

Research on English Teaching Strategies in Higher Vocational Education from the Perspective of "Zone of Proximal Development"

Wei Lanen

Guangxi University of Information and Engineering, Nanning, Guangxi, China

Abstract: *With the development of social economy, the society is paying more and more attention to higher vocational education, the social demand for higher vocational college students is getting higher and higher. The number of students in higher vocational colleges is also constantly increasing every year. However, a prominent problem is that the overall quality of higher vocational college students is not high, especially in English learning. There are significant differences in English proficiency among vocational college students from different regions. In order to improve the English proficiency of vocational college students and minimize this differentiation, Vygotsky's "zone of proximal development" theory can be considered to guide English teaching and learning in higher vocational colleges. The article concludes by summarizing the implications of the "Zone of Proximal Development" theory for English teaching in higher vocational colleges. It emphasizes that teachers should fully utilize this theory to innovate and reform teaching models, and conduct comprehensive, three-dimensional, and integrated assessments of teaching effectiveness, in order to continuously improve the level of students' English learning.*

Keywords: *English Teaching; Higher Vocational Education; Vocational Colleges*

1. Introduction

The theory of "zone of proximal development" is a new theory put forward by Vygotsky, a famous psychologist in former Soviet Union in the 1930s, "zone of proximal development" is also known as the potential zone of development. Vygotsky believes that there are two levels of student development: one is the current level of the student, that is, the level at which the student can complete and solve the current problem independently without the teacher's guidance; The other is the possible development level of students, that is, the potential development ability of students, which can be obtained by teachers' guidance and teaching activities. The transition process and gap between the two is the "zone of proximal development". It can be seen that Vygotsky's "zone of proximal development" theory mainly focuses on the research of students' intelligence. That is to say, different students will have a "zone of proximal development" at different learning stages, and the key is how to stimulate students' learning enthusiasm through appropriate guidance and encouragement, so that the students can achieve better development, from the current level to the possible level development. The theory of "zone of proximal development" is similar to the concept advocated in English teaching in higher vocational colleges. Vocational college students' English learning is a kind of social cooperative activity, rather than simply being mechanically taught classroom knowledge by teachers. Students must have a proper understanding of the knowledge taught by teachers and form their own learning and thinking mode based on their own experience and learning abilities. Only in this way can they deepen their understanding of English knowledge and form useful cognitions. In the process of English teaching in higher vocational colleges, English teachers play the role of facilitator and encourager, providing students certain guidance, so that students can achieve their own all-round development through their own efforts. In order to achieve such a goal, it is necessary to fully understand and analyze the English cognitive level of students. Before teaching, English teachers should know what students have already mastered and not, and what aspects can be quickly mastered through guidance. Only in this way can they have a comprehensive understanding of students. On this basis, teachers can guide students gradually from their current level to the zone of proximal development. In a word, the theory of "zone of proximal development" plays a positive role in the guidance of English teaching in higher vocational colleges, because only by entering the zone of proximal development can the students promote their all-round development. If they simply stay in the current development zone, it can only hinder the development of students. The process of vocational English teaching is to continuously transform students' existing development areas into the zone of proximal development, that

is, the process of transforming vocational students' unknown knowledge into known knowledge, the impossible knowledge into possible knowledge.

In the realm of higher vocational English education, various scholars have delved deep to understand its intricacies and propose effective methodologies. For instance, in the backdrop of the national reading initiative, Zhang Wenyuan explored the prevailing state and potential tactics for English educators to imbibe classical reading, particularly highlighting the experiences of trainees at Nantong Teachers College [1]. This idea of customization in teaching was furthered by Wang Dan, who, under the prism of Howard Gardner's multiple intelligences theory, investigated the personalization of English assignments, citing practices from Anhui Medical College [2].

The challenge of bridging the gap between diploma and bachelor degrees in vocational medical colleges has also been addressed. Li Hongye's empirical study focused on the specialized methods adopted by Zhengzhou Shuqing Medical College in this domain, emphasizing the necessity of classified English teaching [3]. English in the vocational context, especially business English, is also evolving. Wang Xuemei's study emphasizes the importance of developing high-quality courses in business English for these institutions, underscoring the critical role it plays in the modern vocational curriculum [4].

The integration of technology in English pedagogy is yet another dimension explored in recent research. Zhang Lili presented a preliminary evaluation of the application of platforms like Vocational Education Cloud and Tencent Classroom in delivering English lessons, reflecting a shift towards a more digital, accessible approach in higher vocational institutes [5]. Additionally, the modular and graded approach to teaching English has been under the scholarly lens. Gao Lixin's reflection on the practices at Longnan Teachers College showcases the growing emphasis on leveled teaching to cater to the diverse proficiencies of students [6].

Higher vocational English education is a dynamic field with ongoing innovations in methodology, technology integration, and curriculum design, each driven by the unique demands and challenges of vocational contexts.

2. The Enlightenment of "zone of proximal development" on English Teaching in Vocational Colleges

2.1 Fully utilizing the theory of "zone of proximal development" to improve the level of English teaching in vocational colleges

In order to achieve better classroom teaching results, English teachers need to prepare well for work in advance. In fact, the most important thing for teachers is to know the current learning status of students and their zone of proximal development. Only in this way can they provide targeted guidance to students in English teaching, so that the students can get the maximum learning effect. English teachers should reconstruct the teaching content and carry out targeted teaching design according to the teaching plan and purpose. Good teaching design can better improve students' learning efficiency, enable them to better grasp English knowledge in class, and promote students' all-round development. According to the "zone of proximal development" theory, firstly, English teachers need to determine the actual English level of class students, and then explore their potential English development level by deepening existing knowledge. Based on their own teaching experience, teachers can identify the gap between the two, which is the zone of proximal development. In this way, when designing and preparing English teaching, teachers can provide targeted and purposeful teaching, allowing students to achieve maximum benefits. According to the instruction of "zone of proximal development" theory, English teachers should not only understand students' English level, ability, but also fully understand each students' character, especially students' learning habits and learning methods. Only by understanding these can they guide the next steps in English teaching. The improvement of vocational college students' English learning ability is a long-term and gradual process. By fully understanding students' knowledge structure and characteristics, and scientifically analyzing and predicting their potential abilities, we can accurately identify the zone of proximal development areas of the students, and achieve twice the results of classroom teaching with half the effort[7].

2.2 Making full use of "zone of proximal development" theory to teach students according to their aptitude

The English level of vocational students is uneven, and there are significant differences among the

same group of vocational students from different regions. One of the most important methods of vocational English teaching is to teach students according to their aptitude. Targeted teaching methods should be developed based on the characteristics of each student. However, due to the limitations of teaching conditions, in the process of implementing individualized teaching, vocational English teachers are often limited by many factors, often being willing but unable to do enough. Under the guidance of the theory of "zone of proximal development", teachers can redefine teaching in accordance with the connotation of the zone of proximal development and make necessary innovations and modifications to the ways and methods in the actual teaching process. The "zone of proximal development" theory holds that effective teaching methods for students should be advanced and play a guiding role in the development. Therefore, English teachers can get new enlightenment in the teaching process with the help of this view, and carry out further innovation and development according to the teaching principle of different characteristics of students. In the actual process of teaching in higher vocational colleges, English teachers not only need to teach based on the current level of students' English development, but also based on their potential development level. Different students have different potential development levels and abilities, and teachers need to constantly summarize in teaching practice to find out the potential development levels of different students, so that they can accurately identify the different "zone of proximal development" of each student in the process of individualized teaching, so as to understand the best learning period for students in the English learning process. Based on the actual situation of each student, targeted teaching can be carried out according to their "zones of proximal development", thus guiding students to develop their English skills towards a higher direction[8].

2.3 Teacher Training and Professional Development

In the context of higher vocational education, implementing effective English teaching strategies, especially those based on Vygotsky's "Zone of Proximal Development" theory, requires a deep understanding of teaching methodologies, as well as professional capabilities and keen insights in teaching from educators. Therefore, teacher training and professional development play a very important role in this process.

Teacher training focused on the "Zone of Proximal Development" theory should emphasize the integration of theory and practice. Through a series of lectures, seminars, and analyses of actual cases, teachers can gain a deeper understanding of the core concepts of the theory. They can also learn how to apply this theory in teaching scenarios involving different student groups. Through simulated classes, teachers can practice identifying and utilizing students' "Zones of Proximal Development," thus guiding students more effectively.

Professional development plans should include training in new teaching methods. In recent years, with the development of educational technology, tools such as online learning management systems and interactive software have become increasingly important. Teachers need to understand how to use these technologies to enhance students' learning experiences, especially in recent remote teaching models.

Additionally, training in effective communication skills and student psychology is also essential for teachers' professional development. Understanding students' psychological characteristics and emotional needs is crucial for identifying their "Zones of Proximal Development" and guiding them effectively. Such training can help teachers better understand individual student differences, thereby providing more personalized teaching support.

Regular assessment and feedback are important components of professional development for teachers. Through continuous evaluation of teaching practices and peer feedback, teachers can constantly adjust and improve their teaching strategies, ensuring that their methods remain effective and up-to-date.

Teacher training and professional development play a key role in enhancing the quality of English teaching in vocational colleges. Through systematic training programs and continuous professional development activities, teachers will become more proficient in applying the "Zone of Proximal Development" theory, thereby effectively improving students' English learning outcomes.

2.4 Application of Technology and Innovative Teaching Tools

In the context of English teaching in higher vocational education, the use of innovative technological teaching tools has become increasingly important. These tools enhance the interactivity of teaching, significantly increase student engagement, and provide more flexible and personalized learning paths for both teachers and students.

Digital learning platforms such as online classrooms, interactive software, and learning management systems effectively support layered teaching and personalized learning. These platforms can cater to the specific needs of students by providing customized learning materials, enabling each student to learn within their own "Zone of Proximal Development."

Mobile learning tools, such as educational applications on smartphones and tablets, offer students the possibility to learn anytime and anywhere. This flexibility allows students to study at times that suit them best, further stimulating their interest in learning. Virtual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR) technologies show great potential in providing immersive learning experiences. Through these technologies, students can experience English language and culture in an immersive environment, deepening their understanding of the subject matter.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) also plays a significant role in personalized learning. AI technology can assist teachers in tracking students' learning progress, automatically adjusting teaching content and difficulty levels to ensure that students are always learning within their "Zone of Proximal Development."

By integrating these technologies and innovative teaching tools, English teaching in vocational colleges can become more vivid, efficient, and personalized. This not only helps improve student learning outcomes but also inspires their enthusiasm for learning English, thereby achieving a more comprehensive learning experience under the guidance of the "Zone of Proximal Development" theory.

3. Strategies for English Teaching in Vocational Colleges from the Perspective of "zone of proximal development"

3.1 Utilizing the "zone of proximal development" to carry out hierarchical and step-by-step teaching.

Due to the different origins of vocational students, their English levels are also different. An effective way to solve this problem is to adopt a hierarchical teaching approach. Under the guidance of the "zone of proximal development" theory, teachers should master the differences of students in English learning and the reasons leading to such differences, and then solve the problems one by one. In the process of teaching, all students should be treated equally. At the same time, the stratified teaching method of "zones of proximal development" should be adopted to guide vocational students who are good at English to better development. For students with relatively poor English proficiency, teachers need to help them make progress step by step. In this way, it can not only enable students with poor and good English to develop, but also being able to cater the vast majority of vocational English students. From this way, it allows students of different levels to gain from learning English, truly playing the role of hierarchical teaching[9].

In the process of teaching design, English teachers can deal with the content of the textbook which exceeds the potential development level of students. For example, the content of English textbooks can be modified to prevent students from losing motivation to learn English. In addition to reconstructing the content of the textbook, English teachers should also focus on the feedback of each student, and then adjust teaching progress according to the feedback.

3.2 Scaffolding teaching and collaborative interactive teaching methods

Under the guidance of the "zone of proximal development" theory, the student-centered scaffolding teaching has better efficiency and effect than the cramming teaching, which is also an important teaching method proposed by the structuralism theory.

Scaffolding teaching requires higher vocational teachers to construct a conceptual framework of English knowledge for students in the process of teaching, and each level of English knowledge in the framework must be understood and mastered by students. In other words, in the process of teaching, English teachers should be like a scaffold, so that students can maintain the current cognitive level and ability, through the scaffold constantly to pile up students' English cognitive ability, so as to complete the overall construction of English knowledge system. In this way, students can use the knowledge they have mastered to expand and explore new knowledge, and constantly move forward from a development level to a higher level. Apart from scaffolding teaching, cooperative and interactive teaching is also an important English teaching strategy from the perspective of "zone of proximal development". For example, teachers can take a lesson as a scene for students to make a role-play, let each student actively participate in the role, and complete an English situational dialogue in a group, which can greatly improve the interest of vocational students in English learning. With the help of the team, they will no longer be

afraid in the scenario play and establish their confidence in English learning.

4. Conclusion

The theory of "zone of proximal development" gives a new enlightenment to English teaching in higher vocational colleges from a new perspective and strategy. English teachers in higher vocational colleges should make full use of the theory to innovate and reform the teaching model, and make an all-round, three-dimensional and comprehensive evaluation of the teaching effect, so as to continuously improve the learning level and ability of English students in higher vocational colleges.

References

- [1] Zhang Wenyuan. *A study on the current situation and strategies of classical reading for English teacher trainees under the background of national reading: A case study of Nantong Teachers College [J]. Library Theory and Practice*, 2021(4): 98-102.
- [2] Wang Dan. *Research on personalized design of English course assignments for higher vocational and technical colleges under the theory of multiple intelligences: A case study of Anhui Medical College [J]. China Medical Education Technology*, 2020, 34(6): 707-710.
- [3] Li Hongye. *Practice research on classified English teaching for "diploma to bachelor" in higher vocational medical colleges: A case study of Zhengzhou Shuqing Medical College [J]. China Medical Education Technology*, 2021, 35(1): 88-91.
- [4] Wang Xuemei. *Exploration on the construction of high-quality business English courses in higher vocational and technical colleges [J]. Vocational and Technical Education*, 2020, 41(2): 58-62.
- [5] Zhang Lili. *Preliminary analysis of online English teaching in higher vocational and technical colleges based on Vocational Education Cloud and Tencent Classroom [J]. China Distance Education*, 2021(5): 78-83.
- [6] Gao Lixin. *Practice and reflection on graded English teaching in higher vocational and technical colleges: A case study of Longnan Teachers College [J]. China University Teaching*, 2020(5): 34-38.
- [7] Tan Jun. *Teaching deviation and countermeasures from the perspective of "zone of proximal development": A case study of English teaching [J]. School Management*, 2016(05): 40-41.
- [8] Chen Xue, Liu Jia. *The inspiration of "zone of proximal development" to English teaching [J]. Fujian Tea*, 2020, 42(03): 213-214.
- [9] Vygotsky. *Selected Works of Vygotsky's Education Theory [M]. Beijing: People's education press*, 2005.