate the features of cMOOC, which emphasizes the importance of students' constructing knowledge structure by themselves and actively interacting with each other in the expansion of their knowledge. In this model, students will focus on the gathering, screening, organizing and sharing of information, while incidentally acquiring vocabulary and grammar. In this way, the Advanced English course will truly be content-based.*

KEYWORDS: *Advanced english, Blended teaching, Teaching design*

1. Introduction

With China's foreign language education entering its 8th decade, it takes on new missions, challenges and opportunities as a result of the changes in domestic and international environments.

Wen Qiufang divides up the development of China's foreign language education into four stages: Stage of Exploration ranging from 1949 to 1977, Stage of Development from 1978 to 1998, Stage of Acceleration from 1999 to 2011 and New Stage from 2012 up till now. Each stage differs in the kinds of foreign languages taught in school, the specifications of foreign language talents, the teaching objects, the teaching contents, and the teaching methods and means. She points out that the changes in the means of teaching stand out most, and that China's foreign language education will "be faced with challenges from language intelligence technologies".[1]

ISSN 2616-5783 Vol.3, Issue 10: 16-25, DOI: 10.25236/AJHSS.2020.031003

In recent years, intelligence technologies have developed with an accelerated speed and have been applied in an increasingly diversified area with an increasingly greater degree of integration. On April 18th 2018, China's Ministry of Education issued Informatization of Education Action Plan 2.0 , which demonstrates the resolution of the government to promote the informatization of education, and which reveals an irreversible trend of the application of the Internet Plus, big data and new AI technologies in education.[2]

Against this backdrop, Zhou Jie and others thus commented on the first Workshop on Foreign Language Teaching and Research Innovation In the Light of Big Data that "traditional educational model and ecosystem will be restructured to a certain extent and that radical reform will ensue in the ideals, paradigms, learning methods and research perspectives of foreign language education.[3]

Foreign language education should respond actively to the national strategic demands of informatization and intelligentization by "integrating AI technologies and information literacy into education and teaching, and by innovating teaching models", but it is also essential that we acknowledge that "technology should never replace teachers especially in terms of emotional experiences and interaction"[4]. In other words, in the exploration of the potentials of on-line education, the advantages of traditional classroom education should not be forsaken. Rather, a blended model of teaching should be developed to take advantages of the merits of both online and offline education.

2. Summary of Major Online Course Models

2.1 Mooc

Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC) have mushroomed since the first of its kind was launched in 2008[5]. MOOC can be further categorized into cMOOC and xMOOC with their major differences shown in Table 1[6].

Table 1 Differences between Cmooc and Xmooc

	cMOOC	xMOOC
Time	2008 to now	2011to now
Typical Projects	CCK08, DS106, eduMOOC, MobiMOOC	Udacity, Coursera, edX, U2
Supported Theory	Connectivism	Behaviorism
Features	Theme-based	Content-based
	Emphasis on Construction and Creation of Knowledge	Emphasis on transmission and replication of knowledge
	Emphasis on creative, self-directed and social network learning	Emphasis on video watching, assignment and

ISSN 2616-5783 Vol.3, Issue 10: 16-25, DOI: 10.25236/AJHSS.2020.031003

		testing
Structure	Learners learn by sharing resources and interactively expanding scope of learning	Traditional class structure and teaching procedure
Teaching Content	Distributive, open content	Regular arrangement of learning content
Teacher-Student Relationship	Changing and ope	Traditional
Learning Objective	Learners share and create knowledge	Learners master knowledge
Off-class Discussion	Distributed, via diversified social media	Discussion forum, offline meeting
Testing and Evaluation	Comprehensive evaluation by teachers	Software-based testing, self-evaluation, peer evaluation

What is most noteworthy in Table 1 is that in the cMOOC model, the content of courses is distributive and open, adjusted by the teachers in the teaching process, and that the learners have more initiative and autonomy in teaching and learning. As a result, cMOOC places extremely great demand on both teachers and learners, hampering its large-scale expansion[5]. By contrast, xMOOC, replicating traditional class structure and teaching process, centers on the teaching of structured knowledge. Popular online classes of famous universities fall into the category of xMOOC.

2.2 Spoc

SPOC (Small Private Online Course) is another popular online model of teaching. It is small compared with almost unlimited participation of MOOC, and it is private as it places a restriction on the identity of the learners, and thus is not absolutely open. According to He Bin and Cao Yang, SPOC inherits, improves and surpass MOOC. It inherits the advanced ideas and practices of MOOC, such as the utilization of short videos, a few highly efficient and exact tests and learning analysis based on big data. It improves on MOOC in that its privacy and restriction on the scale overcome inherent short comings of MOOC, such as an excessive number of students, a low completion rate. It surpasses MOOC in that it “innovates in operative mechanism, forms and process of teaching... and advocates mixed learning, which helps to integrate the advantages of MOOC and face-to-face teaching”, which means that SPOC would be used as an important source of flipped classrooms and an important link in blended teaching. [7]

Xue Yun and Zheng Li summarizes the difference between MOOC and SPOC, as is shown in Table 2: [8]

ISSN 2616-5783 Vol.3, Issue 10: 16-25, DOI: 10.25236/AJHSS.2020.031003

Table 2 Differences between Mooc and Spoc

	MOOC	SPOC
Targets	The general public	Restricted selection
Scale of Learners	Massive, without an upper limit	Small, with a restricted number
Model of Learning	Self-directed learning by students	Self-directed learning by students + Tutoring by teachers
Exchanges in Studies	Online exchange, limited interaction	Online and offline exchanges, more interaction
Learning Cycle	Short (With an average of 4 to 8 weeks)	Long (by the semester)
Evaluation of Learning	Online testing and assignments etc.	Online and offline evaluation
Learning Resources	Rich online resources	Selective supplement of resources on a real-time basis
Completion Rate	Low (about 10%)	High (almost 100%)
Cost of Implementation	High	Low
Application	Promote courses internationally; share high-quality teaching resources; suitable for students with an avid desire for knowledge; economical.	Promote the quality of classroom teaching in schools; improve teaching design and learning effect.

cMOOC, xMOOC and SPOC have their merits and deficiencies in terms of the scale, organization, teaching process and learning model. Both xMOOC and SPOC have a course structure similar to that of traditional classroom teaching, and their major difference lies in the fact that SPOC attaches greater importance to the tutoring of teachers and offline interaction and therefore is more suitable for wide application in colleges and universities as it can be integrated much more easily with offline courses. cMOOC is more revolutionary than the other two for its ideals of self-directed, open and interactive learning. These ideals, though for the moment obstruct the expansion of the model, actually conform to the demands on learning in this information age and should be promoted.

3. Reflection on on-Line Teaching of the Course of Advanced English

3.1 The Dilemma of the Course

ISSN 2616-5783 Vol.3, Issue 10: 16-25, DOI: 10.25236/AJHSS.2020.031003

Advanced English is the intensive reading course for juniors in the English major. According to its syllabus, it deals with grammar, vocabulary and culture at the same time, thus it is named Comprehensive English in some colleges and universities. Yet, notwithstanding its comprehensive task list, its teaching hours have been cut down to make room for other selective courses. As a result, it is caught in the dilemma of having to accomplish a lot without sufficient hours for the accomplishment. Its reform is urgently called for and online teaching offers a possible way out.

3.2 Online Teaching of the Course

In the spring semester of the 2019-2020 school year, the author taught the course of Advanced English online, in the form of both recorded lectures and live lectures.

In the recorded lectures, the author introduces background information, analyses the structure, summarizes the main idea of each paragraph, dissects long and difficult sentences, appreciates the language and reviews the text in the end. The recorded lectures of each unit are delivered to students in 3 to 4 parts. Students are requested to finish exercises after watching each video.

The exercises are designed according to the content of the video. Major types of exercises include multiple choice, True or False questions and subjective questions such as reading comprehension, word differentiation, paraphrasing ,translation and rhetorical device analysis, etc. Students are requested to upload their assignment to the QQ class group before a deadline.

After a recorded lecture and exercises, students take part in live lectures. Live lectures deal mostly with exercises. First, reading comprehension questions will be discussed by way of reviewing the recorded lectures. Then, paraphrasing and translation exercises would be focused upon, which involves grammatical and rhetorical analysis. Also, students are requested to give an oral representation about a given topic, followed by a Q & A session. It is designed to expand students' knowledge about the related topic and exercise their critical thinking.

3.3 Survey on the Teaching Effect

A survey was carried out in the last session of the course among the 73 students of the course. Altogether 68 valid surveys were collected. The survey polled students' opinion on the advantages and disadvantages of recorded lectures, live lectures and traditional classroom teaching, and asked for students' comments on online teaching and attitudes towards blended teaching model in the future.

The results points out the following advantages of recorded lectures:

Flexibility of time and place to watch the videos

Flexibility of play speed in accordance with the capacity and condition of the students

ISSN 2616-5783 Vol.3, Issue 10: 16-25, DOI: 10.25236/AJHSS.2020.031003

Convenience of note taking and revision

Good quality of sound and pictures without external disturbances as in classrooms

Detailed explanation of the text

The following disadvantages stand out in the survey:

Interruption of the network, consumption of mobile traffic and occupation of the internal storage

Distraction of the phone and deferment of watching due to lack of self-discipline

Excessive number of videos that might result in too much pressure and fatigue

No interaction and exchange of emotions, no immediate feedback and lack of supervision

No immediate adjustment of teaching contents

The advantages of live lectures are listed below:

No waste of time on commuting and free choice of places to attend lectures in

Recording of live lectures available for revision

Clear display of PPT and use of noting tools online

More frequent interaction than offline lectures, sometimes in the form of writing

More at ease when giving oral reports or interacting with others

The disadvantages are as follows:

Interruption of the network, problems with computers and sore eyes

Distraction of the phone

No involvement for some students

No eye contact and no face to face or group discussion

Poor interaction

When it comes to the question of whether or not you are supportive of blended teaching in future, 14 students vote NO, while 54 vote YES. After interviewing these 14 students, it is found out that they disapprove mainly for the following reasons:

Too much pressure would be loaded on students as it means that they need to spend time teaching themselves before the class.

It would be unnecessary as offline teaching is sufficient for the completion of the course.

ISSN 2616-5783 Vol.3, Issue 10: 16-25, DOI: 10.25236/AJHSS.2020.031003

Students lacking in self-discipline would not finish on-line learning tasks leading to their poor preparation for the offline class and their being marginalized in the course.

3.4 Reflection on the Online Teaching Practices

The survey reveals the fact that online teaching provides better learning conditions for students. The flexibility of time and place, the self adjustment of learning speed and the technologies of screen shot and recording empower students with more initiative and control in studies. But the self-discipline and avidity for knowledge determine whether they could give full display to these advantages. Online teaching requires efficient time management of students and active participation in online classroom discussion.

Accordingly, teachers should make use of the rich online resources, arrange diverse class activities, design different assignments for students of different levels of proficiency and areas of interest and tough up supervision so as to engage as many students as possible in the course.

4. Design of Blended Teaching

Based on the online teaching practices and the feedback of the students, a blended teaching process is designed for the course of Advanced English.

A.Before class

Issue preview tasks on QQ class group and make clear the learning objectives.

Upload recorded lectures to video playing websites such as Bilibili for students to download or watch online or comment on in the form of bullet screen.

Insert questions (assignments) in the video for students to answer after watching and to upload their answers to the QQ class group.

Students collect audio or video or written materials relevant to the text and upload them to the QQ class group.

Students prepare a ten-minute oral report about the topic of the text.

It should be noted that each recorded video should not be longer than 20 minutes, which means that the video should be carefully design and focus on the key and difficult points of the text. Besides, the videos should not teaching everything about the text but should promote self-directed learning and independent thinking of students. As for the assignments, they should be designed not only to check students' memory and understanding of the recorded lectures but should instruct students to apply the knowledge outside the text. To encourage interactive community learning, students can form their own study group according to their interest as shown by the materials they upload to the class group.

ISSN 2616-5783 Vol.3, Issue 10: 16-25, DOI: 10.25236/AJHSS.2020.031003

Before-class activities are designed to help students prepare for the offline class. Teachers should collect the feedback of students by looking into the bullet screen comments, go through the materials students upload to prepare for the classroom discussion, grade the assignments of students in time so as to gather the difficult points about the text.

B.In class

Analysis of assignment. Teachers focus on the problems discovered in students' assignments.

Oral report. Students give oral reports and teachers organize discussion about it.

Discussion and debate. Discussion about the key and difficult points is conducted among students and the teacher.

Knowledge sharing. Each study group share knowledge that is deemed as valuable or interesting.

Offline class should fully utilize the advantage of face to face communication and thus should center on discussion and debate. Students should be given more time and chances to speak in class but as classroom time is limited and therefore precious, students should be encourage to make good preparation for the discussion by watching the video carefully and finishing the assignments independently. Offline class should focus on training the ability of students in analysis, application and evaluation.

C. After class

Students write a report in group after the classroom discussion.

Students complete stretch assignments.

Group report serves the purpose of summary and reflection while stretch assignments are meant for transferred application of knowledge learned before and in class. Students are encouraged to further analyse and apply what they have learned in the previous two sessions. It is an important step for students to construct what they have learned after group and class discussions. They are supposed to develop those high-level skills of analysis, evaluation and application in the after-class session.

The design of the course is in essence a flipped classroom based on SPOC. Flipped classroom is an innovative reversal of traditional classroom procedure. It transforms the traditional "teach-practise-assess" process into "learn-test-explore"[9]. This design makes use of recorded videos as the major source and means of the learning process. It focuses on testing and discussion in class. But this design tries to incorporate the features and structure of cMOOC (see Table 1). That is, it tries to promote theme-based, interactive and expansive learning. Students can put forward their need for knowledge in the learning process, share knowledge with one another in the form of oral reports, class discussions or group study reports and in the process build up their own structure of knowledge. Of course, compared to a typical cMOOC, this structuring is only on a small scale, and is confined by the syllabus of

ISSN 2616-5783 Vol.3, Issue 10: 16-25, DOI: 10.25236/AJHSS.2020.031003

the course. But this emphasis on knowledge sharing and interactive learning is typical of cMOOC, which "being an innovative exploration of teaching models, attaches great importance to the communication of non-structured knowledge, and to the cultivation of higher level thinking, and thus is more in line with the demand of learning in the information age. "[5]

In this design of blended teaching, students need to read a lot of materials related to the topic of the lesson. Besides, in order to participate in class discussion and finish the final report, students are requested to understand the text as accurately as they can. In this way, grammar and vocabulary are no longer the focus of the studies, but become "incidental" in learning; they will "notice" their own mistakes in reading during the discussion and by analyzing the mistakes, they will learn something about the vocabulary or grammar[10]. In other words, in the blended teaching model, students can focus on the content while at the same time picking up the clues about grammar and vocabulary. In this sense, the Advanced English course can become truly content-based, which goes in the right direction of its reform.

5. Conclusion

In this age of information explosion, with the traditional teaching model in universities and colleges failing to catch up with the speed of information production and transmission, online or blended teaching models become the unstoppable trend. MOOC, SPOC and other online models are developing at a great speed, developing with incessant reforms, while flipped classroom is also on the rise, overturning the traditional teaching procedure. Against this backdrop, the reform of foreign language teaching should confront this trend of informatization. It should deliberate not only on what to teach but how to teach. It matters to choose a proper method of teaching, but it matters even more to incorporate the technologies of Internet Plus, big data and AI technologies in the teaching process. An open, interactive model of learning should be promoted to help students adjust themselves to the information age, which demands self-directed learning, cooperative learning, and expansive learning.

This blended teaching design of the Advanced English Course is based on one semester of online teaching practices and the feedback from the students. The actual implementation of this model is certain to run into a number of difficulties, some predictable ones being students' reluctance to spend much time on self-directed learning, and teachers' inability to handle all the knowledge shared by students and to prepare for the lessons so as to cater to the diversified needs of students. Thus the design needs to be reformed and adjusted in actual implementation. But it should be carried out nevertheless. For if no innovation is made, the course will not be able to satisfy the need of the students and of the age.

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