Optimizing academic and ESL acquisition environments in China's post-secondary education

system.

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October 16th, 2016

Abstract

The purpose of this article is an examination of methods and result used in modifying classroom management and curriculum delivery in the mainland China post-secondary education system to enhance language acquisition skills. Using hybridized methods to optimize these academic and environmental variables requires merging both national and international strategies into a productive learning environment while maintaining State mandated guidelines. These approaches were produced over the course of a five year study in both vocational college and university settings and continually assessed in real time classroom environments culminating in the deployment at the university level to freshmen and sophomore students pursing majors in teaching, English language and business. The results demonstrate increased academic utility and the acquisition of skills and abilities across the spectrum of L2 language curriculum classes and an elevated level of participation and academic progress for almost all students in these types of classroom environments. Foreign experts and teachers should consider selectively utilizing these elements in their classroom environment to enhance the students' academic and personal progress and their pedagogical goals in this type of educational setting.

Keywords*: hybridization, ESL, classroom management, China post-secondary, teaching methods.

Brief overview of non-synchronized language foundation and the asymmetrical institution

landscape.

As part of the cultural and social organization of the State, citizens were under geographical restrictions that made relocation away from the hometown difficult. This generally placed restrictions on available post-secondary institutions that students may qualified to attend. However it has always remained possible to apply economic and social relationships status / leverage to assist and influence the academic choices available for some students.

Differential language limitations occur when a student, faculty relocate to other geographical locations instead of attending local / provincial institutions. Although the State mandates that Mandarin (Beijing accented) as the official state language, both the complexity of the regional and local dialects render full communications using the State mandated language impossible.

Examples of State language diversity is noted in television programming which incorporate both oral dialogue and written subtitles for programs. The State rightly assumes that most individuals can either understand the dialogue or the written subtitles, which in turn increases accessibility. This also compensates for a substantial cross section of older citizens whom are functionally illiterate, typically from rural and remote provincial areas.

This was noted amongst the student population as well, although the primary education process purports equivalent results measureable by placement testing, students often had difficulty in understanding and assimilating course materials. The most noteworthy side effects of this phenomena resulted in wide spread cheating and collective sharing of information between students, and the development of extensive composite slang languages used by single classes to communicate. The reflexive response by the institutions included multiple testing

attempts and lowering of standards to ensure "successful" course completion statistics and maintain enrollment levels and goals. This includes the effects of non-uniform English language class content during the primary education phase. And reflects a pedagogical disconnect in the curriculum and delivery methods used to ensure uniform synchronization of speech, language acquisition skills and usage ability by the students.

Although faculty teaching skills and abilities were assessed and studied, with notable short comings in skills, certifications, placement, and hiring practices, this work concentrates on increasing the functional utility for teaching and the classroom environments for the benefit of the students, teachers, lecturers and instructors.

Traditional State classroom management, which is discussed in more depth in the body of this work attempts to compensate by allowing and encouraging an overly permissive environment that is sufficiently deficient to instill a meaningful academic experience. This was compounded by incentives and bonus monies for high graduation rates and student grade levels for individual classes. This reflects an asymmetrical academic environment.

These conditions impact the fundamental functionality and marginalize the pedagogical end result of many degree and certification programs for both traditional classes and ESL course studies. Using elements of academic classroom optimizing concurrently with hybridized classroom and teaching management methods offer some solutions that address these types of situations when teaching traditional classes and L2 (ESL) language classes.

Optimizing ESL Acquisition Environments in China's Post-secondary Education.

When seeking to enhance and engage students in China's post-secondary learning environment that focus on English language acquisition a multiyear study was conducted in both the vocational college and university settings to ascertain which facets of classroom management, curriculum could optimize language acquisition in a limited time environment.

Typical student environment.

Typically students who enrolled in ESL type programs were presented with a somewhat contradictory environment in which both Chinese and foreign teachers taught facets of English language in separate classes. Generally grammar, pronunciation, listening and often writing were relegated to Chinese teaching staff, while spoken elements are relegated to "foreign" experts. A foreign expert in this context is an individual whom holds a degree, certification from outside of mainland China and by curtesy is deemed an expert by virtue of claiming English as their native language. (No teaching experience or certification is required)

This often creates conflicts and problems for students as they (the students) would seek opinions related to English language mechanics from Foreign experts that were either contradictory to what was being presented in Chinese curriculum English classes or inaccurately presented by foreign experts as correct format and / or usage. Over the course of the study materials given to the students in the Chinese component classes were periodically reviewed for content, this included assistance in homework correction and guiding efforts to improve comprehension, form and function.

Three curriculum elements to consider.

Curriculum processes, developed by the State overlooked a number of logical and key development processes that would if implemented improve the acquisition of both skills and abilities over the course of study.

The first element is the overreliance on English language text books. (Without singling out specific brands) Although offering some value in topic relevance, the information contained within these types of "text" books suffer from a number of skills assumption that include cultural background familiarity, (that places topic in context) and a working vocabulary sufficient to understand the material.

These overlooked consideration(s) hamper content understanding to the point of nullifying any utility gained from usage. Students were often given vocabulary books and lists to memorize but never given an opportunity to deploy and use the vocabulary in any spoken or conversational environment. School(s) generally defaulted to vocabulary skill evaluation by written test and examination, which stresses memorization recall and not that of functional usage. (Non-synchronized language approach)

The second element is a tacit lack of guidance and / or concern about how "foreign experts" arranged or taught their classes, this free range approach significantly erodes both the pedagogical purpose of "teaching" and as observed in real time environment(s) failed to adequately foster the acquisition of skills and abilities in most of the students. Test and assessments in these situations were anemic, inadequate and the school(s) would routinely overrule foreign expert's course grades in order to placate students and preserve enrollment numbers.

The third element and arguably the most critical of the three discussed was a functional lack of concurrent lesson and curriculum planning. What was observed was that none of the course elements were synchronized between disciplines, (e.g. writing, grammar, spoken, listening…) in that topics were scattered and no unified theme was used to present materials. Logically in an L2 environment students retain more information and acquire skills more rapidly when they are exposed to a lesson objection multiple times. As an example if the lesson of the day involves prepositional usage, then all classes should stress the core lesson relative to the discipline. The student would have an opportunity to be exposed to the core lesson across the disciplines thus enhancing the functional context of the information.

Discussion with several administration(s) on this issue stressed the benefit of having all English language lesson elements run concurrently over the range of classes, which would allow students to have reinforcing lessons, exercise and usage, this was greeted with great reluctance as it would require more time in planning for the classes and would involve having "foreign experts" (whom were / are not teachers) involved in the Chinese education process.

Re-shaping the academic classroom setting.

Organic development for optimizing the acquisition environment in the classroom evolved over a three year period and was successfully deployed on the University level in 2014 ~ 2015 in both freshman and sophomore classes with majors in teaching, English language and business.

The set framework for the spoken "oral English" required having the institution share Chinese curriculum metrics and an ongoing examination of graduation criteria. This allowed for curriculum construction that would overlap lesson information from other disciplines being

taught. Most conventional elements for oral English classes were modified and expanded to encompass all elements of English language acquisition. These classes were mandated as English only environments. (Freshmen classes were allowed some latitude to use Chinese to clarify some lesson elements)

Students were no longer allowed to use cellphone in class, typically for the dictionary function. Instead classes were directed to purchase paper dictionaries which mandated that all students would be using the same definition for their vocabulary. The dictionary was also used for timed "pop" quizzes in which students are given a small set of random words to lookup under timed conditions thus exercising reading and comprehension skills. With the use of common matching dictionaries and definitions an increasing measure of synchronized language understanding is formed.

A notable facet of State education is the emphasis placed on the use of PowerPoint for class lecture and student presentations. This particular tool was being used across the entire spectrum of classes, (traditional and ESL) and although a valuable tool and skill in itself, as a lecture platform it does not provide the best flexibility for acquisition of language oriented skills.

Lectures were realigned towards blackboards onto which lesson elements were scripted. Concurrently Students were required to have lecture notebooks and keep lecture notes from each class. Lecture notebooks were then allowed for some testing and the contents of the notebook were reviewed for grade credit. This augmented handouts and also allows students real time reading, writing and comprehension skill usage. Additionally by utilizing the blackboard as the preferred lecture vehicle, the classroom environment shifted from a dark passive setting into a well-lighted active setting which has greater utility to engage students and for overall skill acquisition.

Lesson topics were developed from real world communication skills[1] and encompassed an increasing complex layered set of language skills that allow for accurate informational exchanges and shifted away from mere topic recitations. (English language text book limitation) The interrogative forms being used solicited spontaneous language usage and not rote responses typically encountered for these types of language class. e.g.   Giving directions, emotions, sharing opinions…

Pronunciation exercises were scripted to address common spoken defects and used to enhance, reading, vocabulary and diction elements of speech. Concurrently exercises involving national and foreign holidays, cultural and customs were periodically introduced as vehicles to enhance comprehension and spoken element exercises. These topics were neutral in nature and did not conflict with State teaching doctrines concerning sensitive and / or counterproductive issues. E.g. Political, religion…

This approach was developed to continually stress English language skills during the limited available class time (40 to 55 minutes (once or twice a week)) and although students perceived this type of class as more challenging and structured than conventional "Foreign expert" and traditional Chinese classes that taught English language, almost all students agreed that they made greater progress with their language skills than with other type of classes.

Homework caveat: Although students were encouraged to use spoken English outside of classroom, assigning any type of homework of this nature was dropped as unenforceable and counterproductive. This approach method allows greater synchronization of core speech and language acquisition skills and understanding for students.

Classroom management through hybridized methods and approaches.

The traditional classroom / teaching environment found in mainland China post-secondary education settings is centered around the permissive socialism model. Typically colleges and universities focus their teaching attentions to and on the more enthusiastic and talented students in the classroom without stringent regard for attendance, tardiness or absenteeism. Some of the compensatory mechanisms for the non-preforming segment of the student population is the ability to re-take tests and exams until the student has passed the course(s). Only under extreme circumstances are students failed, the result of this process places wholly unqualified graduates into the work force.

Students are predominately from single child families and are often detached from the traditional family environment as both parents are engaged in employment and business activities. Often the substitution of monetary considerations in lieu of parental guidance, nurturing along with a strong cultural paradigms involving filial obligation (guilt driven) create resentment that leads towards self-entitled, negative behavior in the post-secondary educational environment. This can be compounded by endemic institutional policies and minimal parental involvement which attach little to no tangible consequence for students to meet educational and academic goals or outcomes.

Most, if not all, Chinese colleges and universities fail to take advantage of an opportunity when post-secondary students attend compulsory military training prior to beginning of their freshmen year. This is a window of opportunity with which to input the ethical structuring necessary to align the students with the concepts of work ethics associated with degree studies.

Hybridization of Western and Eastern education methods offers a way to harness this transitioning phase and places emphasis on a supportive classroom environment and structure

that aligns students towards academic professionalism and proper work ethics that stresses personal responsibility. This effect is enhanced further when the hybridization utilizes a combination of teaching methods that stresses and targets acquisition of skills and knowledge in an egalitarian and meritocratic classroom environment. Elements of the foundation for classroom learning, teaching and management borrow, utilize or mirror some methods and reflect results by some leading Western experts such as Elmore. Richard F. (2002), Sadoff, Sally (2015), Spangenberg Postal. Karen (2011) Fryer, Jr. Roland G. (2013), and Levitt. Steven D. (2003)

Aligning student paradigms for the academic environment.

Ideally, incoming freshmen students were met by teachers at the beginning of their military indoctrination drills. (Two week period prior to the beginning of the formal school year) This creates a positive initial bond between students and teacher, which provided a solid basis and foundation for the academic environment.

Hybridized classroom structures rely on written rules, obligations and expectations that will shape and guide behavior and conduct and introduce students to the core obligation concept that being a student is in fact their job[2]. The process relies on egalitarian meritocratic metrics that are often foreign to the students. However, this method tends to suppresses "self-entitlement" paradigms by placing all students on an equal footing the classroom. These methods were applied to over nine hundred freshmen and sophomore students attending Vocational College and University in China for a period of five years.

Significance is placed on positive behaviors that include concepts in ethical and moral reasoning. This generally fits well with Chinese State Party doctrine, advances strong work ethics, and praises individual efforts to facing academic and personal "fears" related to classroom and social embarrassment that reflect uncertain and under development skills and knowledge.

This is a departure from permissive socialism structures which favors class leaders, perspective youth party members and the segment of the students whom rely on family status as a means to curry better grades and favoritism towards counterproductive behaviors. E.g. excessive absenteeism and multiple testing. The hybridized method ameliorates undesirable behavior from the onset of classes and shifts ownership and responsibility to the students.

Generally, standard classroom teaching methods parallel the rote memorization practices without great emphasis on acquisition of skill or the ability to manipulate information from lecture and theory into practical application modes. The hybridized method model de-emphasizes rote memorization and instead relies on two-part class presentation of lecture and theory, immediately followed by practical application of the materials. This differs from standard practices as all students are required without exception to participate and that the curriculum formula base provides interlocking information that supports each successive lecture.

The hybridized core concept applied is "progress not perfection" this mollifies internal anxiety and allows the students to progress more quickly as it does not cast a critical or negative reflection on the students' immediate performance. This approach method allows greater symmetry and balance in the classroom, while maintaining State doctrine standards.

The result.

General proof of concept in comparison between classroom structures using conventional passive methods, formal active methods and hybridization demonstrated that during the transitions between military indoctrination and the hybridized environment that there was a significant gains in academic utility. Students typically responded very well in both general attitude, acquisition of skills and applied knowledge when measured against traditional passive methods and the more formal active methods. Attendance[3], tardiness and general test scores were

also reflective in that students attended well, were rarely late and typically passed the relevant

course under the one test, no retest doctrine[4].

Class evaluation and testing overall demonstrated that almost all students benefited when

lessons and language were synchronized to afford equal and uniform understanding of the

materials associated with the course. And students also responded positively to having a

symmetrical academic environment that focused and invested in their educational outcome as a

partnership between the teacher / instructor and the students. And with the introduction of

student ownership and responsibility their behavior aligned better with academic, social and

work environment norms.

Comparatively when students went back into environments that used traditional passive

and formal methods the students quickly reverted to less productive practices, leaving a strong

impression that a hybridized approach – when used – offers a higher level of utility to the

teaching and classroom management environments in China.

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Footnotes

[1] Real world communications skill sets were developed from elements that were necessary to ensure an individual had the ability for basic function in a non-native language environments. ("Coming into a country cold"(without any native language skill)).

[2] Students were given a bilingual set of standards and guidelines and were required to sign a receipt that acknowledge that they had received the class rules and regulations.

[3] Attendance was conducted by physical roll call at the beginning of each class session. Institutions attendance practices typically relied upon student ID card swipe or student monitor reports.

[4] All testing, quizzes and performance measures were developed to defeat traditional cheating methods. Test and quiz formats used a pool of question based on lecture and curriculum. During oral examination students were given random questions while written tests and quizzes utilized triple random question selection to prevent intra and inter class cheating.