

Optimizing L2 curriculum for China post-secondary education. 2015

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Abstract

This instructional paper examines the lack of L2 English skills demonstrated by Chinese post-secondary education students and the results of empiric testing to determine what key language functions were missing from a student's tool box when exiting their primary education phase. The identification of these skills and ability gaps allowed for construction of L2 bridge curriculum that would allow students to acquire the necessary foundation skills to exchange information in a meaningful fashion consistent with college and university freshmen and sophomore students. Three years of development in a vocational college environment using TQM (Total Quality Management) elements of continuous improvements and testing with comparative metrics against non-participating classes allowed for dynamic development and improvements in the curriculum package prior to its deployment at the University level in 2014. A two year post assessment took place from 2015~2017 and tracked students continuing test results for both the CET 3 (College English Test) series examinations and the IELTS (International English Language Testing System) examinations which are used as a advancement / graduation metric in many institution settings. The overall results indicate that using element(s) of the optimized L2 curriculum conveyed a significant improvement and advantage over institutions course programs in terms of L2 language skill, ability, and function that included vocabulary span, reading, and writing proficiencies. The demonstrated skill acquisition advantages are reflected in comparative testing and scoring on both formal CET 3 / IELTS tests and general oral communication skills in both post-secondary environment and post-graduation settings. The use of this type of curriculum package provided significant advantages in closing L2 level skills gaps found between non-affluent and affluent students.

Keywords: China post-secondary, L2 bridge curriculum, Sino ~ US joint program classes, information exchange skills, hybridization, TQM, CET, IELTS, dialogue pedagogy

Introduction

Beginning in 2011 at Ningbo College of Vocational Technology it was noted a substantial majority of students from a variety of course majors such as English, art design, and investment and finance lacked the basic capacity to ask and answer questions in a manner that is consistent with L2 language skills that are associated with exchanging basic information, “wh” questions in general. This core ability allows dialogic pedagogy to take place both inside and outside the classroom.

Informal interviews with students and local primary education institutes established that the English language programs focused on grammar and translation skills without emphasis on spoken language practice or building core vocabulary that support and facilitate information exchange.

This curriculum weakness produced a significant gap in critical and essential skills that college and university students must possess in order to meet testing, certification, advancement, and graduation requirement under CET 3 series and IELTS nonacademic testing.

As a compensatory measure colleges and universities place vocabulary emphasis that target CET (college English test) vocabulary and which excludes foundation vocabulary and interrogative skills commonly used in information exchange.

Within a month of the start of the State sponsored Sino ~ US joint classes, empiric testing of student L2 English skills commenced to establish baseline language functions. The rationale was to identify skills gaps and defects that incoming freshmen students had, that would preclude them from meeting a program graduation metric consisting of scoring a 5.5 band on the non-academic IELTS examination.

Given that the joint program classes were “new” many deficiencies were noted in both the curriculum and staff training that would present a persistent barrier in the program utility and graduation outcome for the students. The curriculum in itself assumed student L2 proficiency at the time of enrollment would be at or near IELTS band 4.0, and that in the next two years of L2 language courses students would be able to achieve the required IELTS score of band 5.5.

This situation was compounded by the fact that the foreign experts whom were employed as native speakers were not teachers, but only degree holders. And that some of the institutional staff were given their positions due to social relation status and that only one of the institutional staff had taken and passed the academic IELTS and possessed sufficient skill to present or teach this type of curriculum.

Assessment Methods

All classes 2011 ~ 2015 were administered written and oral examinations to establish a language function baseline. The written examinations specifically tested for vocabulary grade level and oral examination tested for basic comprehension of core skills and ability respond correctly and accurately to basic information exchange prompts. The most critical being “wh” framed questions, which is a critical foundation component for information exchange.

Two stage primary vocabulary testing.

A.) The first stage was an unaided test (no dictionaries or other aids) with a range of grade level vocabulary starting at the US grade level 3 and ending at grade level 8.

B.) The second stage vocabulary test consisted of an aided test (paper dictionary only.) and required students to choose appropriate definitions for words based on context related to course major vocabulary in art design, business and finance, English, tourism and teaching.

The following was noted in the compiled results that the freshmen classes had an average grade vocabulary (US standard) of 3.4, sophomore classes 4.5 and junior classes 5.3.

Course major vocabulary.

Specific core vocabulary associated with course majors in English, tourism, writing, art design, investment and finance, business and teaching were gauged in comparison with non-participating accounting and information technology classes. The foundation vocabulary for all of these disciplines were noted as being absent, anemic or minimal and that critical vocabulary necessary for basic communication and support of course majors were superseded by institutionally mandated vocabulary booklets that focused on CET 3 series vocabulary which is / was neither course major related nor used in everyday spoken language.

Oral testing and examination to gauge information exchange ability.

The examination consisted of randomly selected questions, (from a question pool) and given under a timed element and covered a wide range of basic information questions, “wh” framed questions, object questions, opinions (comparative value response) , personal and demographic information. Student were also required to ask ad hoc questions during the exam, (within a set written guidelines) to evaluate spoken form and structure.

Oral examination assessments indicators. Using IELTS / CET test definitions and standards indexed against real time classroom performance results generated the baselines and provided a comparative benchmark of college / university freshman grade level English language skills and abilities in the following categories, listening, speaking, reading and writing.

The database was compiled over a period of four years and includes comparative components from first, second and third year students. (Freshmen, Sophomore, Junior) Refer to tables one and two.

Table one. Vocabulary / IELTS baseline class averages.

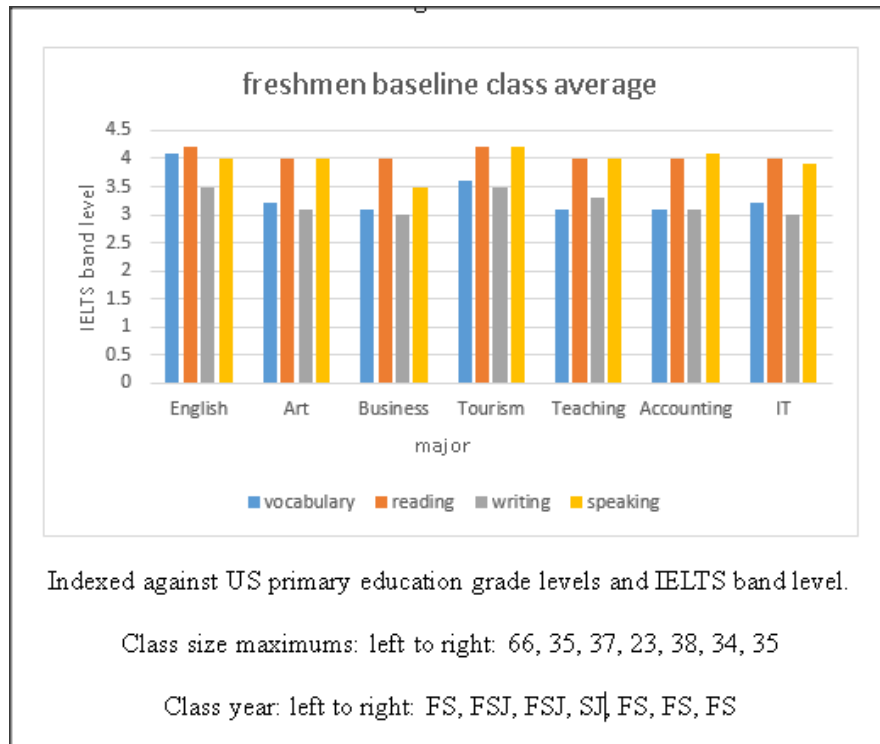
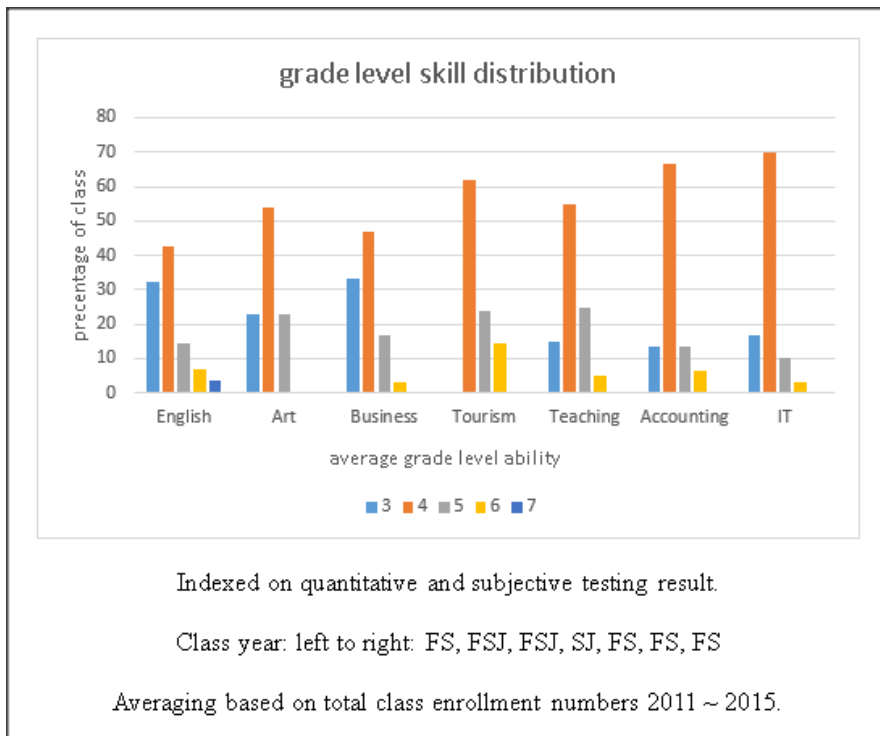


Table two. Student / course major grade level skill distribution.



Identification of missing /absent communication skills.

1.) Prepositional time components / AM / PM associations / seasonal information. (96% failure rate) The causative is time reckoning by lunar calendar as part of the cultural norms and mandated under State curriculum.

2.) Color identification was severely limited to five colors, and 99% of all students could not identify the seven color names associated with a rainbow, indigo and violet being absent. Nor could students identify the three basic metallic colors (copper, silver and gold (commonly reported as red, white and yellow)) this also extended to transparent, clear, and translucent. This vocabulary deficit directly affects a student's ability to describe and communication a wide variety of information during exchange tasks.

3.) Sequencing events is a critical skill in communication / information exchange, including the ability to give directions. Wide gaps in prepositional and descriptive skills (object and event) associated with sequencing information and events were evident in both written and oral based examinations. 92% of students lacked the functional vocabulary and skill to sequence information sets greater than five events in length / depth, with the average being three.

4.) Appropriate place preposition usage is a necessary foundation skill when conveying information for events, directions, and locations. 84% of students misidentified or omitted situational place prepositions in both written and oral examinations.

5.) Identification by description of objects is a crucial skill for information exchange, and must encompass the ability to accurately describe objects when the common name is not known. Students were orally examined with common room objects and also with portable common objects. All students demonstrated gaps and deficiencies in vocabulary and language operation associated with object descriptors. [length, size, color, name, material and usage]

Photo one. Common portable objects



6.) Oral examinations identified gaps in information exchange oriented vocabulary, (“wh” questions) and appropriate application of both inquiry and answer modes. 84% of students could not identify or remember which “wh” questions are typically used in daily conversation and information exchange. [who, what, when, where, why, how...]

7.) A number of critical academic / language oriented skills were absent from the students toolbox of foundation skills when entering post-secondary educational institutions. Including research skills, (librarial and internet) contextual connection skills, abstract connection skills and logical connection skills were all conspicuously absent.

Assessment of institutionally provided / available textbooks, methods and materials.

The typical work / text books, [foreign / locally published, (Pearson, Longman English et.al)] that institutions purchase for classes rely on a number of assumptions which do not take into account students actual operational L2 function levels. This includes assumptions in cultural context, operating vocabulary, (idiom and slang variants...), and situational appropriacy which renders much of the lesson content inert in both dialogic pedagogical utility and for teaching basic information exchange skills to students.

These types of textbooks are generally more appropriate for students who attend “training schools” which are nonacademic business oriented environments and are by virtue of their business model embrace, casual, non-time critical, non- metricized settings.

The State book selections, including those developed in country and published under State business concerns often suffer from translation defects, mismatched vocabulary, and / or poor / incorrect word choice and grammar construction. [In the vernacular “chinglish” (reconciled Chinese/English)].

This often muddies students understanding of correct forms and content / context paradigms and leads to source conflicts between State education staff and foreigner language experts, as students will often poll both sources in an attempt to reconcile conflicting information. Guadagni (2017)

Many of the textbooks advance vocabulary which falls outside of the necessary core vocabulary needed to effectively communication basic information and ideas. This extends to reading class materials, which have some utility for reading practice, however as noted previously without providing cultural context and clarification to literary / period vocabulary that in some instances draws upon old English and other predecessor forms including those from other languages, the provable utility and value towards L2 acquisition is very limited.

L2 Bridge curriculum package.

After identification of the missing foundation skills, curriculum development based on the concept of “in a country cold” (without any native language skill) began and formed the framework for the curriculum package. The development phase for the base package relied on TQM (Aminbeidokhti et al. 2016) continuous improvement models with applied testing, feedback, and corrections.

Establishing classroom hierarchy and teacher / student familiarity with the freshmen students in mainland China, required proactive introduction prior to or concurrent with the students military indoctrination training which occurs a few weeks before the beginning of the formal school class schedule (Guadagni, 2017) this provided / provides a window of opportunity to conduct informal oral examinations and gauge general language function.

Furthermore this provides western educational psychology for Chinese students in both the cognitive and behavioral perspectives used to frame hybridized classroom management methods. Guadagni (2017)

Another specialized feature incorporated into the 2011 ~ 2015 curriculum entailed group field trips to course major specific businesses, areas, migrant schools and museums to enhance and place course major specific vocabulary and communications into context for work related environments.

The L2 bridge curriculum core elements.

Phase one 2011/12 freshmen/sophomore

- A.) Enhanced testing schedules that include mid-term examinations.
- B.) Adjusting working vocabulary levels to comport with student’s upper grade level range and including basic specialized vocabulary for course major studies.
- C.) Realignment of classroom into an active participation environment.

D.) Focusing on information exchange skills. “wh”.

E.) Introduction of and utilization of room and common portable “objects”.

Phase two 2012/13 freshmen/sophomore/junior

A.) Requirement to take written lecture notes / paper dictionaries requirement.

B.) Deemphasizing PowerPoint presentations in favor of live blackboard supported lectures.

C.) Realignment of foundation vocabulary with emphasis on information exchange ability. Intermediate specialized vocabulary for second year course major studies.

D.) Realignment of lecture practices to include L2 interdisciplinary skills in classes.

Phase three 2013/14 freshmen/sophomore/junior

A.) Integration of academic topics within the lesson framework. (topic / cultural context)

B.) Synchronizing lesson objectives with other L2 interdisciplinary language classes.

C.) Extracting appropriate lesson content from course assigned language textbooks.

On March 6th 2014 a set of recommendations and guidelines were submitted to China’s Ministry of Education which included enhanced vetting for local institute staff as qualified to teach programs containing L2 English course elements and realignment of both admissions and graduation standards to assure that well qualified students were admitted to programs by meeting set IELTS band requirements for core elements to Band 4, and by structuring course content to provide necessary bridge components to ensure those with the weakest set of skills an opportunity to meet graduation metrics without having

“training school” course augmentation and cost added to the already enhanced tuition fees already associated with specialized programs such Sino ~ US, Sino ~ foreign, TAFE NSW. (Technical and Further Education, New South Wales) et al.

Curriculum templates and core materials were submitted to the International School at Ningbo City College of Vocational Technology at the end of the 2014 school year.

Initial deployment

Deploying the developed framework commenced at Taizhou University at the start of the 2014 ~ 2105 school year for English, teaching, and business course majors. Student progress was continuously assessed against classes given by other “foreign experts” (without education / teaching credentials) and local staff which afforded a real-time opportunity to gauge the effectiveness when compared to traditional institution modes and approaches.

Comparatives used classes taught by three “foreign experts” and two university staff members observed both in parallel and contiguous course modes. (same content, and intra / inter disciplinary content)

Post assessment.

Beginning in the fall semester of 2015 (September 2015 and continuing through the end of the fall semester of 2016 (February 2017) student progress was evaluated through a number of mechanisms, which included.

A.) Open assistance with continuing studies, either in person or via social chat clients QQ international / WeChat, typical assistance included.

i.) Oral dialogue

ii.) Written dialogue exchanges

iii.) Assistance with school writing, research assignments, and thesis papers.

B.) Attending student and school functions such as sports meets and talent shows, student volunteer activities...

C.) Attending outside social functions.

D.) Follow-up on subsequent CET 3 and IELTS examination tests and scores.

Results

General core vocabulary, both operable (useful) and accumulated (pool) components reflected increases over other classes not participating in the optimized curriculum courses. Operable vocabulary increased on average 90 ~ 180 words per semester and accumulated vocabulary on average 40 ~ 110 words per semester for first year students. Second year students averaged 230 and 180 respectively.

When applied to CET standards the realized total vocabulary increased of up 12% of the standard requirement for the CET 4 (2nd year students) and nearly 16% for the CET 6 (3rd + year students) on the average 540 words and 1040 words respectively.

Writing and translation “on the fly” accuracy and speed improved by an average of 8%.

General listening abilities for the active environment improved by 23% and information extraction rates as measured in cloze / error correction performance improved by 17%.

Oral communication and information exchange ability nearly double as gauged by student’s ability to ask and answer questions requiring information exchange skills. When applied to IELTS band standards for speaking this reflected a general improvement of three quarters of band for first year students and over one-band for second year students. Third year students averaged one-third to one-half band level improvements.

For minimal skill students entering college / university this translates from IELTS band 3.5 at admission to nearly band 5 at graduation.

This compares with minimal to one-half band improvements for other non-participating classes for first, second and third year students. Including those from TAFE NSW programs.

Response time and information accuracy improved for all students following the first semester of curriculum. General response times decreased on the average of 30% for freshman and nearly 55% for sophomore classes over the course of school year. Keeping in mind that midterm and final oral exams have a 3 minute time limit.

Over a four-year period 2011 ~ 2015 only eight students failed to pass the L2 course curriculum and three of those students were absent without leave during their scheduled test date.

Discussion.

Historically the defects in the English language programs for primary school students lead to the proliferation of “training schools” in China to take advantage of greater disposable wealth generated during the second half of the first decade of the 2000’s, this also allowed foreign programs access to the language markets to fill the gaps left by the State mandated curriculums.

This placed the majority of non-affluent students at a distinct disadvantage when entering post-secondary education programs and caused a catastrophic failure rate for mandated State sponsored CET 3 series examination and IELTS examinations to academically advance, meet graduation criteria and employment requirements.

The construction of the L2 curriculum accurately targets defects and skill gaps allowing those students with the lower tiered skill sets to acquire sufficient skill advancement to align more closely with institutional standard necessary for academic advancement and meeting graduation criteria and employment requirements.

Conclusion

The overall utility of the this type of curriculum when used in hybridized classroom settings, Guadagni (2017) is better able to take advantage of the hierarchical collective learning environment, Elmore (2014) and provides a significant advantage and utility over conventional institutional L2 programs and allows the majority of students to build language skills and communication abilities in manner that is more consistent with necessary post-secondary needs and functional levels. This in turn reduces the necessity for “training schools”, which can constitute an additional expense beyond institutional tuition and ameliorates some institution programs that may demand concurrent student enrollment into “training school” programs in order to meet advancement / graduation testing and examination criteria and requirements.

Furthermore this type of curriculum offers a flexible framework and ease of integration into State course curriculum programs and models, and with minimal additional training requirements would allow State educational staff, “foreign experts” and teachers / educators coming to or already teaching in mainland China to provide better skill acquisition and learning environments for their students and greater added value to institution programs and course major outcomes.

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Author Bio

Donald Guadagni was a foreign expert teaching in Taizhou University and Ningbo City College of vocational technology as one of the first foreigner experts involved in the Sino-US projects class programs beginning in 2011. Prior to teaching in China and Taiwan he taught in the Arizona public school system as a certified educator and his education background includes a degree in computer electronics, teaching certification from the University of Cambridge (CELTA) and course studies in Justice, International law, education and educational technologies from Harvard, Louvain and MIT.

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Donald Guadagni, who once worked as a deputy sheriff in the US, lectures at Ningbo City College of Vocational Technology.

American teacher develops special methods in Ningbo

By ZHAO XINYING
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At Ningbo City College of Vocational Technology, people may have no idea who Donald Guadagni is. But, if

other issues, including public policy and international trade agreements until his interests finally turned to teaching.

In 2007, Lao Tang went back to school to study teaching and earned a Level 4 certification for teaching

June 2014