Exam Preparation or Teaching English: A Way out of the Exam-orientatedness Dilemma in China

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Abstract
Theoretical framework: A CLT-based technique, Vygostskyan sociocultural and socio-constructivist theory. Local Settings: Comprehensive English course at a private college in China. The main textbook assigned by the college administration was *The Integrated Skills of English*. Participants: Control group: 39 students (two classes) were taught in the traditional teacher-centered and teacher-fronted manner when the teacher comments on the textbook and students answer questions related to the book assignments later materialized in exam-assignments. Experimental group: 58 (two classes) students taught in the experimental manner within the student-centered system and analytic procedure of the textbook analysis. Methods: This study fall into the rubric of action research aimed at “the improvement of teaching and language learning practices.” Class records and video were used randomly throughout the academic year and semi-structured interviews were conducted with a focal group of 10 students to solicit their detailed evaluation of the teaching methods. Data Analysis and Conclusion: The experiment helped to dissolve this teacher-centered paradigm within the existing exam-oriented context without breaking the context itself establishing a “location-specific, classroom-oriented innovative practice.”

Keywords: Preconceived and post hoc categories, Classroom discourse management, Teacher-centered classroom discourse, Student facilitator

Introduction

Comprehensive English in China as Preparation for tests

Chinese student’s exam preparation mindset and exam-orientatedness of the curriculum have always been the main problem of foreign teachers of English in Mainland China. (Gu, 2003; Tsui, 2003; Gao, 2005; Simpson, 2008; Wolff, 2010; Trent, 2011) There have been many views on this problem ranging from a deliberate ignoring of students’ examination-related anxieties to following Chinese student’s requests to prepare them for the national exams. Simpson calls it “the competition between Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and the Traditional Chinese Method (TCM)” (Simpson, 2008) Each of about 200,000 foreign teachers of English in China (Wollf, 2010) eventually has to strike a balance between these two extremes.

Chinese learners’ “learning approaches… seem to be extremely exam-oriented and dependent on learners’ self-will and effort as well as teachers’ support and attention.” (Gao, 2005) The most common exams related to English studies Chinese students have to take are
comprehensive English language tests or “proficiency tests” (Zou, 2004) such as CET 4, CET 6 (College English Test, Band 4 and 6) and many local tests modeled on CET that in turn, modeled on the international English tests, e.g. IELTS. Those who want to continue their studies overseas have to pass the international proficiency tests. English majors in China have to take two more national exams (TEM 4 and TEM 8, Test for English Majors, Band 4 and 8); the first test is obligatory and serves as a prerequisite for obtaining a B.A. degree in English (Zhou, 2004). No surprise that the main textbooks used in the English classes in China are heavily based on the assignments similar to or directly taken from the comprehensive English language tests students have to take.

Comprehensive English courses in China represent the students’ preparation for international English tests. For the English majors they are particularly important as a demonstration of their professional competence. “Two of the most widely tests used and internationally recognized tests are the International English Language Testing Systems (IELTS) and the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL)” (Coffin, 2004). Uysal (2011) claims that “IELTS has its unique characteristics, the most important of which is IELTS’ claim to assess English as an international language.” An IELTS exam is structured as a comprehensive test with four major components: “it covers the four language skills (listening, reading, writing and speaking), and it is statistically designed to genuinely reflect students’ abilities in each of those skills.” In some countries, e.g. the UAE, these tests are so common that the whole English study curriculum is organized around the IELTS test as a preparation to it (Aboudan, 2011) The studies of English and the curriculum are predictably based on these assignments modeled on or taken from the international testing systems. The structure of TEM 4/8 exams and the Chinese universities’ English curriculum is focused on preparing students for international careers and test-taking up to the situation described by Gu when students “spent much more time on learning English than any other subjects even though they were not English major students” (Gu, 2003).

**Literature Review**

**Theoretical framework**

Exam-orientedness/language testing and Communicative Language Learning and Teaching (CLL and CLT) in the Chinese context (Xu, 2010) have had a rocky relationship. “Some challenges faced by teachers are: incompatibility with public assessment; conflict with educational traditions and culture.” (Littlewood, 2011) There is a need for “location-specific, classroom-oriented innovative practices.” (Yoo, 2011) and they can be based on a synthesis of the two approaches: testing-orientation (as it’s a global tendency as many universities with the English language curricula accept foreign students on the basis of IELTS/TOEFL test scores) and local dominant teaching methods. On paper, the dominant English teaching method in China is communicative language teaching, CLT (Bao & Sun, 2010; Xu, 2010), but in reality, it is actively used “in some big cities, such as Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin, Guangzhou. Some schools are limiting their class size to about 20 students.” (Xu, 2010)
I present my own model of compromising the CLL/CLT and academic training at the college level helping the learners prepare for the national tests. Other theoretical components of this synthetic pedagogical method used in this exam-centered context are Bakhtin’s understanding of “the language as a world-view,” (Bakhtin, 1981; McKay, 2004) Vygostsky’s sociocultural and socio-constructivist theory and the idea of scaffolding, in particular. (Vygotsky, 1978; Lee, 2005; Magno, 2010) as the students in the experimental group helped each other in unraveling the textbook assignments.

ITsui’s classification (1985, 1994, 1995, 2001), seventeen-category system was used where appropriate. The teacher-student or student-student interactions are classifyable in terms of the Initiate-respond dichotomy. We see in the classroom transcript, the level of the discussion based on the trivial comprehensive English assignment goes higher and higher as the Vygoskyan metaphor of scaffoldings is illustrated by the evolution of the teacher-led classroom discourse, TLD (Toth, 2011) to the highest academic level possible in the classroom-based English learning format when the students use metalanguage and make conclusions on the nature of the assignments and tasks in the textbook.

The Study: Local Settings

Comprehensive English course is taught to the English majors in their second and third years of studies (grade 2 and 3) The main textbook assigned by the college administration is *The Integrated Skills of English*. “Each 15 units of the book is organized and divided into three parts, Listening and Speaking Activities, Reading Comprehension and Language Activities, and Extended Activities.” (Ming, 2011) At the end of each semester the students took the test that serves as an “achievement test… that measures how much of a language someone has learned in a particular course of study or program of instruction.”

Participants

I’ve selected 71 English majors taught in the framework of the same course, Comprehensive English 3 and 4. The students have been reading for the B.A. degree in English and all of them have been majoring in English in a Chinese private college. All of the students were taught by the same teacher and all of them took the same English proficiency tests in the academic year 2011-2012. The group was taught in the experimental manner within the student-centered system and analytical procedure of the textbook analysis with the involvement of scaffolding-based teaching technique and TLD.

Methods

This study fall into the rubric of action research aimed at “the improvement of teaching and language learning practices” (Bailey, 2005, p.15) Action research, “a small-scale intervention in the real world” is a way of “empowering practitioners.” (Yoo, 2011) Classroom records and transcripts were used randomly throughout the academic year; semi-structured interviews were conducted with a focal group of 30 students participated in the study to solicit their detailed evaluation of the teaching methods and the results of the course. Students were not
pre-selected and they attended other classes, so their progress cannot be attributed to the comprehensive course only, plus the dynamics of the test results was not always positive and the fact that the students got higher or lower scores can be random.

The primary research question the study is addressing: How can an EFL teacher structure an English class to be able to combine exam preparations, analytical and academic training into the teaching English classroom discourse in the Chinese context?

**Data collection**

Two academic hours class sessions were recorded. The data were analyzed in the way Rashidi and Raffieerad (2010) used in their paper analyzing discourse patterns. The experimental group of students was taught the whole academic year of 2010-2011 (two semesters, 36 weeks, 6 hours of classes per week) in the student-centered manner. The control group was taught in the teacher-centered approach framework when the teacher explained the comprehensive course assignments and tasks. The test scores of the two groups were collected. The test results analysis did not yield fruitful outcomes as the fluctuations have been big and they can be attributed to the students’ changing attitude towards their English studies or other factors. When some students in the control and experimental groups achieved a significant growth in their comprehensive test scores within one semester from 60 to 91 or 66 to 90, some students got 81 in the first semester and 39 in the second, so it is hard to say what the reason of such progress or regress was.

**Transcript Analysis**

Analyzing the synthesis of exam preparation and teaching techniques is not a task that can be fulfilled through obtaining statistical data and triangulating them with observation-based and interview-based methods as the number of variables is too large: we do not know about the students’ individual preferences for exam preparations and to what extent the other English classes in the curriculum affect their progress. The most valuable results of the study are the class transcripts themselves and the analysis of transcripts in terms of preconceived and post hoc categories. (Subtirelu, 2011)

Preconceived categories were used for the theoretical conceptualization of the main points of the lessons recorded, categories are:
- Classroom discourse management
- Teacher-centered classroom discourse
- Student facilitator
- Classroom facilitating
- Assigning classroom tasks

Post hoc categories came as a result of the transcript analysis and interviewing the participants
- Teacher’s interventions and analytical input
- Teacher’s improvising input
- Teacher as a supplementary facilitator
- Students’ creative input and discoveries
In China, classroom discourse management is, on the one hand, easy, as “the Chinese learners are always described as “rote-learners” who are “passive”, “spoon-fed”, “quiet”, “unquestioning”, “motivated”, “obedient”, “disciplined” (Tang, 2009), so they mostly expect the teacher to “teach” them and impart “knowledge” as can be seen in the interviews that the students “always need some fresh and interesting knowledge.” (Student A in the interview; vocabulary, grammar and syntax of the students have been preserved throughout the paper)

On the other hand, it is challenging for a professional teacher to make students speak and express themselves in classroom.

Teacher-led discourse, TLD, has long been a subject of research, but “the question of how best to provide L2 assistance remains unsettled.” (Toth, 2011) I provide the classroom transcripts from the very beginning of the year in the week one, in the middle of the year in week 12.

Classroom transcript. Excerpt 1.

Normally, the teacher assumes the role of facilitator in language learning (Pica, 2000; Wang, Hill, 2011). The idea of appointing a student as facilitator is still new in the EFL/ESL teaching community as it is not used often at the western universities where the most of EFL/ESL ideas come from. Although as a step towards a “two-way accommodation” (Wang, Hill, 2011) of non-native forms of English in the Asian context, the learners may welcome the local students facilitating role when locals speak more than the native English teacher in class. Here is the first example of this “teacher-decentralized” model in a Chinese classroom:

**Teacher (starts the class and chooses a student-facilitator, for the first few weeks, the teacher has chosen the good students only) At the beginning of the semester, the teacher’s function is to introduce all the procedures. In a few weeks, the students will do them by themselves. The class will become student-centered, but so far, the teacher is leading the class discourse.**

Kitty, Come forward please.

**Kitty (a good student) comes to the stage.**

**Teacher:**
Tell them to open their books and to go to item B. Work with sentences, on page 7. Tell them what they should do.

**Kitty:** Turn to page 7. *(reads out the assignment)* Rewrite the following sentences using the expressions in the box below. “I chose the car for its speed, comfort and, most important, for its reliability.”

Here we can see that the student can facilitate the class easily and assign the classroom tasks taking the routine job off the teacher, but the facilitator’s role has been shifted. The student is assigning tasks to classmates. This is a novelty of the lesson.

As Navera put it: “Facilitation’s goal… is used to get these ideas from the members organized and to ensure that every member is involved in making informed judgments on these ideas… The most that the facilitator can do regarding rules is to provide instruction for activities that the members need to undertake for a future discussion.” (Negara, 2007) When the student is
facilitating the class taught by a foreigner, there may be some apprehension as the learners have got used to the teacher-centered model common in China. “The commonly held opinion is that the teacher in China is in control of knowledge and delivery, while learners listen and remember, and that examinations are of crucial importance, the ultimate goal for teachers and learners.” (Tang, 2009) The only development of the last decade can be summarized in Belchamber’s statement: “Students want to be noticed” (Belchamber, 2007,) With this wish to be “noticed” comes a niche for the “student as facilitator” experiment.

**Interview result.** Student B: “I like standing in front of the blackboard, but I don’t’ like asking questions to other students. Because they don’t want to be asked.”

Student 2: “On the one hand, it can help us practice. On the other hand, we don’t have abilities to be a facilitator and teach students other knowledge.”

In a weak class with students of low communicative skills, there may be a reluctance or even resistance to facilitate the class, even asking simple questions from the textbook assignments, so it is important to select facilitators for specific assignments and tasks, even if some students volunteer to facilitate, but not suitable or qualified enough for the role.

In the case of a well-structured English course when the textbook determines the majority of classroom activities, even in the exam-oriented paradigm, the class routine often lack variety as the teacher may opt to variety deliveries in the form of movies or games. As the class is aimed at the international, national and, to an extent, local, exam preparations, entertainment digressions will be considered unproductive. So we recorded one of the sessions where the discussion raised to the high academic level.

**Classroom transcript. Excerpt 2.**
The facilitator’s role can be gradually enlarged and made dominant in the classroom discourse. The space for the teacher’s interventions and analytical input is always present:

**Excerpt 2, Week 12. Unit 6 in the middle of the textbook. The dominant theme of the unit happened to be “travel.”** Reading comprehension assignments are all “localized”: the story about a tour around Thailand “Lifting the veil.” Subtitle: “The night that a blind man helped me to see.” Then the learners go to the description of Bali by a backpacker and finally an excerpt for a package tour advertisement in China “The Cormorant Fisherman.” Assignment: Work with words.

**Student-facilitator:** Let’s turn to page 112, work with words. Fill in the following blanks with words from the alternatives below.

**The student-facilitator is reading out the text and addressing the task:** (1)_________ against the backdrop of the peaks of the Guilin area and reflected in he limpid water below, this (2)_________ evokes a timelessness with the visitor to China.

**Alternatives:**
1. a Taken   b. Seen       c. Captured   d. Described
2. a scene   b. landscape c. view       d. spectacle

Again, the assignments are very common for the CET 4 and TEM 4 examinations in China (Zhou, 2004)

**Facilitator:** Who would like to answer?
No answer is the assignment is really difficult.

Facilitator: Lynn. What do you choose?

Lynn (an average student): “Captured” is Number 1 and “view” is Number 2.

Facilitator (looks at the answer is the teachers’ book provided): “view” is not correct.

Lynn (reads out the excerpt): (Captured) against the backdrop of the peaks of the Guilin area and reflected in he limpid water below, this (scene) evokes a timelessness with the visitor to China.

Facilitator: Correct. Can you explain why you chose these two words?

Lynn: “Captured” is better than “seen” or “described” because we don’t describe or see. “Scene evokes” is better than “view evokes” or “landscape evokes” and “spectacle evokes” is incorrect.

Facilitator: Any other opinions? Nicole, what do you think?

Nicole (a student above the average level): Hmm, I don’t know…Captured is better because “taken against the backdrop of the peaks” is not good because “scene” needs to be “taken.” Something is wrong.

Facilitator: OK, good. Any other opinions? Daisy?

Daisy: “Scene captured” is the best. “Scene described” or “scene seen” are not good because nobody sees or describes it. “View captured” or “landscape captured” or “scene taken” - something wrong there.

Teacher (preparing for an intervention): What’s wrong?

Daisy: Lexically they are not good together. View is captured and reflected and then this view evokes. Not good.

Teacher: It’s called linguistic intuition. Use it now. Scene is captured against the backdrop of the peaks and is reflected in the water, then evokes a timelessness. The same subject first is used in the passive voice and then in active. Nothing rings the bell?

Facilitator: No.

Teacher: It’s a very artistic text, lots of picturesque descriptions. Look at “landscape is captured, reflected in waters and evokes.” Try to use the words “subjects” and “object” in your explanations.

Facilitator: Landscape cannot be captured. Subject does not fit the verb.

Teacher: Yes, because the landscape is the thing, not the idea in your mind, the same with “view” or “scene,” let alone, the spectacle – the latter is absolutely wrong here. So we have “landscape is captured and reflected in the waters and evokes” and “scene is captured, reflected and evokes” only two choices left. And what is better out of these two?

Vicky (a student above average): “Scene” is captured against the backdrop and reflected in the waters and “this scene evokes a timelessness.” Very brief and artistic.

Teacher (finishing the analytical intervention): So for the sake of an artistic description, the writer combined the subject and object in one word “scene” and put the two verb in active and passive voice in the same sentence. But we always have to take the whole sentence and the whole context into account; the whole context is: “Captured against the backdrop of the peaks and reflected in the waters, this scene evokes a timelessness…” Subject is the same-the scene-it’s a landscape, but not as a thing, it’s a landscape reflected in the waters, plus you are seeing it. If you put “view” here – it’s in your mind only, so the view can be captured by the observer, but the view cannot be reflected in waters. Here we don’t see any other object or
subject, because it was once used- the word “scene.” So the “scene is captured” and evokes something, in this case, “a timelessness with the visitor to China. So the only correct answers are “scene captured…and evokes… a timelessness.” Still not absolutely clear, but at least we made an explanation of a very artistic description. It was hard…

Facilitator: Moving on

The lesson goes on.

We have seen the teacher’s improvising input regarding the choice of the correct answers. The teacher employed his knowledge of textual analysis. (Cheng, 2010) Students’ discoveries and students’ creative input were also accommodated in the excerpt 2 as the best students in the class of 20 students had a chance to analyze a very artistic passage. Unfortunately, their input was not decisive in this excerpt 2 as the teacher picked up the discussion point at the highest level the students scaffolds reached and the teacher pushed the discussion and classroom discourse to the highest level but a few weeks latter the best students in the class, at least, managed to imitate the teacher’s creative input. The student-facilitators learned how to conduct the class when the teacher calls them to facilitate. They also learned to make grammatical comments and sometimes they comment on cultural issues. So the teacher occasionally leads the class discourse, but most of the classroom time, the facilitator is doing the teacher’s job. The class is completely student-fronted and, probably, student-centered.

Discussion

Exam results don’t demonstrate good dynamics as the students in the control group who were taught in the traditional teacher-centered manner gained better scores in tests 1 and test 2 than the students in the experimental group. Means in the control group are 75.8889 for test 1 and 80.1111 for text 2 at the end of the term, so there is actually a progress in the control group. In the experimental group the results are: Mean of test 1 scores = 78.8000; Mean of test 2=73.4857, so the students in the experimental group showed worse results. The lesson transcripts showed that the students can facilitate their class discussion and facilitation helps learners provide some valuable explanations and comments on the textbook assignments.

Conclusion

Some students (normally, the best students in class in terms of test results and class performance) have learned to analyze their exam assignments. Their newly acquired skill can be demonstrated only through the transcripts of the lessons and self-report questionnaires rather than an objective test results. Statistically, their results and distribution of test scores are random. An analysis of the English proficiency test assignments has always been a teacher’s prerogative that led to the domination of the teacher-centered discourse in the Chinese classroom, if not in any ESI/EFL-related educational context. The experiment we undertook helped to dissolve this teacher-centered paradigm within the existing exam-oriented context without breaking the context as highlighted the way to establish a “location-specific, classroom-oriented innovative practice.” (Yoo, 2011, p.234) The weakness of this experiment is that the fact that participants learned to analyze their exam assignments can be verified only through the self-report questionnaires rather than an objective test.
References


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