

A Framework for Blended First-class Courses of College Foreign Languages

Lihua Wang

Department of College English, Zhejiang Yuexiu University, Zhejiang 312000, China

Abstract

This study, on the profoundness-innovation-challenging connotation of China's first-class courses, constructs its theoretical framework for College foreign languages by use of Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives, production-oriented approach (POA) and blended learning theory, to transform first-class courses into small private online courses (SPOCs) in accordance with the characteristics of local universities, with the aim to improve the effectiveness of foreign language teaching and enhance the quality of talent cultivation.

Keywords

First-class course; POA; Bloom's taxonomy; Blended learning.

1. Introduction

Since 2017, with the convening of "National Conference on Undergraduate Education in Higher Education in the New Era" and the promulgation of a series of policies such as "Double First-class" construction and "Double Ten-Thousand Plan" in China, all proposed that Chinese universities should improve the teaching contents of courses, weeding out "bird courses" and creating "first-class" courses [1]. In 2020, for the epidemic reason, China successfully launched the world's largest online teaching and learning programme, realizing the goal of "offline classes suspended but learning continues". At the end of 2020, the Ministry of Education launched the first list of national first-class undergraduate courses, including about 180 courses in foreign languages. The large-scale online teaching implemented during the time of prevention and control of the epidemic have played a leading role in education reform [2]. In the current post-epidemic period, information technology, represented by the Internet, continues to integrate deeply with higher education and has become the "new normal" in daily teaching.

In the implementation of first-class undergraduate courses, the Ministry of Education has proposed that the reform achievements must be applied into the course' construction. However, their current utilization rate arouses concerns among experts. According to the statistics, among the 38 national first-class courses of foreign languages on the platform, only 8 courses have more than 1,000 students enrolled at a semester, while 13 courses have less than 100 students [3]. How to make these online first-class courses play their proper role in enhancing the quality of higher education has attracted the attention of many scholars. Moreover, first-class courses in foreign languages face some other common problems, such as overly simple platform functions, insufficient supervision and guidance. Meanwhile, although online courses supply foreign language education resources, how to construct a new environment with personalized blended teaching is a problem that every university has to consider and deal with. Many scholars have proposed standards and contents for the construction of first-class foreign language courses from a macro perspective [4,5], but there is still a lack of specific construction methods and strategies, especially the obviously insufficient theoretical research on how to construct blended first-class courses. Therefore, studies need to break through the research

perspective and maximize the use of the online resources of first-class courses to facilitate the efficiency of nowadays university courses.

This study, on the profoundness-innovation-challenging connotation of first-class courses, makes use of Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives, production-oriented approach (POA) and blended learning theory, to transform first-class courses into small private online courses (SPOCs) in accordance with the characteristics of local universities, with the aim to improve the effectiveness of foreign language teaching and enhance the quality of talent cultivation.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objective

The taxonomy of educational objective is a framework for classifying what we expect or intend students to learn in instruction. It was released in 1956 by Benjamin Bloom and his coworkers under the title of *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: The Classification of Educational Goals* [6]. Used by K-12 educators as well as college professors for many years, the framework was made up of six main categories—Knowledge, Comprehension, Application, Analysis, Synthesis, and Evaluation, which were ordered from simple to intricate and from tangible to abstract. The original Taxonomy was also thought to represent a cumulative hierarchy, meaning that mastery of each simpler group was a requirement for the more complicated. One of the most common uses of the taxonomy was to classify course objectives to show their breadth across the spectrum of a category. But these analyses always displayed a high emphasis on objectives that required only recognition or recall of information, which fell within the Knowledge category. However, what are usually considered to be the most important educational objectives are those that deal with the understanding and use of knowledge, which would be categorized as ranging from Comprehension to Synthesis, which therefore provide the basis for moving the curriculum into more complex categories of objectives.

In 2001, a revision of Bloom's Taxonomy was published by a group of specialists entitled *A Taxonomy for Teaching, Learning, and Assessment*. This title highlighted a more dynamic understanding of categories rather than the fairly static idea as it was in Bloom's original ones. By naming their categories and subcategories with verbs and gerunds, the authors of the updated taxonomy emphasized how thinkers encountered and processed knowledge through their cognitive processes. Later, a guide to the new version was provided in a helpful table listing the six cognitive processes and four types of knowledge by Mary Forehand from the University of Georgia. This taxonomy table with two-dimensional framework—Knowledge and Cognitive Processes provided a clear, concise, visual representation of a particular course or unit when classifying objectives, activities, and assessments. Once used and completed, the entries in the Taxonomy Table could check curriculum alignment and missed educational opportunities. On the basis of this examination, teachers could decide where and how to improve lesson planning and instruction. Moreover, Taxonomy Table can also be used to categorize the teaching and learning activities used to achieve the objectives, as well as assessments used to determine the extent to which students have mastered the objectives.

2.2. POA Theory

POA is a teaching theory proposed by Professor Wen and his team. The theory proposes that teachers play an important role in the entire teaching process, serving as designers, organizers, and conductors, while students are the main body to exert their enthusiasm and initiative. The POA theoretical system includes three parts: teaching theories, teaching hypotheses, and teaching processes [7]. Fig. 1 illustrates the components of their relationships and subcategories. The teaching theories are the direction of the other ones, while the theoretical support for "teaching process" lies in the teaching hypotheses—"output-driven", "input-

enabled”, and “selective-learning” hypotheses. But to implement the actual specific teaching objectives of POA is in the teaching process. All the three stages are mediated by teachers, specifically manifested in their roles: guiding, designing, and scaffolding, etc.

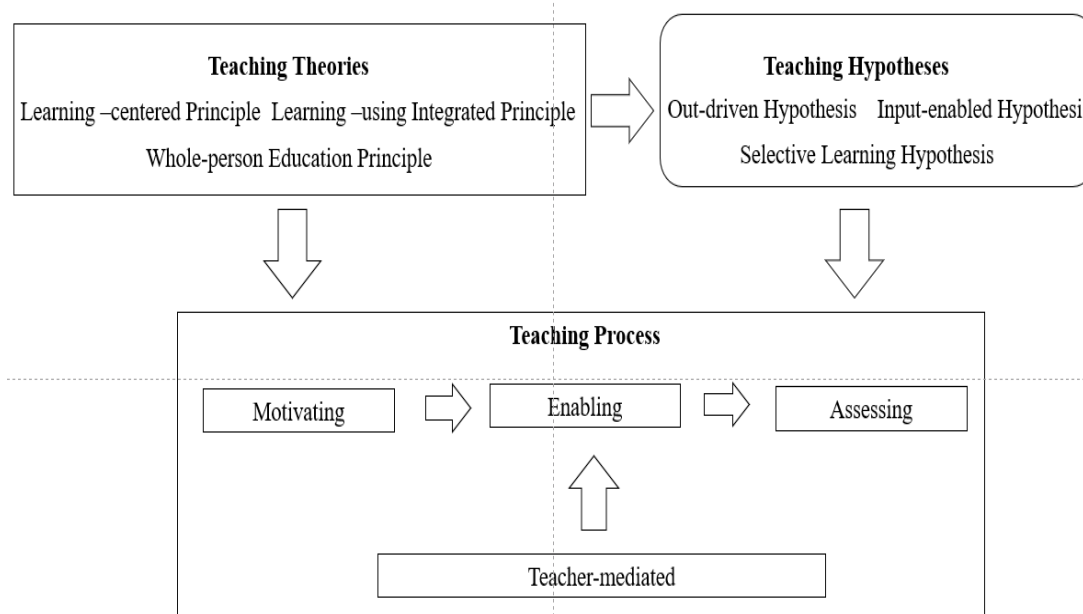


Figure 1. Theoretical System of POA (Wen, 2015)

2.3. Blended Learning

The term “blended learning” has been widely used in foreign language teaching since Sharma and Barrett published their eponymous teachers’ resource book in 2007. It was defined by Whitaker as “the term most commonly used to refer to any combination of face-to-face teaching with computer technology” [8]. Therefore, blended learning is often understood by people as a process of using computer technology at some time to make the teaching take place in another location rather than all in the face-to-face (f2f) classrooms, which can be watched at any time by learners.

The promotion of blended learning in foreign language teaching is undoubtedly driven by the economy and increasingly accessible and affordable hardware and software. It has been proven that the cost savings brought by hybrid methods are attractive to institutions. In addition, insufficient classroom space, large class sizes and the limited exposure to the target language may be important factors in choosing to implement blended learning methods in some contexts [8]. In other cases, political instability may increase the demand for blended learning, when learners experience difficulties in physically attending f2f classes [10]. No matter what the reasons are, blended learning has been studied to have positive results for teachers' teaching schedules and students' learning processes. Due to its characteristics, this teaching approach “can optimize the strengths of face-to-face and online teaching, allowing for efficient goal-setting, document organization, the facilitation of learning, participation in learning, and the assessment of academic achievement. Most studies also show that blended learning facilitates interaction between teachers and students, teachers and families, and allows for more personalized learning and assessment without the hindrance of space or time” [11].

3. Framework

In 2018, the Ministry of Education proposed the profoundness-innovation-challenging standards of "first-class" courses of universities. These basic connotations are mainly reflected in the foreign language curriculum in two aspects: course contents and teaching modes. The paper, in reference to Zhang's blended golden course framework [1], makes use of Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives, POA theory and blended learning theory, to construct a framework for college English "first-class" courses, to meet the profoundness-innovation-challenging requirements of the courses design, from the main five specific teaching processes: high-level teaching objectives, the innovation of teaching content, the challenges of teaching activities, the challenges of teaching evaluation and innovation of teaching methods (see Fig. 2).

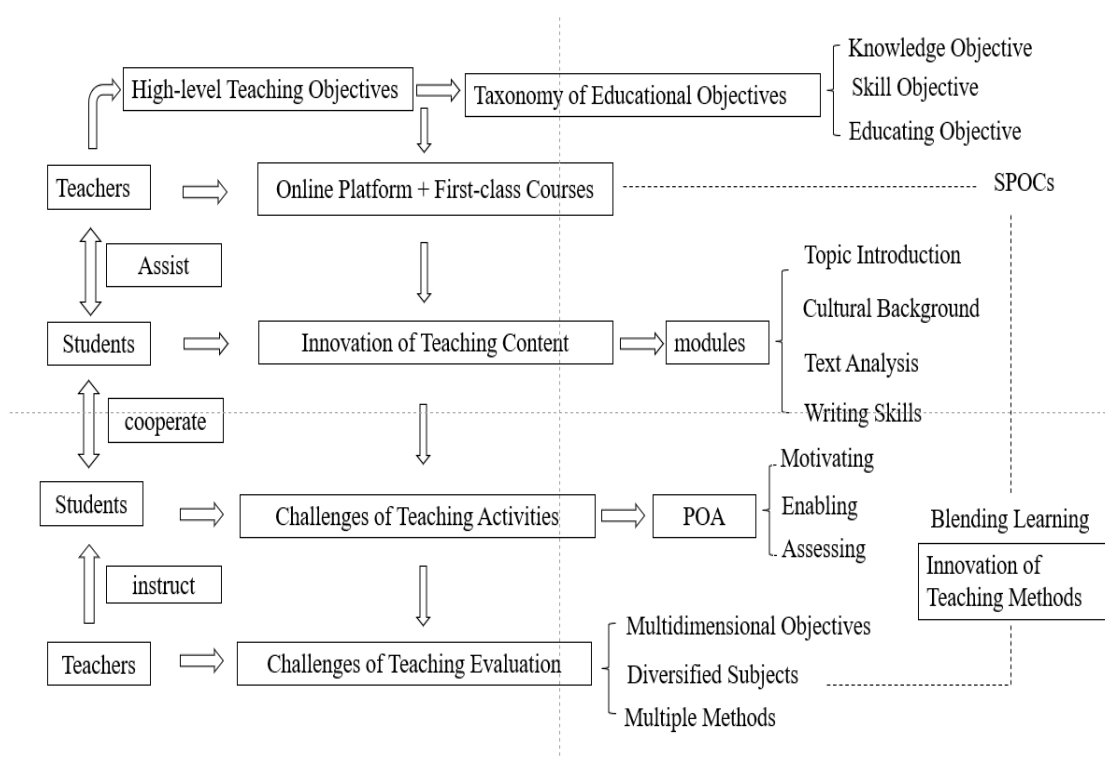


Figure 2. A Framework for Blended First-class Courses of College Foreign Languages

3.1. High-level Teaching Objectives

From the macro and micro perspectives, the curriculum objectives are set as "knowledge objective, skills objective and educating objective" to achieve the organic integration of knowledge exploration, capacity building and value guidance based on Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives and Chinese College English Syllabus (2017). The knowledge goal is to teach students vocabulary, grammar, discourse, and pragmatic knowledge, while the skill goal is to cultivate students' language skills in listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translating, as well as their language application ability, cooperative ability, self-learning ability, and innovative ability. Educating goal is mainly achieved through realizing the organic integration of the fundamental task of cultivation of morality and professional talents, to achieve the personality development, and value guidance, thereby improving their academic, professional, and comprehensive cultural literacy.

Taking unit three "Green Movement in Architecture" of New Integrated College English (book 4) as an example, we set the teaching objectives as "knowledge transfer", "ability development", and "value shaping". The language objectives include carrying out extracurricular selected articles' language listening, speaking, reading, writing and translation skills training related to

the green development concepts used from the key words and expressions in the texts, closely consolidating the language knowledge points and achieving the language teaching objectives in the ideological and political context. Ability cultivation refers to discussing how to improve students' humanistic literacy, cultivate their critical thinking ability, and stimulate their creativity based on the themes of green movement, organic architecture, harmony, integrity, etc. in this unit. Value shaping is to establish the connection between this unit and the new concept of green development of socialism with Chinese characteristics, so that students can recognize the importance of harmonious coexistence between humans and nature, establish correct views on nature and development, and cultivate students' awareness of respecting nature, protecting the ecological environment, and conserving resources and energy, thus to appeal for students' patriotism and encourage students to practice the concept of green development.

3.2. Innovation of Teaching Content

With the rapidly developing technical revolution, the teaching environment has undergone significant changes, laying a solid foundation for the transformation of college English education in the new era. In 2019, the Ministry of Education set requisition for Chinese universities in use of appropriate digital teaching tools based on MOOCs or online courses (SPOCs) to implement students' online autonomous learning, and carry out blended teaching in 20% to 50% of the instructive time considering the different characteristics of each school [12].

In the context of the above policy, some English courses, under the agreement of founders of national first-class courses, make use of their courses and transform them into a Small Private Online Courses (SPOC) through a campus platform, whose knowledge of different topics in each unit is run into several small modules, including topic introduction, humanistic and cultural background, text analysis, and writing skills according to the school's objective. Students can engage in online autonomous learning and attempt to complete output tasks before class. When in classrooms they present the results, teachers assist them with relevant input materials and help solve their difficulties, effectively making students absorb important points and promoting exploratory and self-directed learning.

The SPOCs is convenient for learners through computers and mobile terminals while for teachers fully supporting personalized blended instruction based on class units, facilitating them to adjust content as needed. With QQ or WeChat groups as auxiliary tools teachers can also promptly solve problems encountered by students during their learning process.

3.3. Challenges of Teaching Activities

According to the theory of blended learning, online and offline teaching are organically integrated. POA is used before, during, and after class in the teaching process to set innovative and challenging communication scenarios stimulating students' desire to finish output tasks, analyze the learning difficulties, and achieve the goals. The process of POA mainly covers three stages: Motivating, Enabling, Assessing.

3.3.1. Motivating

Unlike traditional teaching methods, POA places the "Motivating" of output at the beginning of the new unit. "Motivating", as the first stage of POA, includes three aspects: 1) teachers present communicative scenarios; 2) Students attempt to produce them; 3) The teacher explains the teaching objectives and output tasks. Before class, teachers attempt to clearly present the discussion topics that students may encounter in their future work before starting a new unit. Although students have not experienced these scenarios, they can truly feel the possibilities of their existence and the challenges posed to their cognition. The second aspect allows students to experience the tasks' difficulty, which may cause embarrassment in the future. At this point,

they will experience a sense of learning pressure and motivation within themselves, intentionally a created “hunger state”. The third aspect is about teaching objectives and related output tasks like in -class and extracurricular homework. In-class tasks refer to output exercises that are synchronized with input learning, while out of class ones refers to review-based and transfer-based tasks with increased difficulties.

This "Motivating" stage are usually made into videos or micro-lessons for students to learn on the platform. Teachers spare time to check students' understanding of the video, set teaching objectives accordingly, and then make arrangements for output tasks. Even if the online first-class courses have the part of introduction for the unit, teachers still need to adjust the difficulty level of the output scenarios and provide differentiated tasks based on the differences in students' foreign language proficiency, for students of different levels to choose from and fully tap into their potential.

3.3.2. Enabling

In “enabling” stage, in response to the common problems faced by students on the platform, teachers in class focus on content, language, and discourse structure in the facilitation process, helping students enrich language knowledge, construct discourse structure, form personal insights, and help the completion of output tasks.

In order to finish a series of increasingly challenging tasks, content facilitation, including the mastery of language points, aims to help students understand viewpoints in the text, inspiring students to form personal perspectives based on critical understanding. From this input of the text, students can imitate excellent works as materials for extracting discourse structure in the initial stage, and thereafter, use self-expression structures rich in personal characteristics encouraged by POA. The after-class tasks are completed on the platform, allowing students to practice in pairs or groups under the guidance of the teacher or the resources from the first-class courses. At the end of the exercise, an evaluation should be conducted immediately to understand whether the student has the ability to complete the task.

In the “enabling” stage, the scaffolding role of teachers is the most obvious and important. Providing too much help is not conducive to cultivating students' learning autonomy while insufficient assistance limits learning efficiency. Therefore, teachers should consciously consider their role and gradually enhance students' sense of learning responsibility. For example, when at the beginning of implementing POA students may be not familiar with how to extract useful materials from input to serve their output, teachers need to take on more assisting function, but as students become familiar with the teaching philosophy, assumptions, and processes, the teacher should encourage them to find suitable materials to supplement the materials in the textbook themselves.

3.3.3. Assessing

Based on the characteristics and foreign language objectives, teachers, guided by POA theory, develop online and offline tasks by the methods of autonomous learning, project-based collaborative learning, and activity-based interactive learning to cultivate students' complex problem-solving abilities. From the perspective of their difficulty and complexity, tasks generally have measurable characteristics that teachers can play the scaffolding role in.

When the output tasks are in the submission status, there comes two types of assessing: immediate or delayed. Immediate assessing refers to the inspection part of the "facilitation" process, which refers to the evaluation given by teachers to students' learning effectiveness during the process of selective learning and task practice in class. This real-time evaluation can help teachers adjust the teaching pace in a timely manner and properly control the teaching progress. Delayed assessing refers to students submitting the results of extracurricular exercises to the teacher based on the requirements. Different output results have different evaluation criteria. Teachers can discuss in advance with students the criteria for speaking,

writing, and translating based on specific samples. Clearly stated to students, the standards are helping them to compare and check their own execution.

3.4. Challenges of Teaching Evaluation

Teaching evaluation is of great significance for the curriculum reform in the "Double First-Class" construction, for the establishment of a scientific evaluation system is related to the quality of curriculum development. The success of the "Double First-Class" construction fundamentally lies in whether it can reflect social needs or not. Based on this standard, the evaluation requires special attention to its scientific, effective, and developmental features. Scientificity means that the evaluation should be accurate and in line with the characteristics and logics of curriculum development; Effectiveness suggests that evaluation should focus on reality and find out the problems in curriculum development; Developmental nature implies that evaluation should focus on the future improvement rather than only at the present.

Based on the above multi-dimensional evaluation system, for the POA approach, three layers are proposed—diversified evaluation subjects, multiple evaluation methods, and multidimensional evaluation objectives, helping to build an objective and comprehensive evaluation system for blended first-class courses. Firstly, on evaluation subjects, beyond the curriculum experts, teachers, and students engaged in curriculum evaluation, relevant social personnel, especially those from cutting-edge and emerging industries in economic and social development can help curriculum construction update while keeping up with the needs of the times. Secondly, on the methods of course evaluation, some bold ideas can be incorporated into the curriculum evaluation besides the traditional paper-and-pencil tests, better playing the role of activating the multifaceted value of the curriculum, and striving to make top-notch innovative talents stand out. Thirdly, on evaluation objectives, the evaluation system breaks through the rigidity and singularity of curriculum evaluation objectives, integrating stage goals, developmental goals, and long-term goals, enhancing the flexibility and tension of curriculum evaluation, thus to continuously promote the development of the curriculum itself and better realize the important role of the curriculum in the construction of "Double First Class". In summary, diversified and three-dimensional evaluation is an improvement and transcendence of a single curriculum evaluation, which not only meets the inherent demands of curriculum development but also meets the practical requirements of "Double First Class" construction for curriculum reform.

3.5. Innovation of Teaching Methods

The implementation of national first-class courses as SPOCs establishes an ecological operation mechanism with stable technical support, full participation of teachers and students, timely courses set-up and management, ensuring the effectiveness of teaching and learning. Teachers use SPOC platform to set learning tasks and guidance plans, while students check homework online and carry out independent or collaborative learning. This blended teaching leads to a change in learning methods.

(1) Autonomous learning method. The foreign language SPOC is completed by the school administrator and English teachers in the early stage of the course construction. Each teacher then conducts online teaching based on the specific situation of their teaching class, finely grasping the learning progress and implementing offline teaching accordingly. Compared with traditional blended teaching based on text and audio resources, blended teaching in SPOCs allows teachers to restructure good teaching resources from national first-class courses. During the teaching process, students complete online learning tasks in an orderly manner within a specified period, which help them gradually develop strong self-management abilities and improve cognitive and metacognitive levels.

(2) Task-based learning method. In preparation for setting up tasks, teachers usually analyze the teaching syllabus and determine the learning output based on the individual differences in classes. Considering students' language proficiency, multiple tasks can be designed from simple enough to be completed immediately which helps to enhance students' confidence, to difficult ones requiring students to collaborate with each other to complete them together. The task design should also be close enough to students' daily lives, therefore extending learning from classroom to extracurricular practice and achieving a combination of learning and application.

(3) Interactive learning method. Interactive activities are one of the most common and effective teaching methods in foreign language teaching. Research has found that activity-based interactive teaching can improve students' motivation and academic achievement. This learning interaction under the SPOCs blended teaching mode is divided into online and offline activities. Online learning activities include completing special exercises and forum discussions. Offline teaching activities mainly include checking language points in teaching videos through group reporting, investigation and pair writing, etc., or deepening online learning by guiding students to apply, analyze, and evaluate through questioning. This learning mode stimulates the improvement of students' self-learning ability and collaboration, thus to improve the effectiveness of teaching process.

4. Conclusion

This study attempts to construct a theoretical framework of blended learning in college first-class courses of foreign languages. From “high-level teaching objectives, the innovation of teaching content, challenge of teaching activities, the challenge of teaching evaluation, and the innovation of teaching methods”, the study reflects how to make use of national first-class courses to implement blended teaching in foreign language classes, which may be helpful for the utilization of good online resources and improvement of teaching quality. In the future, further study needs to be done on the application of the framework on teaching practice and the facilitation of its promotion.

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