

Original Paper

Ways of Getting Students Practising English Speaking in Chinese High School

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Abstract:

Ministries of Education increasingly emphasise the importance of communicative skills in their strategy reports and guidelines considering the functioning meaning of English. However, it is notable that in educational settings using grammar-translation methods, such as in some Chinese high schools, many students emerge after years of some types of English classes with minimal skills in speaking. It is urged to find a way out to focus on productive skills development and figure out effective approaches that can be combined effectively for developing students' speaking while taking into account class size, teacher competence, assessment used, and official curriculum syllabus.

Keywords

Grammar-translation method, communicative language teaching, task-based language teaching, Chinese high school, English speaking teaching,

1. Introduction

In this era of globalization, the importance of English communicative skills has been increasingly emphasized by ministries of education in many countries. The narrowed gap between social relations worldwide has boosted the demand for communication between speakers whose mother tongues are different. English plays a role as a global lingua franca, which refers to contact language facilitating international communication between people from different first language backgrounds (Seidlhofer, 2005). English as a lingua franca (henceforth ELF) helps overcome the language barrier resulting in increased awareness of communicative skills like spoken English.

Grammar-translation method (henceforth GTM) as a traditional teaching method usually appears with an increasingly prevalent teaching approach called communicative language teaching (henceforth CLT). Although some scholars accept that GTM and CLT are quite different, some are likely to explore the possibility of combining them. Harmer's (2015) contention that "GTM did what the terms say". In the

GMT procedure, students read and translate the target language reading text to finish the comprehension questions. Then, teachers will introduce new vocabulary and grammar rules. Larsen-Freeman and Anderson (2011) and Gollin (1998) held a similar view that this method's focus is reading, which is superior to spoken language. Students need to follow the instruction of the teacher and memorize those content (Larsen-Freeman, 2011). In this teacher-centred classroom, students have limited room to explore language knowledge by themselves. It may result in rote learning and minimal speaking skills in class. Despite those doubts of GTM, some other advocates GMT and affirms the value of it. Aqel (2013) claims that GMT is one of the most effective methods since it focuses on translating sentences so that students can notice specific grammatical rules in this process, which will benefit the acquisition of English as a second language. Additionally, translation in class will promote language learners' comprehension of a foreign language, especially for the beginners. According to Aqel (2013), grammar is an elementary foundation besides the four skills in any language. Because teaching English grammar provides a clear outline to correct learning structure and process. However, Aqel (2013)'s arguments above are generalized from a sample survey whose participants are all female students. Hence, the research result may exist limitation of gender singleness.

According to Thornbury (2017), communicative competence refers to the competence to talk appropriately to different groups of people about specific content on certain occasions. Additionally, Harmer (2015) shows that one of CLT's principles is transferring from grammar and vocabulary to stress the function of language. Thornbury (2017) also indicates that CLT follows a syllabus of communicative tasks, exemplified by authentic contexts such as making a request, complaining, narrating, and so on. Therefore, CLT focuses on speaking but emphasizes what people can do through the language they have learned. Thornbury (2017) also pointed out that the implementation of communicative activities has no restricted grammar item, which made classes more exciting and fun. However, as Harmer's (2015) contention, there are no teacher interventions. Thus, how to assure the accuracy of these activities may become an issue. Thornbury (2017) accepts that CLT realigns the teaching aim from grammatical accuracy to fluency, which is at least as important as accuracy. Besides, the negative washback which means that the content of test based on a limited language ability will limit the teaching and learning process (Taylor, 2005) may occur if tests continue to focus on isolated language items using CLT. According to Harmer (2015), in that situation, teachers may find it challenging to persuade students that communication is a realistic aim, resulting in deviating the original wish "communicative" of teachers. Some authors agree that teachers may not merely use communicative activities but regular activities (Harmer, 2015). Harmer (2015, cited in Griffiths, 2011, p. 307) repeated that it is flexible for teachers in their choices, and it may be useful to consider "traditional" methods as complementary to "communicative approaches".

Foster (1999, cited in Ellis, 1994) introduced various task-based language teaching (henceforth TBLT) approaches. It can be generalized that learners need to learn the target language without following a particular order presented to them. Because despite those well-organized textbooks provided by

teachers, language learning is an organic and internal process. Harmer (2015) illustrated that there are two kinds of tasks in TBLT class. Willis puts forward the first one in 2012 that TBLT consists of three primary stages: pre-task, task cycle, and language focus. Another press on speaking which asks students to give a presentation. After the presentation, teachers will analyze their work with language points. Finally, students are supposed to re-plan or re-deliver, which, according to Harmer (2015), called task repetition, is an extremely effective way of provoking language practice. The meaning of pre-task is committed by Skehan (1996), who illustrated that if learners have time to prepare before they begin the task, their language complexity, accuracy, and fluency will increase dramatically. Although TBLT can stimulate students, it can be a rather time-consuming process. Harmer (2015) noticed that teachers have little time to wait until the language item pops up in communicative tasks. But TBLT cannot be excluded since it may be quite beneficial to ELT, especially teaching. Foster (1999, cited in Pical et al., 1993) repeated that interactive tasks are sometimes considered particularly helpful because when students are doing pair work, they can transfer information which their partner does not know. This process is named the information-gap type, which can enhance students' comprehensibility. Overall, TBLT as a complementary component of a structured, language-based syllabus suggested by Harmer (2015) may be a possible solution.

Role-play is one of the most recommended activities in TBLT (Aliakbari & Jamalvandi, 2010). Hedge (2000) illustrated the definition of role play that it is a kind of contextual activity in which learners are supposed to imagine they are in a specific situation outside the classroom, play the role of someone else, and use appropriate language in that context. Additionally, Aliakbari and Jamalvandi (2010) illustrated that role-play in teaching, which is considered a praised technique in TBLT, can boost learners' speaking in an experiment in which two groups are compared. They concluded that role-play turns out to be an effective and fruitful activity for English learning courses, at least in the context of this experiment.

Based on the above discussion, this essay will further zoom on the issues and possible solutions in teaching speaking in China's high school, specifically a school in an underdeveloped city. And trying to explore a suitable way to improve the status of English speaking under the traditional Gaokao system.

2. Issues of Teaching Speaking in China's Senior High School

Many countries seem to overlook communicative skills in terms of English language teaching throughout their whole educational system which results in students who have learned several years of English acquiring minimal productive skills, explicitly speaking and writing skills. China can exemplify this phenomenon.

2.1 Historical Development of English Teaching in China

In 1956, the Chinese government began to restore the previously suppressed English professional education energetically, and the first draft of the English teaching syllabus in high school was promulgated in the same year. By 1964, the ministry of education listed English as the first foreign

language. Since the resumption of the university entrance examination in 1977, English has long been one of the compulsory subjects (Fu, 1986). And then, English was included in the National English Curriculum Standards for Nine-Year Compulsory Education and Senior High School Education (the NECS) in 2001 (Zheng, 2011).

2.2 Dominance of Grammar-Translation Method (GTM) in China

GMT has been dominant in ELT in China primarily in high schools serving for the rigid national university entrance examination which contributes to an intensive and efficient class. In GMT procedure in China, high school English teachers usually give the correct answer and introduce all the language points directly, which enables students to memorize and master the knowledge required in exams in a short time. However, due to the negative washback, GMT in China's high school shows the drawback of ignoring oral English teaching in class since the university entrance exam in many provinces totally does not evaluate English speaking. Learning speaking, hence, will be considered as time-wasting. In the context of China, high school students tend to become less motivated because some of them do not have to use spoken English in the future; even English serves as lingua franca. However, neglecting spoken English is likely to be harmful to students' long-term development after the university entrance examination. Because students may find that they need to do a presentation in English, which is quite common in university even in workplaces, they may also find it difficult if they want to apply for further education overseas.

2.3 Shift towards Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)

Noticing the external global background and the internal open-door policy, the importance of the communicative function of English has drawn unprecedented attention, which as Seidlhofer (2005, cited in McKay 2002) repeated, is the prerequisite for the changing of language policy and language teaching. Education ministry in China has introspected "Deaf and dumb English". Meanwhile, English teachers in China started to switch from traditional ways of ELT such as GTM to various modern English teaching approaches in these years. CLT approach is one of the most prevalent and widespread ones in China these days (Rao, 2013). Other authors like Kong Na (2011) aimed to explore the possible way to establish comprehensive English teaching patterns combining the CLT and the GTM taking advantages of both of them. Kong (2011) suggested that, for first-year students in China's senior high, taking GMT as the major method, CLT as aid will make students more stimulated and motivated. Meanwhile, students are provided with solid grammar basis as well. After students have received the necessary training and enter the senior grade, the ultimate goal of this stage is effective communication. Thus, CLT will take dominance. However, Kong's suggestion seems to be too idealistic, since education in China's high school are still exam-oriented, gaining higher scores in the national university entrance examination is the final goal of students and teachers. As for the specific procedure in class, Kong (2011) illustrated that teachers are supposed to explain and emphasize grammar and language points before or after the communicative practice. Plus, these communicative practices can beyond text which is established by teachers. Alternatively, teachers can teach grammar and introduce

grammatical rules by creating situations in students' real life. However, the suggestions may be fuzzy because Kong (2011) only gave several examples without building up teaching procedures systematically and theoretically. The context in China's senior high school has not been mentioned too much; the feasibility of the examples above has not been evaluated in detail. Nevertheless, Kong's idea can still be considered as a signpost when it comes to fusing CLT and GTM in China.

2.4 Challenges in Implementing CLT in Chinese High Schools

Students' capability to cope with communicative class is another issue in China's high school. The levels of students may not be the upper-intermediate, and advanced levels of spoken English users since most of them have not been trained systematically for spoken English throughout the whole public education system. They are rarely exposed to a particular practice environment for speaking. Besides, the various reasons of students to learn speaking such as winning a negotiation, managing a relationship, and influencing people put forward by Hedge (2000) seems to be less practical to Chinese senior high school students. Thus, how to motivate students and present more speaking skills without impact original teaching syllabus is worth considering.

It seems to be feasible to set up an optional speaking class in high school imitating universities in China, which enables students to explore their interest in English learning and find the importance of communicative competence. Moreover, the particular approaches which will be practised in the optional oral English class should be considered. TBLT may be a useful approach which is one of the underlying principles of NECS as well (Zheng, 2011). However, big class size is pervasive in China's high school, which will degrade the feasibility of TBLT. Since many communicative tasks like role-play and presentation are based on group work or pair work, which can be time-consuming and influence the discipline in the class. According to Zheng (2011), this is the gap between theory and practice.

Furthermore, teachers' competence is also a problem, especially for classes using CLT in China. On the one hand, according to Rao (2013), although there are some foreign teachers in China, the bulk of English teaching is delivered by Chinese teachers. Many of them have limited opportunities to practise communicative skills which lead to a lack of proficiency. Thus, they are not able to conduct the whole class using fluent target language or lead some communicative activities. On the other hand, according to Zheng (2011), teachers' education should empower teachers with knowledge, skills, and attitudes to smooth the path of teachers' professional development. Rather than merely providing teachers with packages of new methods and techniques. However, the professional support for Chinese secondary English teachers is far more sufficient at present due to the excessive workload and limited funds support.

3. An Anticipated Speaking Class in a Specific Senior High School in China

Taking the high school named Mudanjiang No.1 Middle School which is a typical public school as an example, the following paragraphs will discuss the possible ways to organize a speaking class in high

schools in less developed areas.

3.1 Context of Mudanjiang No.1 Middle School

The conditions of Mudanjiang No.1 Middle School are as followed. This senior high school is located in an underdeveloped province Heilongjiang province, which followed the local university entrance examination syllabus excluding speaking test and speaking teaching. One English teacher is usually responsible for two classes. The class size of each class is around 60 students. All of the teachers working in this school have passed the national authoritative examination system in China named national teacher certificate examination (henceforth NTCE). However, none of the English teachers is trained in speaking systematically nor passes any tests including speaking, such as IELTS or TOEFL. The target students of this experimental speaking class are the first-year students in senior high whose age is 16 years old typically. The assessment used here is a traditional exam paper. The question types and time limit of it are entirely the same as the exam paper of university entrance examination.

3.2 Creating an Optional Speaking Class and after School Activities

Considering the existing guidelines of Mudanjiang government which have not applied speaking test so far, focusing on speaking skills development seems to be extremely difficult to achieve. However, offering the speaking class is still viable by creating an optional spoken English class and after school activities. The anticipated teaching context is illustrated bellow.

This optional speaking session will teach module 1 of the students' book one (Tomalin et al., 2004), which is the official textbook in Heilongjiang province. This session will follow the syllabus of The National English Curriculum Standards for Nine-Year Compulsory Education and Senior High School Education (henceforth NECS) (seeing it in appendix1), using the recommended TBLT and formative assessment and trying to build learner-centredness. This session will also follow the National Uniform Examination Syllabus for General Higher Education Admissions (seeing it in appendix 2), learning the keywords among the 3500 requires vocabulary in the module. Meanwhile, this session will also try to meet several requirements for speaking in this syllabus: expressing meaning and ideas; achieving natural pronunciation and intonation; using language correctly. The class size is under 60 students, assuming that less than 50% per cent of students are volunteer to the participant. The exact procedure is demonstrated as follows.

3.3 Class Organization and Procedures

Stage one: intro. During the period of students entering the classroom, the teacher can play some music about school life, which will contribute to building a relaxing atmosphere. As Harmer (2015)'s contention, teenagers are often passionate about music. Additionally, creating a comfortable environment to kick-start will make reluctant students feel relaxed in speaking class. After all of the students arriving, the teacher can introduce the topic of module one "my first day at senior high" by asking students' feelings because a critical ingredient of successful teaching for the teenager is to make the learning content relevant to their own lives (Harmer, 2015). If students are shy or they are incapable of answering in whole sentences, the teacher can encourage them to say some keywords like amazing,

boring, exciting, brilliant, etc. Because Harmer (2015) accepts that it is crucial to match level and task, in this way, students may feel less nervous and reluctant.

Stage two: revision. At the beginning of this stage, teachers are supposed to hand out a worksheet which will instruct students throughout the following activities. Specifically, for large classes, Harmer (2015) accepts that the factors which can contribute to a successful large class include well-organized, following routines, using students, worksheets, pair work and group work (Harmer, 2015). Then, the teacher can lead students to revise grammar rules about present tenses and adjectives ending in-ing and -ed. Next, the teacher will play the audio of pronunciation: -ed endings, to teach differences between three groups of adjectives and ask students to listen again and repeat. After that, the teacher can delivery several useful expressions to describe feelings and experiences besides textbooks and show these expressions on slides. Kong (2011) raised that communicative activities can beyond context and established by teachers.

Stage three: role-play. Students will work in pairs in this stage. TBLT is considered as the offspring of CLT, and role-play is one of the most recommended activities in TBLT (Aliakbari & Jamalvandi, 2010). The setting context of this role-play is that one of the students plays the role as a friend or parent and ask another students questions about their first day in high school, then they will shift positions and continue to practice. Meanwhile, teachers should remind students of formality, which refers to using different manners to talk with diverse groups of people. During this stage, the teacher should play a role as a facilitator rather than possess authority in the classroom (Harmer, 2015). This changing of the relationship between students and teachers will boost a student-centred classroom.

Stage two and stage three is an attempt of combining GTM and CLT as many scholars like Harmer (2015, cited in Griffiths) and Kong (2011) assumed before. Grammar and language point is emphasized before the communicative practice (Kong, 2011). Besides, TBLT used in these stages is a complementary component of a structured, language-based syllabus suggested by (Harmer, 2015).

3.4 Assessment and Feedback

The assessment used in this class is formative such as instant feedback. Teachers may give some encouraging and positive comments on students' interactions because the purpose of this class is enhancing students speaking skills and stimulating their interest. Grades are not essential. Harmer (2015) illustrated that the purpose of assessment is more than a measuring of students capability; teachers feedback also play an important role to improve students' performance.

To settle the issues that some teachers lack capability and experiences of organizing speaking class, managers need to support teachers' professional development by sending them to the advanced area leaning and observing—especially places like Shanghai and Beijing. Senior high in those areas has started to teach speaking for several years, which has developed an advanced system of oral English teaching, daily quiz, and speaking test in higher education admission exam.

To conclude, the problem that students obtain minimal speaking skills has aroused the Chinese government's attention. New guidelines and related studies started to emerge these years. Additionally,

the long-dominant GTM combining with practical CLT by using TBLT approach appears to be an effective way to delivery speaking skills in China. However, the big class size, limited teacher speaking competence, and scarce use of formative assessment restrain the revolution of teaching speaking in high school. It remains unclear when will teaching speaking be normalized nationwide.

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Appendix 1

The National English Curriculum Standards for Nine-Year Compulsory Education and Senior High School Education (the NECS)

- (1) Education should aim to promote quality-oriented education for each and every student;
- (2) Learner-centredness should be advocated and individual differences be respected;
- (3) Competence-based objectives are designed for each level with flexibility and adaptability;
- (4) Task-based approach of teaching, experiential learning and participation are emphasised;
- (5) Formative assessment is advocated;
- (6) Learning resources should be optimised to provide maximal opportunities for learning and using the language. (MOE, 2001, pp. 2-3).

Appendix 2

The 2019 National Uniform Examination Syllabus for General Higher Education Admissions. The syllabus of the unified national examination for general college admissions is the normative document and standard for the proposition of the college entrance examination. Revision of the examination syllabus under the reform requirements of the college entrance examination is an important task to ensure the science and fairness of the examination and promote the development of quality education. The syllabus of the unified national examination for admissions to ordinary colleges and universities in 2019 is now announced.

English Subject

Assessment goals and requirements

1. Language knowledge

Candidates are required to master and be able to use the basic understanding of English pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, and the practical ideas and topics they have learned. The essential vocabulary is about 3500.

2. Language use

1. Listening

Candidates are required to understand brief monologues and dialogues on familiar topics. Candidates should be able to:

- (1) Understand the main essence;
- (2) Obtain specific factual information;
- (3) Make inferences according to the context;
- (4) Understand the speaker's intentions, opinions and attitudes.

2. Reading

Candidates are required to be able to read short paragraphs on general topics in books, newspapers and magazines, as well as announcements, instructions, advertisements, etc., and to obtain relevant information from them. Candidates should be able to:

- (1) Understand the main essence;
- (2) Understand the specific information in the text;
- (3) Infer the meaning of words and phrases based on context;
- (4) Make judgments and reasoning;
- (5) Understand the basic structure of the article;
- (6) Understand the author's intentions, opinions and attitudes.

3. Writing

Candidates are required to write according to the prompts. Candidates should be able to:

- (1) Clearly and coherently convey information and express meaning;
- (2) Effectively use the language knowledge learned.

4. Speaking

Candidates are required to make oral expressions according to the prompts. Candidates should be able to:

- (1) Asking or transmitting factual information, expressing meaning and ideas;
- (2) To achieve natural pronunciation and intonation;
- (3) Proper use of language;
- (4) Use effective communication strategies.

Appendix 3

Original Chinese version of The 2019 National Uniform Examination Syllabus for General Higher Education Admissions

2019 年普通高等学校招生全国统一考试大纲正式公布

普通高等学校招生全国统一考试大纲是高考命题的规范性文件和标准。根据高考内容改革要求修订考试大纲，是保证考试科学公平、促进素质教育发展的一项重要工作。现将 2019 年普通高等学校招生全国统一考试大纲予以公布。

英 语

考核目标与要求

一、语言知识

要求考生掌握并能运用英语语音、词汇、语法基础知识以及所学功能意念和话题（见附录 1 至附录 5），要求词汇量为 3500 左右。

二、语言运用

1. 听力

要求考生能听懂所熟悉话题的简短独白和对话。考生应能：

- (1) 理解主旨要义；
- (2) 获取具体的事实性信息；
- (3) 对所听内容做出推断；
- (4) 理解说话者的意图、观点和态度。

2. 阅读

要求考生能读懂书、报、杂志中关于一般性话题的简短文段以及公告、说明、广告等，并能从中获取相关信息。考生应能：

- (1) 理解主旨要义；
- (2) 理解文中具体信息；
- (3) 根据上下文推断单词和短语的含义；
- (4) 做出判断和推理；
- (5) 理解文章的基本结构；
- (6) 理解作者的意图、观点和态度。

3. 写作

要求考生根据提示进行书面表达。考生应能：

- (1) 清楚、连贯地传递信息，表达意思；
- (2) 有效运用所学语言知识。

4. 口语

要求考生根据提示进行口头表达。考生应能：

- (1) 询问或传递事实性信息，表达意思和想法；
- (2) 做到语音、语调自然；
- (3) 做到语言运用得体；
- (4) 使用有效的交际