A CASE STUDY: SYLLABUS, METHODOLOGY, AND ASSESSMENT WITH ORAL EL CLASSES FOR NON-ENGLISH MAJORS

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ABSTRACT
This paper explores the desirable syllabus, methodology, and way of assessment concerning oral English teaching in light of the contemporary second/foreign language learning theories. The research work is carried out in two probed classes totaling 71 sophomores of non-English major. The hypotheses of a three-staged task-oriented syllabus have been put forward and a variety of methods are designed accordingly to be tried out in the class. The scoring result of the terminal test, which is a combination of the students’ self-rating and the teacher’s evaluation, shows that through one semester’s training, the over-majority of students has considerably improved the speaking ability wherever the individual is in the linguistic competence hierarchy. In short, by firmly putting the students at the center of language teaching, we certainly can work out more effective syllabuses, methodologies, and ways of assessment regarding oral EL classes for non-English majors in line with the recent English Curriculum Requirements put forth by the Tertiary Sector of State Education Ministry.

KEY WORDS: syllabus    methodology    assessment

1. INTRODUCTION

There is now strong recognition in China for the need to build up the EL students’ comprehensive ability to apply the language rather than merely understand it. In response to the school curriculum reform, approximately 1200 out of the 3000 sophomores of non-English major in our university selected the oral English course as an optional subject for the autumn semester study of 2003. This paper of mine will truthfully report the research work on the two probed classes totaling 71 students randomly picked and fixed by computer from the 1200 candidates, the focus being on the syllabus, methodology and assessment.

Efforts have been made to identify the specific learning group involved. These are young people around 19 years old who have studied English for about 10 years all through the elementary school, middle school, and the college. Most of their past time has been devoted to reading and grammatical exercises, less time has been spent in listening, and hardly any has been focused on speaking training. Being aware of the importance of spoken English in the drive of economical globalization of the new age, all are eager to improve their oral abilities in order to
become the real master of the language. Since few students registered for the oral course for the purpose of learning and then going overseas to study or live, we are certain that the most likely situation they will use oral English should be in China, that is, they will have to be able to make use of the full range of language patterns and expressions suitable for the settings and positions that they may have in their future work in our own country.

The course goal is determined-- The students are to be trained to play the roles of themselves, talking on or off job in future. The course contents are conceived-- The texts should be basically discourse-based so that they can be taught in an “integrated skills” framework. The topics and materials for the classroom use have been carefully selected and collected to reflect the students’ communication needs. The classroom strategies are established likewise to put the learner firmly at the center. The hypotheses of a three-staged task-oriented syllabus have been put forward and a variety of methods are designed accordingly to be tried out in the class.

2. HYPOTHESES AND FINDINGS

2.1.1. HYPOTHESIS 1: The Initial ‘Pre-speaking Period’

Valerian Postovsky (1974) found that adults became more proficient when they were not required to produce the language orally during the first four weeks of their course.

2.1.2. METHODOLOGY: Class work is concentrated on picture talking which aims at activating the single words and then the relevant phrases and expressions and furthermore the useful sentence patterns the students already know. Multimedia devices are largely resorted to. Speaking activities revolve around the multimedia-supported pictures (or moving pictures) which present the visual stimuli and comprehensible hints to set the students on the talking or pre-speaking mood. Listening tasks and reading assignments help the students to hit upon the likely ideas and get the possible word clues. A minor amount of written work prepares the students for more clear thinking and better presenting. Important strategies such as generalization, transfer, redundancy reduction and imitation are demonstrated repeatedly by the teacher until the students see that it’s not too difficult to relate 3 meaningful sentences (either descriptive or commentary) at one stretch to any picture they come across and thus they find themselves ready psychologically and physically for entering the second period of the study syllabus.

2.1.3. EXAMPLE CLASSROOM ACTIVITY: [The students were told to draw pictures to show what “fashion” was like in their minds. Then a dozen or so volunteers came up to the front of the classroom and took turns to depict the ideas their drawings had represented in words. The pictures were projected on to the screen for everybody to see so that all participated in the process of verbal brainstorming. With the help of the teacher, the separate words uttered by the students were regrouped and incomplete phrases given were reorganized in a way to become some very good expressions and sentences.]

... Student 1: “Fashion means to keep up with the trend of our times.”
Student 2: “But fashion could be something very traditional with an element of the modern.”
Student 3: “We must never ever go after the trend blindly. To be yourself is fashionable.”
...
Finally, the teacher made a summary as follows---

“Fashion is a way to dress up, a way to behave, or a way to think. Fashion can be many things to many people…”

[The summary was dictated when repeated…]

2.1.4. FINDINGS: At this stage most of the students are quite silent unless they are called upon to say something. However we can find that students with extrovert personality traits may take more chances to state their ideas and that students with high self-esteem might be equally active when they are sure they know what to say. For the rest of the class, they are listening. Maybe it’s the so-called ‘immersion’ that is undergoing and that is to show the effect in the test four weeks after when the students are asked to say at least three sentences spontaneously before the tape-recording machine about a picture they have not seen before. None find it difficult to perform the task. Many use simple structures of sentences but not without the variation of words and expressions. 30% of the students show their ability to utter complicated sentences with adverbial clause of various kinds. Infinitives and gerunds come out with ease. Errors and mistakes do occur, but without serious interferences with understanding. The teacher is only too glad to see all the students without an exception are walking briskly through the “relatively silent period” towards the more elaborate talking process in the coming-up periods.

2.2.1. HYPOTHESIS 2: The Developing “Creative Construction Period”

William Littlewood (1990) ascertains that productive skills are simply the external expression of the system which the learner has internalized at a particular stage of development.

2.2.2. METHODOLOGY: Class work is intended for involving everyone of the class in the topic discussion of their concern. Relevant listening and reading materials to their interest are provided for reference and study. Student activists are trained to take a lead and even take the chair in conducting discussions in small groups or in the larger class. The ‘inter-language’ is allowed to some extent because it represents the natural process in the way to internalize the target language. Students are consequently offered a more relaxed and less threatening talking climate which they would delightedly melt in. Importance is also attached to the techniques of giving good talks with around 5 sentences. Students’ mistakes and errors in their spontaneous utterances are usually dealt with at the end of the discussion so that the teacher may have sufficient time to have them sorted out and to get the right kind of summing –up prepared. It’s so arranged that the students may also have used the time to reflect on what they have said and learned to correct themselves as far as they could.

2.2.3. EXEMPLE CLASSROOM ACTIVITY: [The whole class had been notified about the topic being ‘pressure and success’ one week in advance. Five students had made special preparations for the panel discussion in front of the class, with one student called Qu Wenjing acting as the chair.]

At one point, a girl said---

“I have two years to graduate from university, but now I feel more and more pressure for I’m not a Shanghai person…”

The student chair gave her opinion--
“An English proverb says: Nothing ventured, nothing gained. In Chinese we have a similar saying: you will not get the cubs if you do not enter the tiger’s lair. We cannot expect to achieve anything if we risk nothing…”

[The whole class participated in the discussion now. The students asked each other questions, gave their own opinions, and managed to keep the conversation going. It was a heated discussion although traces of ‘inter-language’ were very obvious at times. For the errors and mistakes the students made, the teacher just hinted at a remedy or echoed with the right expression as what might be happening in the intercourses in real life, rather than risk stifling the students’ speaking attempts with corrective feedback. Both the teacher and the students found great satisfaction as the really comprehensive and interesting messages were being got across.

At the end of the class, while the teacher warmly applauded the students’ zest and endeavors in the discussion, she produced a piece of paper and had the refined version projected onto the screen based on the girl’s speech. It read: ‘Xiao Zhang’s going to graduate in two years’ time. She’s worried about the housing, the job, and many other problems because she’s not a Shanghai citizen. But if Shanghai is really the place she likes, she might as well make up her mind to stay. The benefit of a risk-taking decision is usually felt in the years to follow.’]

2.2.4. FINDINGS: In this session, students learn talking through talking. They take initiatives in communicating. It’s found that the students who used to refrain from directly speaking to the teacher are less inhibited when talking to the peers in small groups or in the big class. A boy named Mei Yuan is a case in point. He drew the teacher’s attention when his face turned red hardly had he even begun to talk at the beginning period of the semester. In time, and before we know it, he has become a very daring speaker in class.

The students are likely to make four types of errors though: over-generalization, ignorance of rule restrictions, incomplete application of rules and false hypotheses. However these mistakes are seen as normal and useful for the ‘internalizing’ process. The number of students who have strong awareness of becoming an automated learner increases from 15% of the initial stage to 60% at this second stage of our study syllabus according to the survey. By the gradual process of trial and error and hypothesis testing, the students slowly and tediously succeed in establishing closer and closer approximations to the system used by the native speakers of the language.

2.3.1. HYPOTHESIS 3: The More Developed “Communicative Competence Period”

Henry Widdowson (1978) noted that communicative competence is not a compilation of items in memory but a set of strategies or creative procedures for realizing the value of linguistic elements in contexts of use.

2.3.2. METHODOLOGY: Class work is organized in much the same way as in the second period except that the emphasis is shifted onto the intercourse function by large. Five speakers make prepared presentations about any topic they would choose to have in the one and a half hour’s double-classes. All the others learn to ‘listen’ properly and to ‘agree/disagree’ in a nice and tactical manner. The teacher heeds in particular the students’ need for freedom (learners are put in a situation they will have a desire to communicate); the need for meaningfulness (learners are encouraged to start sentences even when they don’t know how to finish them); the need for
fluency practice (learners are directed to internalize a considerably large amount of ready-made expressions so that they will have more time and attention capacity to deal with the plans which have not become fully automated during the oral production).

2.3.3. EXAMPLE CLASSROOM ACTIVITY: Once in class, a boy named Xiao Gang narrated a true love story of his own. He said: “…She’s such a lovely girl that I couldn’t help thinking of her all the time. …” The students’ opinions were divided in the follow-up discussions where whoever said ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to the issue should use reasons or facts to back up his/her idea.

**[Topic for Debate: Is Love on Campus OK?]**

**Positive Points**

1) Love can make you better motivated.
2) People in love can help each other better.
3) When love comes, you cannot resist it.

**Negative Points**

1) Love can waste a lot of your time that would have been spent in studies otherwise.
2) Love can bring trouble also.
3) We are too young to know how to love properly yet.

Students practiced how to support or oppose a view with 5-7 sentences at a time. From time to time they had to ‘negotiate’ the meanings. Students found themselves interdependent on group work activities not only because of the ‘information gap’ or ‘opinion gap’ they wanted to get over but also because of the interaction benefiting all participants whatever levels they were in the linguistic competence hierarchy. The teacher’s comments covered various domains ranging from the phonological & grammatical competence, socio-linguistic competence to strategic competence. But the teacher didn’t go so far as to tackle the students’ mistakes at full length. Instead, a number of examples were listed to show how to do paraphrases, to adjust the message, to use approximation, or even to create new words and use body languages in communication.

2.3.4. FINDINGS: The proportion of students taking an active part in the discussion increases so much so that it’s no exaggeration to say that nearly everyone of the students in the class is apt to speak well now, the differentiation in the degree of progress being explained in terms of cognitive styles, language aptitudes, personality traits, motivations and attitudes though. Besides, through one semester’s oral training, all students have developed a ‘feel’ for the oral language by experimenting with its grammar and words. They now know how to make their own opportunities for practice in using the language inside and outside the classroom. They know it’s necessary to learn certain production strategies to fill in gaps in their own competence. What’s more, they take charge of their own learning by developing a kind of self-monitoring ability. However, fossilization occurs as a by-product. As a result, a few up-mid- leveled students become frustrated and even slip back.

3. ASSESSMENT AND CONCLUSION:

3.1. ASSESSMENT: The student’s competence in spoken English at the three stages is assessed on the scale of 1 to 6 as shown in the table below. The fluency of speech is invariably seen as the most important while factors of contents, grammar, pronunciation, etc. are all taken into account. The students are asked to do the self-rating of their oral proficiency accordingly, on the
basis of which their scores of the terminal test are calculated by the teacher.

### An Overview of the Band Scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Band Score</th>
<th>Full Competence (smooth speech on general topics with no trace of ‘foreign accent’.)</th>
<th>Advanced (effortless and smooth in speech with occasional mistakes only, but perceptibly non-native)</th>
<th>General Competence (speech with occasional hesitance and unevenness, a few errors in grammar and mispronunciation which do not interfere with understanding)</th>
<th>Basic (speech with constant hesitance and a few gross errors which may cause irritation and misunderstanding)</th>
<th>Way stage (very slow and uneven speech with a number of gross errors which constantly prevent understanding)</th>
<th>Threshold (halting and fragmentary speech with unintelligible pronunciation and almost entirely inaccurate phrases)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Along with the scoring results of the final test at the end of the semester there are also records of students’ competence development in the two foregoing periods as shown in the chart.

### Oral Competence Development Chart

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number Of Students</th>
<th>Band 2</th>
<th>Band 3</th>
<th>Band 4</th>
<th>Band 5</th>
<th>Band 6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First Period</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second Period</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third Period</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The proportion of students with good communication competence reaches 68% at the end of the semester.

3.2. **ANALYSIS:** The statistics indicate that it takes about 5-12 weeks or even longer time for the 12 students who are initially leveled at Band 2 to get over to reach Band 3-4. While the students at the bottom are moving up the scale, those who are middle-leveled or up-middle-leveled are also advancing. At the end of the semester, 49 out of 71 students can be counted as possessing good communication competences (leveled from 4-6), taking up 68% of the total.
Zhong Jianin is the most distinguished student in class who speaks just like a native user does. In class he’s not a frequent speaker perhaps because he’s sort of introvert on the one hand, and he intends to give more space to his classmates on the other. While sitting quietly in the classroom, his mind is busy—thinking about the right answer, comparing his version with the classmates’, taking notes when he finds something that appeals to him, and so on. When asked about the secret of his success in the language learning, he replied: “Speak to yourself as much as possible and then you’ll know what you’ve already known and what you’re gonna learn. Language learning should be a very natural process whatsoe’er.” Zhang Jun, another top student in the class who’s managed to move from ‘advanced level’ to ‘full Competence’ during this semester is good at learning from watching English movies and listening to the radio. Zhang Xiao Lei who keeps an English diary takes pains in study and his speech is usually memorable and could be excellent if not for the obvious ‘foreign accent’. Xu Ding is no longer an inconspicuous boy hidden in the corner of the classroom. His speaking competence has risen from Band 2 to 4 within the semester and he remarks on his self-rating paper: “It’s so wonderful a feeling when you can express your true self in a second language.” Yan Xia used to be very disorganized when speaking but now she’s able to make herself clearly understood. Qu Wenjin, the student mentioned in an instance in the second period has remained on the ‘plateau’ at Level 5 throughout the semester. Towards the end of the semester she is a bit frustrated and therefore she is convinced by the teacher that Band 6 is within her easy reach so long as she’s willing to give a freer rein to her mind and tongue. The two students who are rated at the lowest points of the oral competence hierarchy are the girl who habitually breaks down in the middle of the speech because of nervousness and the boy whose pronunciation is time and again too unintelligible to be good. The strangest thing is that quite different from the evaluation by the teacher, they both rated themselves at Level 4, which suggests they do have the motivation and potential to improve. Facts and statistics point out that students having better tolerance for ambiguity and stronger capacity for empathy move forward the fastest; whereas those who overuse the self-monitor mechanism tend to be stuck longer in the status of standstill quite against their own will.

3.3. CONCLUSION: The findings of the semester’s research work through two probed classes totaling 71 sophomores in our university show that the process of learning oral English can be identified as three broadly defined stages. In the initial ‘pre-speaking period’, the learners may not be made to talk much yet they are listening attentively, pondering actively, speaking to themselves quietly, and once they start to talk, it’s not the beginning of their language acquisition, but rather, kind of testimony to the language acquisition they have already done. In the next ‘Creative Construction Period’, the learners adjust the order of their acquiring organism consciously or unconsciously so as to promote the internalization of morphemes, grammatical structures and other cultural and linguistic elements of the target foreign language. The acquisition of the foreign language, after all, is the process by which the individuals ‘pick up’ a new system through exposure to it and the use of it. In the follow-up period, all the students feel more confident and are more capable of talking with two thirds of them demonstrating better communicative strategies. Not every student, however, improves at the same pace and enjoys the same degree of success owing to the differential individuality. And there are a dozen or so of students end up in a
status of ‘fossilization’ at the end of the semester. It’s the teachers’ role to adverse the situation and offer them greater encouragement and support to progress further.

Instructions and work within one semester is not enough to deal with all the problems found with our students. There are still too many gaps in our knowledge. And there are too many variables to take account of about our teaching procedures. Nonetheless, by firmly putting the students at the center of language teaching, we certainly can produce more effective syllabuses, methodologies and ways of assessment in oral EL classes. It’s our hope that this probing work of ours, finite yet qualitative, will exert on the students concerned an effect which proves to be quantitative and infinite. It’s our wish that the few insights and ideas resulted from our research study should have high potential relevance to the facilitation of all oral EL classes currently at work in line with the English Curriculum Requirements recently put forth by the Tertiary Sector of State Education Ministry.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


