

Career Development of Foreign Language Educators in Vocational Colleges under the Context of New Productive Forces

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Abstract: This research explores the concept of “new productive forces (NPF)”, also referred to as “new quality productive forces”. Through a comprehensive literature review and analysis, it examines the evolving landscape of vocational education under the context of new productive forces and the corresponding career development needs of foreign language educators in vocational colleges. The study provides strategies to better equip foreign language educators in preparing students for emerging industries and technologies. An illustrative scenario demonstrates a staff development program for foreign language educators in a vocational college, and offers suggestions to the school authorities about further support in developing teachers’ competencies.

1. Introduction

The term “new productivity Forces” was first introduced during the symposium on promoting the comprehensive revitalization of Northeast China in the new era in September 2023[1]. The introduction of this concept marks a new understanding and new standards for productivity development in the context of China’s new era.

New productive forces feature technological innovation, digitization, artificial intelligence and sustainable development in various fields, dramatically shaping the trend of global economy and requirements of labor market. As vocational colleges are playing irreplaceable roles in cultivating talents with high level skills to meet the demands of new era, it is significant for teachers in vocational colleges to realize the pressing change and update their competencies.

The research is focused on English teachers in vocational colleges, exploring the changing roles in their career, the necessity for their professional improvement and the strategies for them to face up to the challenges posed by new productivity forces and hence pursue competency development in an all-round way. By taking Shanghai Publishing and Printing College as an example, the research also proves the effectiveness of the strategies in the course of English staff career development, offering suggestions to the school authorities about how to carry out further reform

and support in developing teachers' competencies.

2. The Impact on Vocational Education

Driven by technological innovation and underpinned by strategic emerging industries, new productivity forces are marked by high efficiency and high quality. There exists a bidirectional relationship between new productivity and educational development. Education can enhance new productivity by fostering labor force reproduction, accelerating technological innovation, and promoting the renewal of ideas [2].

In terms of language services, new productive forces refer to advancements and transformations driven by technology, globalization, and changing consumer expectations. Technological advancements means integration of artificial intelligence (AI), machines learning, and natural language processing (NLP) in language translation and interpretation services. Globalization involves increased demand for multilingual communication and cultural sensitivity in international business, diplomacy, and digital media. Industry standards and client expectations put emphasis on accuracy, efficiency, and customization in language service delivery. There is need for the development of new tools, platforms, and innovative pedagogical approaches for language learning and localization services.

The development of new productivity has had a profound impact on vocational education. On one hand, it requires vocational education to keep up with the trend of industrial development, constantly updating teaching content and methods to meet the needs of new technologies and industries [3]. On the other hand, the rise of new productive forces has also provided new development opportunities for vocational education, promoting the deep integration of education and industry through models such as industry education integration and school enterprise cooperation [4].

3. The Evolving Roles of Foreign Language Educators

In recent years, significant achievements have been made in the development of vocational college teachers' abilities. With the accelerating process of the Internet and the popularizing of the education information technology, the ability of applying information technology in teaching has been significantly improved [5]. By participating in various teaching competitions, training seminars, and other activities, their professional competence have also been effectively improved [6].

However, the development of vocational college teachers' abilities still faces many challenges. Firstly, new technologies and industries emerge one after another, which puts higher demands on teachers' knowledge reserves and updating abilities [7,8]. Secondly, new teaching models such as industry education integration and school enterprise cooperation requires teachers not only to possess solid professional knowledge, but also to have certain industry practical experience and interdisciplinary abilities [9]. Moreover, limited funding and resources for professional development programs often constrain opportunities for faculty growth. Resistance to change within educational institutions and industry reluctance to engage with vocational education also present barriers [10]. Finally, teachers' own teaching reflection and innovation abilities are also important factors that constrain their ability development.

4. Necessitated Abilities of English Educators in Vocational College in the Context of NPF

Teachers' competencies are discussed and stated repeatedly in government documents. As it is pointed out in the document Guiding Opinions on Strengthening the Reform of the Construction of

University Teachers in the New Era, the primary task of enhancing teachers' competencies is strengthening the ideological and political quality and professional ethics of university teachers, and improving the professional quality and ability of teachers[11]. The document clearly mentions eight qualities and abilities that university teachers should possess, namely ideological and political qualities, professional ethics, professional competence, scientific research ability, moral education ability, ability to use information technology to improve teaching, practical ability, and innovation ability. Many foreign language education experts have also discussed the professional ethics of English teachers. Wen Qiufang (2021) constructs a framework for the quality of foreign language teachers in universities, including teaching ability, research ability, management ability, and educational technology ability, and points out that the development of these abilities needs to be guided by the overall quality requirements of "four good teachers"[12]. Zhang Hong and Xu Hao (2024) points out that the professional competence of foreign language teachers in universities refers to the sum of correct values, core knowledge, key abilities, and essential qualities exhibited by foreign language teachers in educational and professional development activities, including six aspects of literacy: learning literacy, education literacy, digital literacy, teaching literacy, disciplinary literacy, scientific research literacy, and teaching literacy[13]. The two of them argue that literacy means far more than competencies.

This research does not intend to make comparisons between qualities, competency, literacy or abilities, considering that these concepts all cover educators' morality, knowledge and abilities (teaching, researching, technology, innovation and such). No matter university or college English educators, they are expected to have a solid grounding in professional knowledge, arm students with cross-cultural communication skills and an international outlook, show proficiency in modern educational technologies for effective teaching, and employ new teaching methodologies tailored to student needs. However, English educators, especially, ESP teachers, in vocational colleges need at least one more competency: the initiative in participating in practical work in the companies or factories so as to obtain a certificate named double teacher certificate. Undoubtedly, under the context of new productive forces, the evolving society is expecting more qualities from foreign language educators.

In a word, foreign language educators need to uphold principles while embracing innovation, ensuring that English instruction aligns with the fundamental laws of language learning and acquisition. They must also explore how to keep pace with the times by leveraging digital technology and utilizing various effective resources. Steered by these principles, the goal is to effectively enhance the efficiency and guarantee the effectiveness of foreign language teaching.

5. Strategies for Enhancing Career Development

Based on the essential qualities and competencies discussed above, this part puts forwards six strategies for enhancing the career development of foreign language educators in vocational colleges.

5.1 Advancing Teaching through Technology and Innovation

Technological advancements make it necessary for foreign language teachers to acquire new digital skills and adopt innovative teaching methods. Language teachers must become proficient in using educational technology, such as natural language processing and corpus linguistics based on big data analysis to enhance student engagement, with a strong emphasis on digital literacy as a core component of professional development. Additionally, to stimulate students' interest in language acquisition, educators are required to design multiple level teaching content and adopt diverse teaching strategies to realize personalized learning through adaptive platforms; to enhance

teaching proficiency, educators are getting used to the adoption of innovative pedagogical approaches like blended learning and flipped classrooms. These approaches not only offer flexibility but also require teachers to design engaging online content and foster interactive, student-centered learning environments. Their tasks involve giving offline classes in the physical classroom, as well as communicating with students to assign preview tasks, to grade their online posts, and to offer feedback on their performance anytime. In other words, the use of machine learning technology does not mean a shortcut in learning and teaching, but a stimulus for critical thinking in learning and teaching.

5.2 Fostering Cross-cultural Communication Competencies

Besides carefully preparing lessons, seriously giving classes, providing attentive guidance, and emphasizing the cultivation of language skills, foreign language teachers should take the responsibility to foster students' international perspective, patriotism, innovative spirit, guiding students to deeply understand the close connection between foreign language learning and national development, and inspiring their sense of responsibility to contribute to the country's foreign exchange and cultural dissemination. On the other hand, they need to take advantage of foreign languages to spread Chinese culture. By translating excellent Chinese works and participating in international cultural exchange activities, English educators should aim to help the world better understand China and enhance the country's cultural soft power.

5.3 Promoting Industry-education Integration

Industry-education integration is a crucial pathway to enhancing the capabilities of vocational college teachers, including English educators if they are teaching English for special purposes, such as business English, media English or mechanics English, to name a few. By establishing close cooperation with enterprises, resources can be shared and complementary advantages realized. On one hand, enterprises can provide practical opportunities and industry platforms for teachers and students, helping them understand industry needs and follow up with latest standards. Teachers can also combine their theoretical knowledge with practical needs, exchanging with industry experts, and thereby enhancing their practical abilities [14]. On the other hand, as an exchange, teachers may offer help workers gain deep understanding about theoretical knowledge. This collaboration enables teachers to design and deliver more relevant and dynamic courses that prepare students for real-world challenges. Also, "double teacher certificate" can be achieved through the collaboration.

5.4 Strengthening Reflective Teaching and Research Abilities

To engage in reflective practices and embrace innovation is essential for their career development. Regular self-assessment, participation in educational research, and involvement in teaching reform initiatives help teachers identify areas for improvement and experiment with new approaches. New productivity forces sound daunting to English teachers, who mostly major in humanities. However, teachers need to gain up-to-date knowledge and technology before they can provide source of inspirational ideas. They think to think twice a day about their teaching practice to make self evaluation. Additionally, English teachers are not alone while confronted with the development of new productivity forces. Attending seminars, workshops, and conferences on the latest industry and educational trends allows teachers to stay updated and continuously refine their teaching strategies together with other educators in the same line.

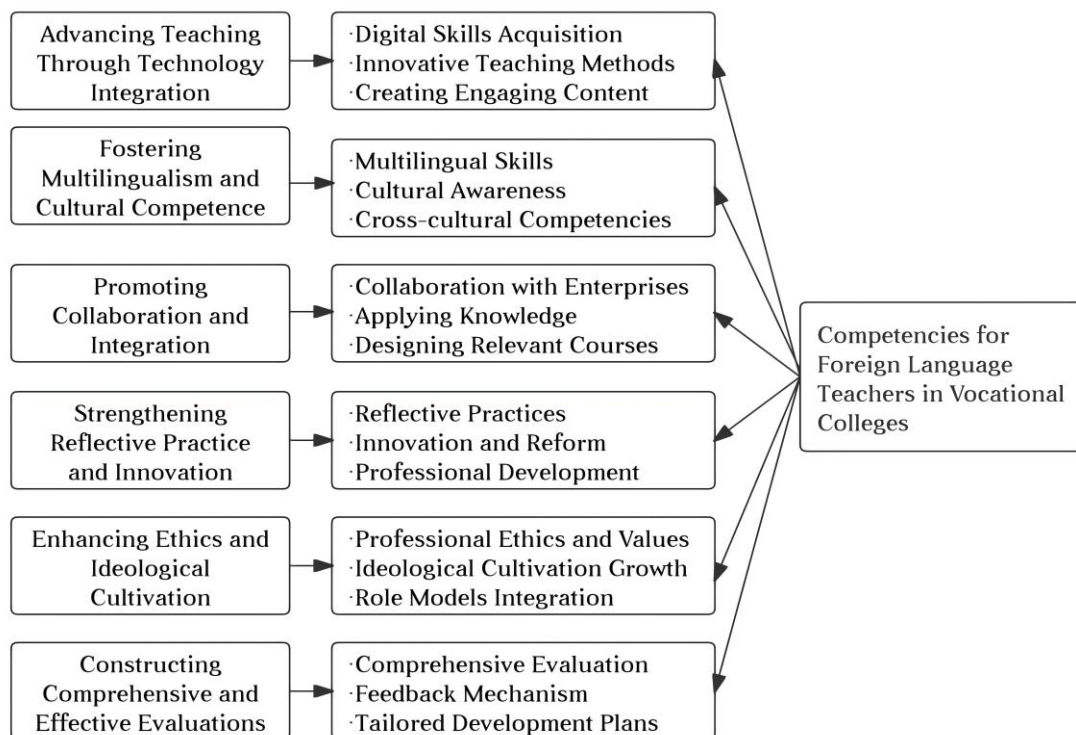


Figure 1: Key Strategies for Enhancing Foreign Language Teachers' Development

5.5 Enhancing Professional Ethics and Ideological Cultivation

The career development of educators is shaped by their professional ethics, core values, and ideological cultivation. Upholding ethical standards and embodying socialist core values create a positive learning environment and build trust between individuals. Ideological cultivation guides continuous growth and adaptation to new teaching methods. Integrating ideological education and role models further supports educators' development, ensuring alignment with societal values. A robust ethics mechanism reinforces these standards, fostering long-term professional growth and enhancing teaching practice.

5.6 Constructing a Diversified Evaluation System

Constructing a diversified evaluation system is a significant means to facilitate the development of teachers' competencies. By establishing a scientifically reasonable evaluation system, comprehensive evaluations can be conducted on teachers' teaching abilities (including ideological teaching abilities), research capabilities, practical skills, and working ethics. Simultaneously, emphasis should be placed on providing feedback and applying evaluation results to help teachers clearly understand their strengths and weaknesses, thereby formulating personalized capacity enhancement plans[15].

To provide a visual overview, Figure 1 illustrates the six important strategies for enhancing the career development of foreign language teachers. The middle part of the diagram highlights the essential components of competencies, including digital literacy, multilingual and cultural competencies, industry-education integration abilities, reflective practices for innovation and reform, upholding professional ethics and values and developing a diversified evaluation mechanism.

6. Example Scenario

To illustrate these strategies in practice, the following scenario demonstrates how to effectively enhance the career development of foreign language teachers through integrating technology, industry collaboration, and reflective practices.

At Shanghai Printing and Publishing College (SPPC), the School of Foreign Languages has started a significant effort to align student outcomes with the needs of evolving productivity trends. Central to this initiative is the rigorous professional development framework designed for faculty within the Business English Department.

Foreign language educators integrate advanced technologies through three key strategies. First, they use blended teaching models that combine face-to-face instruction with online platforms, such as China MOOCs for Media and Communication Course and KIMI platform, offering flexibility and interactive learning for after class assignment, for example, to summarize the main idea by using 20 words, 50 words and 100 words and compare different versions in content. Second, they incorporate digital tools like Pigai.com for online writing and multimedia resources like Bilibili.com to cater to diverse learning styles, provide real-time feedback and carry out assessment reform on Chaoxing platform. Lastly, technological integration improves learning outcomes by allowing practical application of language skills and developing essential digital competencies for students.

Teachers within the department benefit extensively from practical training collaborations with local leading enterprises such as EXPOTEC, which has been dedicated to the exhibition industry since 1994, and provides professional exhibition services; TOPEASE, which specializes in business information consulting, corporate management consulting, and investment consulting; and Shanghai UPG International Trading Corporation, which focuses on machinery sales, goods import and export, and technology import and export. These partnerships not only enrich the pedagogical approach but also ensure that instructors are immersed in current industry practices and trends. Moreover, this engagement not only enhances their practical knowledge but also fosters a deeper understanding of industry dynamics on the part of the full-time educators, which they subsequently impart to their students.

To stay at the forefront of educational innovation, teachers regularly attend seminars focused on AI-assisted teaching and research. These seminars provide crucial insights into leveraging artificial intelligence in educational settings, equipping faculty with the tools needed to adapt and thrive in a rapidly evolving digital landscape. Through training students in these relevant skills, English teachers achieve significant self-improvement, continually enhancing their own professional capabilities. Liu Jun, Vice Dean of Foreign Language Schools of SPPC, has been invited to share experience more than once at Research and Development Workshop on English Teaching Development and Innovation. Liu introduces the teaching effectiveness of the blended teaching mode framework of the “Media English” course, and points out that teachers should actively enhance their digital literacy, seize the new wave of rapid development of AI, fully utilize the advantages of new media, and achieve personalized and precise learning[16].

Critical to fostering new qualitative productivity and ensuring sustained growth and performance evaluation of the faculty is the implementation of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). These metrics not only measure faculty contributions against predefined standards of excellence but also serve as benchmarks for innovation and adaptation to new educational paradigms. By aligning KPIs with evolving qualitative productivity demands, faculty are encouraged to explore innovative teaching methodologies, enhance research impact, and continuously improve their professional capabilities. This approach nurtures a culture of accountability and excellence, where faculty strive to meet and exceed expectations in preparing students for the dynamic challenges of today’s

educational landscape.

Under the guide and training of capable staff, students in Business English Department in SPPC actively engage in language practice activities such as language competitions, volunteering services for international expos, and online training for business skills, all of which are designed to meet the demands of new qualitative productivity. These initiatives not only enhance practical language skills but also foster critical thinking, intercultural competence, and effective communication. For instance, students participating in speaking contests refine their presentation and persuasive abilities which are essential for professional communication in diverse contexts. Additionally, through volunteer roles at exhibitions, such as guest registration and visitor counseling, students develop hands-on skills in customer service and event management, bridging theoretical knowledge with practical application. Furthermore, the use of advanced online platforms for cross-border e-commerce training equips students with industry-relevant skills, preparing them to excel in digital trade environments. These multifaceted experiences not only prepare students for the complexities of global markets but also instill a proactive approach to learning and adaptation, crucial for succeeding in today's dynamic professional landscape.

7. Conclusion and Further Suggestions

Foreign language teachers today are decisive figures for imparting linguistic skills, nurturing students' cross-cultural communication abilities, fostering innovative thinking and enhancing students' self-directed learning abilities, also known as four core competencies in accordance with the Teaching Standards for English Courses in Higher Vocational Colleges (2021 Edition) [17].

As generative AI reshapes the English teaching landscape, English educators in vocational colleges must, firstly, stay updated and develop expertise in AIGC (Artificial Intelligence Generated Content) technologies. This proficiency will enable them to guide students more effectively in navigating an increasingly complex and dynamic global environment. Future research should focus on anticipating trends in language education and evolving industry demands, ensuring that faculty are well-prepared for upcoming challenges. Moreover, policy recommendations should prioritize enhanced funding for faculty development, the strengthening of industry-academic collaborations, and the establishment of flexible educational frameworks that can quickly adapt to technological advancements.

In conclusion, advancing the career development of English educators in vocational colleges, particularly in light of emerging new productive forces, is vital for improving educational outcomes, meeting industry expectations, and equipping students with the skills they need for success. By tackling current challenges, implementing strategic initiatives, and promoting ethical and inclusive practices, vocational colleges can empower English educators to adapt curricula, integrate new technologies, and drive student achievement in a rapidly changing world.

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