Conduct College English Learning
Within and Outside the Classroom

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Abstract:
This research aims at finding ways to combine students’ language learning activities, especially those of the non-English majors, both in and after class into one actual, natural learning process.

Key words Actual learning process natural learning learner autonomy learner strategy training computer literacy

Introduction
The “low efficiency problem” in college English teaching in China has drawn concern of teachers, students and authorities. There have been discussions and analyses of this problem from experts and teachers in recent years. Though we understand there is hardly any universal resolution to such a complicated problem as to increase foreign language teaching efficiency or to help the non-English-major learners to achieve communicative competence, which is required by the teaching syllabus and the current society and anticipated by ambitious learners, yet we are all trying our best to get nearer to one.

Considering the nature of language acquisition with the “arts” of language teaching created by notable achievers in this profession, viewing the present circumstances of college English teaching, I believe it would be of value to suggest that teachers reduce their efforts in classroom textbook teaching and exert much effective control over the task-based and natural learning activities that can assure students actual learning experiences and extricate them from time and space limitations. If carefully designed, these activities will also motivate students to learn autonomously, cooperatively and competitively.

Situation analysis---- current problems in college English teaching

I emphasize “actual learning” due to my knowledge of the fact that the strictly controlled syllabus and the limited curricular time have inevitably led the course into a teaching-centered practice, in which most of the teachers’ efforts are spent teaching, or exactly, explaining the textbooks in class while students are supposed to be listening. In the recent big classes that consist of at least 50 students in one classroom (some have more than 140 in the college where I teach), where teachers demonstrate the main parts of their lectures in PowerPoint slides and
deliver their “speeches” through an open microphone, individual student is seldom invited to respond, neither is there much collaborative work required, for the layout of seats and the size of the audience can’t allow such convenience. As a result of all the unfavorable factors, students’ needs are rendered subordinate to the convenience of the teacher (Gu, 1999). Consequently, most students become irresponsible in class. What is worse, though they are expected to learn after class, and are supposed to be particular about English, the global language of modern times, they often fail to present satisfactory performance or enthusiasm in this course whenever inspected. Without appropriate instructions, students are easily overwhelmed by the amount of work they are required to do in the textbooks: memorizing the numerous focal language points issued in each text; checking on the Internet for the online resources, which often take up much of the reviewing sessions but provide little reward; reading the endless reading materials requested but never commented on, etc.

After two years of learning that way, students in my college perform poorly in the final examination. Take the National CET4 (College English Test Band 4) as an example, their average score dropped by nearly 10 points compared with that of the higher grade, who had experienced the “traditional” ways of classroom learning (in smaller classes and had more classroom learning activities such as group discussion, teacher-student dialogue, oral presentation of discussion report). Some students complain instead of developing their English skills, their English abilities seem to have been suffering regress since they entered college.

An investigation made among 100 students from different majors including 50 who have passed the CET band 4 through questionnaires and interviews reveals valuable information including:

I. 98 Students have realized the time-consuming nature of language learning. 68 say they just fail to find any interest in spending their time on the monotonous repetitions of reading, memorizing and exercising.

II. 85 say they do some actual learning after class, which will guarantee them a short success in an examination but hardly any communicative competence in the long run.

III. Some fast learners suspect that the teachers may never allow themselves any chance to see their students’ strong enthusiasm and deep potential in English learning.

IV. Half of the objects expect the teachers to come up with ways to convert their English knowledge into actual use. They doubt if the teachers can.

V. 59 students are curious about others’ learning strategies, and are willing to communicate with them to exchange ideas.

VI. A slight majority of the students being asked believe more in ability than in school certificate.

VII. Contrary to what we expect, the slower learners have the stronger opposition to the present teaching methods. They believe them to be too old-fashioned and inefficient.

VIII. A surprising discovery is that they all prefer an on-line (through the Internet) chatting to a face-to-face communication with their peers.

IX. Given opportunity, they would like to issue topics they want to discuss instead of following the textbooks, which they regard as not related to their future
professions.

The discovery not only explains students' low motives and poor performances but also sheds light on how the teachers will exert their efforts in conducting an effective, actual learning process according to students' needs. Teachers all believe that meeting students' needs is the best way to motivate them.

**Development trend and theory review----direction of change**

Fortunately, students' desire are somewhat compatible with the requirements of recent development in foreign language teaching in that they call for similar changes in the present classroom teaching operation.

Recent development in College English Teaching Syllabus includes great emphasis on more practical and socialized approaches of language teaching with individualized instructions to learners. Greater importance will be attached to learner autonomy and learner strategy training. The application of modern technology in education is going to be enhanced in language teaching, which will surely favor communicative learning. There will be further restriction of curricula time and expansion of learning space and material range.

It appears that the new challenge will make both the teaching and learning tasks even more difficult to shoulder, but in fact, it will benefit greatly the effectiveness of our work, since the new requirements are based on the fundamental rules of language acquisition, and will lead us to the right way of language teaching.

Linguists and language educators have long pointed out that a second language is usually "picked up" from the environment while foreign language learning always needs appropriate instructions (Brown, 1994).

But owing to lack of language environment and reliable teaching instructions, most of our students fail to find any interest in following the teachers’ in achieving communicative competence or strive in vain to become a competent speaker.

If we can’t offer an ideal target language environment to our students, that is, put them into the target language speaking world, we can at least create a seemingly one, in which learners use the target language to solve real life problems, either through reading and listening, when they “input” knowledge, or through speaking and writing, when they “output” what they know.

It is also imperative that teachers provide a “safe” learning environment, treat language learning as a “social” process where comprehensible “input” is a must when expecting comprehensible “output” (Krashen, 1980).

This “safe” environment is expected to be able to maintain opportunities for individual language learners to obtain needed information and to get ready help from the teacher and fellow learners. In such “safe” environment, the teacher’s instructions should be so effective as to guarantee learner’s awareness of their tasks and new achievements in time, motivate them to learn actively and autonomously, and sustain their interests in cooperation and competition.

Teachers are convinced that there is no single "best way" to teach (Doggett, 1993), and are suggested to apply “a combination of methods” (Brown, 1994) and to perform “multiple roles” (Gu, 1999).

Considering the present circumstances in college English teaching, we believe the “combination of methods” may include those that can solve our particular problems. Take the Community Language Learning for example, in which teachers apply psychological counseling
techniques to learning, has been proved to be effective in teaching large classes. When students get assisted and supported, they will have the real sense of participation. They become more responsible and feel more secure in learning. **The Natural Approach** focuses on principles of meaningful communication, comprehension before production, and indirect error correction (Krashen & Terrell, 1983). The goal of **Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)** is to create realistic contexts for language acquisition in the classroom. The most important one to mention is **Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL)**, which not only helps students to get access to a gold mine of language resources on the Internet, but also offers a variety of input opportunities from both a quantitative and a qualitative perspective (Pennington, 1996). Since the procedures of different methods are likely to be compatible in real classroom practice, we can’t tell which method is superior to others. The fact is we should study them and employ the suitable effectiveness in certain circumstances or draw value from whichever we can. Therefore, how we should combine the usefulness of all these methods and let them contribute to the attainment of our goals should be reconsidered in the new era.

Concurrently, to guarantee an actual learning process, our roles as class manager, information provider, assessor, supervisor, instructor and so on all need to be emphasized again and performed with new devices.

**Implications and suggestions----possible solutions**

Of course students don’t learn well because the teachers know the best ways to teacher. It seems that as language teachers, we need to consider far more things than classroom delivery and management to be competent and responsible. Based on the survey about students’ learning attitudes and theories on the nature of language acquisition, we work out a teacher’s task list. Besides the usual practices in language teaching, we need to fulfil the following tasks:

1. Design learning activities that are problem-solving, task-based or research-bound.
2. Supplement the textbook with materials recommended by either students or the teacher.
3. Establish ways for communication in the target language.
4. Offer opportunities for student presentation.
5. Establish rules for regular evaluation and record student performances on carefully designed score registration list.
6. Divide the big class into different levels of community groups and manage activities according to this route: teacher----class monitors----group leaders----individual students or pairs.
7. Develop our own computer literacy as well as students’.
8. Operate and participate in after-class communications mainly via e-mail.
9. Instruct students in accessing learning resources from different sources.
10. Assist students in setting up goals for learning, and monitoring their progress.
11. Facilitate students with learning strategies or the “technical know-how” about language learning, and gear them towards being independent learners.

In completing the above tasks, we intend to solve the present low efficiency problem in college English teaching and achieve the following goals:

2. Make students responsible for learning both in and after class.
3. Generate student interaction, cooperation and competition.
4. Stimulate students’ interest, and increase their levels of motivation.
5. Develop students’ learning strategies, and increase their awareness of their learning styles.
6. Increase their confidence.
7. Increase their English language proficiency.
8. Meet the requirements of the syllabus and curriculum design.

Specifically, appropriate instructions are given to guide each step of a learning activity. These learning projects usually will follow certain procedures as:

I. In class topic selection or article suggestion
II. Assign topics or articles to small groups.
III. Students’ individual task and group work after class.
IV. In class group discussion, competition and presentation.
V. In class teacher’s summary and assessment.
VI. In class student evaluation of individual or group work
VII. In class free discussion.
VIII. Exchange topics or articles among groups after class.

Actually there is a variety of autonomous learning activities or projects available from different sources, for example, in course books, from training centers, on school web pages and commercial websites. But most of them are designed for elementary ESL learners or English major students and don’t work well in college English teaching. To guarantee effectiveness or the learning projects, we need to be particular about the following features of activities and materials.

Features of the learning projects:
1. Content of material or topic suits students’ interest or be related to their majors.
2. Tasks are of appropriate degree of difficulty: challenging but not demanding.
3. Tasks call for information-searching, peer-tutoring and cooperation.
4. Instructions of one project lead to development of the four language abilities.
5. Various projects follow same evaluation and presentation rules.
6. Different levels of communication take place mainly outside the classroom, via e-mail, list servers, BBS (bulletin board systems), online conference, IOCQ and chat rooms.

An example of such learning projects will show to what extent we can call it an actual learning process.

Title of project: Famous Person Project (web-quest and writing project designed for PR majors)

**Step one:**
Coverage of class hour: 3 minutes
In class instruction (also published via certain links on campus website for course design)

**Step two:**
Coverage of time: One week
Students’ work after class:
Content of instruction published: Famous Person Project
You will practice Web search and writing through the following project. The assignment has
to be done and handed in electronically. Please find “web-search project” folder under your class folder for “Famous Person Project” and store your document in it.

1. Copy and read the worksheet presented on the next page. On the World Wide Web, use a Web search engine to find information on a famous person you like best from at least three Web sites.
2. Under the folder “websearch1” set up a folder and name it by your user name. Save the three articles as text files by using Notebook (记事本) and name them by “the person’s name + a number” (e.g. cliton1, cliton2, cliton3). Place them in the folder you just created.
3. Then according to the information you get, fill in the worksheet and save it by the name of the person (e.g. cliton). Place this document under your own folder mentioned above.

Sample work sheet for a web-quest:

Famous Person Worksheet

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>1 to 3 photos of the person</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Born</th>
<th>in</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interests</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family information</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Career history</th>
<th>(Provide 5 to 8 highlights in his/her career life. No less than 5 and no more than 8!)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interesting information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>My reasons for choosing this person</th>
<th>In about 150 words</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>URLs of the Web sites you get information from</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Important notices: 1. Do not simply copy information into the table. Write in your own words.
2. Make a paper-work copy of your 150 words composition for in-class group discussion.

**Step three:**
Teacher’s work before class:
1. View students’ progress in the project, and offer corrections to students’ written work. (Alternative: leave this work until after the class discussion and evaluation by reading the paper form compositions).
2. Communicate with class monitors and group leaders: inform about possible further instructions, offer help and ask for their evaluations of students’ individual work.

**Step four:**
Coverage of class hour: 10-20 minutes
1. In class group discussion and individual report presentation: students discuss in groups about their written works mainly, they also exchange information about working experiences during the week.
2. After individual presentation within the groups, they will select the best works in each group and make class presentations (this time just reading aloud of the compositions).
3. Teacher record students’ performances simultaneously.

**Step five:**
Coverage of class hour: 5minutes.
1. Teacher’s summery of students’ compositions, and recommend good writings for supplementary reading after class.
2. Ask students to exchange their papers in group units. The group leaders will assign them to individuals in the group and ask them to read and make corrections (student evaluation).

**Step six:**
Coverage of time: one week (overlapping with next project).
Student work after class: read peers’ work before handing in to the teacher next meet.

**Step seven & eight:**
Teacher’s work:
1. A second correction of students’ writing.
2. Record their scores.
3. Make brief comment on the whole project in class (in about 5 minutes).

**Conclusion**
Each step of the learning activities was carried out under careful control with technique. Students were actively involved in deciding their own working partners, the learning materials, and the way they communicate and participate. They learnt effectively from each other, from the Internet, newspapers and books, through searching, reading, translating, analyzing, discussing, writing, presenting and listening. They really communicated with the teacher and among themselves in different ways. Most of the students harvested satisfactory performances. They changed from passive followers to active participants. They became not only self-reliant and self-responsible in learning, but also realized the importance of cooperation in language learning. One student told me there was full of fun in learning English in college. As a teacher, I also
acquired a deeper understanding of “the art of teaching is the art of making students learn”.

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