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How do Chinese Tertiary EFL Teachers Recontextualize Target Cultures in a Teaching Skill Contest?

Ning Liu[1*]

[1] English Division, University of Nottingham, Ningbo, China

* Ning Liu, E-mail: lienwuhan@yahoo.com.cn /ning.liu@nottingham.edu.cn

Abstract

One primary purpose of the teaching skill contests is to stimulate pedagogical renovation. Few empirical studies, however, observe how the contestants make renovations in these contests. The research reports on a preliminary discourse analysis of the 1st SFLEP Chinese national college English teaching contest, to lay focus on how the contestants disseminate target cultures in the contest. The research result reveals how the contesting teachers deal with the contextual constraints of the contest and renovate their cultural pedagogies.

The research analyzes a number of extracted video recordings for the contestants' mock teaching by employing Eggins & Slade's Conversational Analysis (CA) approach (Eggins & Slade, 2004). The research results reveal how these contestants deploy linguistic resources to shape their pedagogies within the contextual constraints in the contest.

Keywords

teacher talk, source culture, target culture, conversational analysis

1. Introduction

Based on a field survey in Shanghai, China, Paine (2003) reveals that the teaching skill contest is a dominant induction activity carried out in China to provide new teachers with learning opportunities outside their classroom (p. 73). It provides these teachers with the opportunities to deepen their understandings of teaching (ibid., p. 79). From the perspective of a discourse analyst, one question to be answered is how this deepening process manifests in the contest discourse.

This research looks into how Chinese tertiary EFL teachers disseminate target cultures in a teaching skill contest. The data are a number of teaching recordings from the 1st SFLEP National College English Contest held in China. By analyzing these teachers' talk, the author reveals that the contestants recontextualize target cultures to react to the contextual challenges of the contest.

2. Teacher Talk as a Media for Target Culture Dissemination

The topic of teacher talk (TT) has long been concerned in the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA). It is "the language that teachers address to L2 learners" and "a register with its own specific formal and interactional properties" (Ellis, 1985, p. 145). Investigations before Ellis reveal that there are two types of teacher talk: the type of language that teachers use in language classrooms; the type of language that teachers use in subject lessons involving L2 learners. In the former type, teachers make adjustment of their talk for L2 teaching; while in the latter type, they make adjustment of their talk for information sharing (Ellis, 1985, pp. 145-146). Apparently, TT is the particular language which is shaped by teachers for their own particular teaching purposes in both types.

Many scholars believe that TT is one dimension of the classroom interaction and therefore needs to be observed together with the learning process. Richard (2001) introduces classroom input in L2 teaching as a larger context which subsumes TT. He then puts relevant researches of classroom input into four categories: the nature of teacher talk; feedback given by teachers to learners or by learners to other learners; learner strategies in classroom; classroom interaction and learner participation (pp. 71-72). This holistic view is also embodied in other researches of TT. Walsh (2002), for example, unveils the constructive and obstructive function of TT to EFL learners' learning opportunities by conducting a conversational analysis (CA) of EFL teaching audio recordings. Todd & Chaiyasuk, et al. (2008) reveal the relations between the moves of TT and their functions of instructions by examining both teachers' monologues and dialogues in EAP classes.

More recently, some scholars view TT as a medium which reflects teachers' teaching beliefs. Inbar-Lourie (2010), by jointly using ethnographic and linguistic analysis approaches, reveals that non-native English-speaking EFL teachers' L1 use is related to their personal teaching beliefs and therefore differ from each other. Daraswang (2011)'s research suggests that teachers' knowledge or experience about language learning influences their counselling types. The research is based on the longitudinal observation of these student teachers' learning and teaching processes.

One thing worth mentioning is that the innovation of all these previous research angles in TT is always paired with the innovation of discourse analysis approaches.

As Ellis says teachers "make adjustment of their talk for information sharing", the question may be asked that what kind of information it is? Does it cover the cultural information? Regrettably speaking, there have been few research reports to answer the question. So though a lot of respectable work has been done, fairly few studies are about how TT transfers culture to L2 students.

According to Risager (2006), language teaching in transnational areas is an institutionally-shaped learning space where different cultural flows converge at three different levels: linguistic practice, linguistic context, and linguistic content. Language teachers are therefore the orchestrators who determine pedagogically the cultural forms in this space (pp. 21-25). EFL language teaching also embodies a process where EFL teachers' syncretistic mind absorbs and transforms variant cultures and

then disseminates them to the students. Thus, from linguistic perspective, it's a fair question how variant cultures co-exist or are coordinated in EFL teachers' talk.

3. Teacher Talk in the Context of Contest

Every social situation constructs its particular discourse, and a contest is no exception. Based on Eckhouse (1999)'s definition of competitive communication, contestants in a competitive situation "seek and compete for an audience's attention, agreement, or action (xi)" and "attempt to gain advantage over other forces that contend for their audience's attention (ibid., p. 1)." Ingested by this view, TT in a teaching skill contest involves competitive characteristics and therefore differs from TT in the usual classrooms.

In a teaching skill contest, contestants are challenged by a lot of contextual factors different from those they usually encounter. These factors may include: time limit, participation of the observant, new students, anxiety, and so on. Therefore, an excellent contestant has to turn these factors into a steppingstone for their performance. At the same time, they can't teach in the normal manner, but have to recontextualize the teaching contents to adapt to the above-mentioned contextual factors. If we take a genre as "a staged, goal-oriented social process (Martin & Rose, 2003, p. 7)", the genre of contestants' mock teaching in a teaching skill contest is particular because of its particular goal and process to realize the goal.

4 . Re-Contextualization of Target Culture in TT in the Context of Contest

Our research focus is on one aspect of the recontextualization process of TT in the contest, i.e. how is target culture recontextualized in the TT. The research problem can be intuitively displayed in Figure 1 of Cortazzi & Jin's theory (1999) on the paradox in EFL teaching where Non-Native English-Speaking Teacher (NNEST) and Non-Native English-Speaking Students (NNESS) exploit English textbooks. In this process, NNEST understands NNESS's source culture of learning (C1L) and therefore uses this source culture (C1) to teach the target culture (C2) in the English textbook. The paradox is that the way NNEST transfers C2 doesn't match C2 itself. And this paradox also dominates the dialogic exploitation of the text in EFL teaching (p. 213).
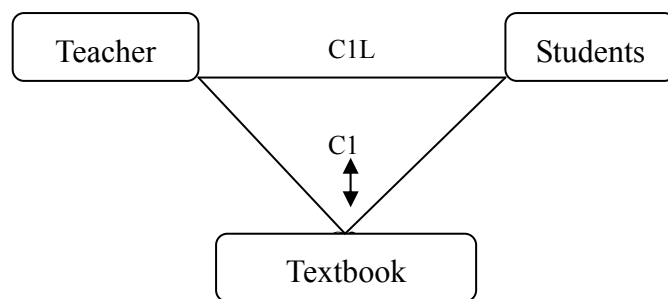

Figure 1 Teacher and students share the same culture of learning.

C1L=source culture of learning; C1=source culture; C2=target culture (Cortazzi & Jin, 1999, p. 213).

C1 here is similar to that in the usual Chinese tertiary EFL classrooms. According to the regulation, the contestants in SFLEP are all NNESTs below the age of 35, having learned English for more than 20 years. On account of the nearness in ages and cultural backgrounds of the contesting teachers and the students, they can be expected to share similar C1 in the contest. This is consistent with the above diagram. However, the C1L takes on different meaning in this contest. First, with Chinese government's increasing emphasis on cultivating tertiary EFL students' communicative competence and cultural awareness, we can expect these contestants to mainly employ communicative approach and embed cultural content in their pedagogical strategies in order to win the contest. Second, C1L herein is also pertinent to the contextual restrictions of the contest. The timelimit of contest, for example, puts strain on C1. According to the rules, the contestants need to accomplish their teaching in 20 minutes. This is about half of the time in normal teaching and all the teaching is therefore condensed. How these contestants disseminate cultural contents with communicative approaches in this timelimit reveals partially how the contestants renovate their pedagogies in such a context of contest. It has therefore become the research focus in this paper.

As Kramsch (2006) claims, culture is "a host of phenomena" which "means different things to different people" (p. 23). Obviously, C2 is associated with language in various ways. It can be the words, pragmatics, context, and so on. In our research, the way C2 is presented to the students is highly related to C1 and C1L. As Figure 2 shows, C1L in the contest exerts external restrictions on the shape of C1. Then, the shape of C2 may be changed when it is mediated by C1 and transformed into the teaching content for the sake of these contestants' competing purposes. In other words, these contestants explain C2 in the way that they believe contributes to their performance in the contest.
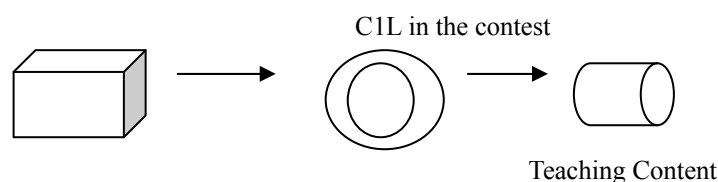

Figure 2. How C1 mediate C2 in Chinese EFL teaching

In line with this logic, the teaching content reflected in the contestants' TT construction is the C2 form mediated by C1 and C1L, it can thus be viewed as reflecting how the contestants re-contextualize target cultures in the context of contest.

5. Methodology

This research is posited in the field of systemic functional linguistics (SFL). Based on Hjelmslev (1961)'s division of connotative semiotics and denotative semiotics (cf. Martin, 1986, p. 8), SFL scholars treat language per se as the denotative semiotics which has its own expression forms to make

meaning; and the social context of language as connotative semiotics which doesn't have its own expression forms. They therefore believe that social context takes over language as their expression forms (Martin, 1986, pp. 8-9). Based on SFL theories, it can be hypothesized that the above-mentioned recontextualization process also manifests in the contest discourse.

In the area of SFL, this paper mainly employs Eggins & Slade (2004)'s aproach of conversational analysis as its analytic framework. Being affliated with SFL theories, Eggins & Slade (2004) regard conversations as the "social agents" in and between the micro-interactions of everyday life and the macro-social world (p. 7). They thus propose a multi-layered linguistic method analyzing how the four layers of languages in conversations, viz. generic pattern, speech function, semantic pattern, and grammatical pattern, act jointly in bridging individuals and society. The established links between different layers of language can therefore be applied to our research. We mainly employ Eggins & Slade's approach to explore the afore-mentioned recontextualization process in three transcribed extracts of three contestants' mock teaching videos in the contest. As is shown in Figure 3, the re-contextualization process happens in the conversations in the mock teaching and manifests at the four layers of the conversational discourse.
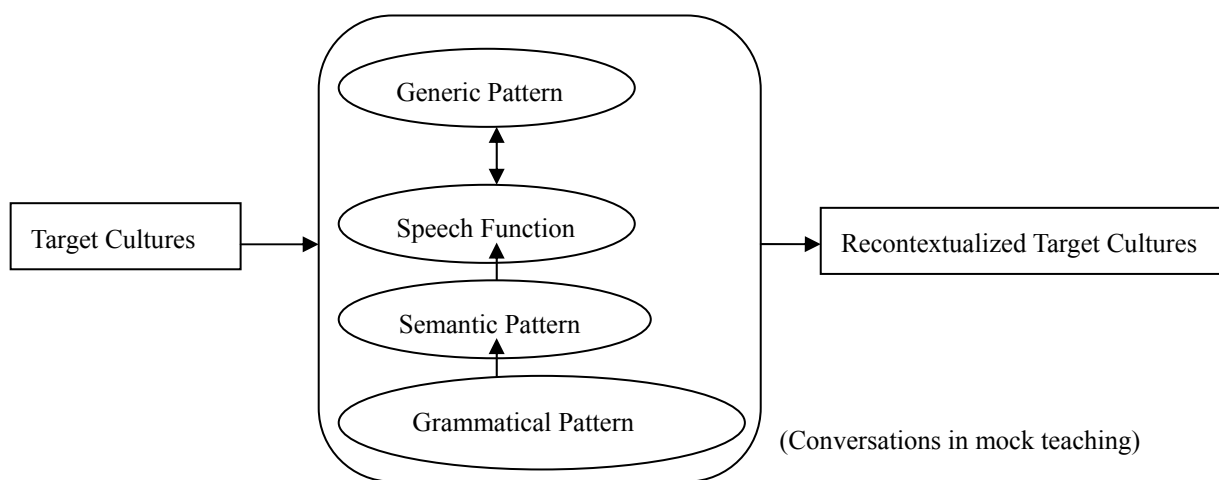

Figure 3. Recontextualization of target cultures in mock-teaching conversations in the contest

In our research, generic pattern concerns the overall orientation of the contesting teachers to construct their TT and takes the form of sequenced moves (Martin, 2007, p. 236) within conversations in the mock teaching; speech function concerns the way participants in the conversation act upon each other and takes the form of moves per se; semantic pattern concerns the attitudes of these contesting teachers and takes the form of their lexical choices in the conversations; grammatical pattern concerns mainly how the mood system (Halliday & Matthiessen,2004) in each move enacts the contesting teachers attitude toward cultural contents.

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6. Subjects

The research analyzes three transcribed extracts of the teaching videos for the first SFLEP National College English Teaching Contest. SFLEP National College English Teaching Contest is currently the biggest and most important contest for Chinese English teachers (for non-native English-speaking teachers only). All the contestants, questioners, commentators, and most of the judges are Chinese native EFL scholars and practitioners engaged in Chinese higher education. We transcribe and analyze a number of representative excerpts of the contest videos which are taken from *首届"外教社杯"全国大学教学大赛总决赛获奖教师教学风采（综合组）*(2011).

7. Result

The following research results reveal how the subjects in this research employ different pedagogical strategies to embed their cultural introduction in the mock teaching segments.

7.1 Culture as the Discourse for Vocabulary Learning

Extract One:

[First, the teacher explains the theme of this lesson: How does U.S. change from a land of free to a land of lock? Then, the teacher explains the teaching procedure and has the students watch a two-minute episode of the movie "National Treasure" starred by Nicolas Cage. In the episode, the protagonists are thieves, and they are talking about the layout of the library of congress.]

Turn	Speaker	
1	Teacher	(i) OK.
		(ii) Just now you watched the film clip.
		(iii) What impressed you most? [pause – 1 sec]
2	Students	[showing no response]
3	Teacher	(i) Yeah of course.
		(ii) A lot of [pause – 1 sec] [to the screen] security devices mentioned here. [to the students]
		(iii) What are they?
		(iv) Let's go through it very quickly.
		(v) First is what?
		(vi) Video monitors. [the words appear on the screen in turn]
		(vii) And next?
		(viii) Heat monitors.
		(ix) And?
		(x) Sensors.
		(xi) And?
		(xii) Bullet proof glass.

(xiii) And the last is?

(xiv) Electronic glass.

(xv) OK.

(xvi) They are all advanced security devices.

Generic Pattern: *Turn 1 (i), (ii), (iii)* are a set of move complexes (Martin, 2007, p. 245) which work together as a single move. The contesting teacher is apparently putting forward a question here. However, the students then offer a silent response. The response appears like a refusal to cooperate in the classroom. We may then notice that the contesting teacher soon changes the conversational forms from dialogue to monologue in the following turns. In this way, she constructs another set of move complexes which serve as a single move. Obviously, the teacher needs to deal with the time constraints and keep the teaching content integrated. Therefore, when she notices that the students aren't cooperative, she tries to answer her own questions in the following turns in order to go through this segment very quickly. We can regard the orientation of the move complexes here is to demonstrate the teaching procedure. The generic pattern can therefore be: Question $^\wedge$ Silent Response $^\wedge$ Demonstration of Teaching Procedure.

Speech Function: From the perspective of speech function, it can be seen that the teacher the episode of the movie is used as the media to learn new words, but not for any further discussion. A list of phrases for security devices are extracted from the episode and the teacher obviously wants the students to learn to identify the objects at this stage. This can be seen from the moves around the phrases. First, in *turn 1 (iii)*, the teacher starts with the question "What impressed you most?" She seems having not given any time for the students to answer the question, but instantly gives the answer in *turn 3 (i) and (ii)*. By so doing, she makes the students focus on the words being used in this movie, rather than other aspects such as the plot.

Grammatical Pattern: The grammatical patterns of the sentences around the above phrases are changed accordingly. In *turn 3 (v) First is what?* The teacher puts *what* in the complement. It reveals she doesn't really want the students to spend time answering the question. The purpose of the teacher is just to list out these words.

Semantic Pattern: The word "quickly" in *turn 3 (iv)* also reveals that the teacher doesn't want to have an interactive activity here.

From this analysis, we can see that this contestant deploys linguistic resources to narrow down the cultural content to specific words in order to deal with the time constraints, and to embed a "seeming" communicative approach into a monologue.

7.2 Culture as the Discourse for Drilling Paraphrasing Skills

Extract Two:

[First, the teacher has the students take notes while watching a half-minute video and gets ready to answer her following-up questions. In the video, a woman asks a group of American students about

their dreams, and they make their answers in turn.]

Turn	Speaker	
1	Teacher	(i) OK. [A question appears on the screen: What are the speakers in the video talking about?]
		(ii) So, what is the question?
		(iii) What does the woman ask first? [pause – 4 secs]
2	Students	(i) [showing no response]
3	Teacher	(i) [bending over to the students] What are your hopes for the future?
		(ii) And what do you want to do [pause – 1 sec]
		(iii) when you graduate from high school or college?
		(iv) So what are the answers respectively? [pause – 2 secs]
		(v) Have you written down any key words? [pause – 1 sec]
		(vi) For the first speaker, she says what? [pause – 3 secs]
		(vii) She wants to join the peace corp.
		(viii) You [pause – 1 sec] maybe you are not familiar with this word.
		(ix) Peace corp is an U.S. government organization that aims to help poor countries by sending volunteers over there.
		(x) Yeah.
		(xi) She wants to join the peace corp and to do some research of field work for the country India, right?
		(xii) Yeah, she also wants to learn the language Indian better.
		(xiii) More proficiently, right?
		(xiv) And what about the second speaker?
		(xv) I guess you have written down something? [to Student One]
		(xvi) What about this young lady?
		(xvii) Would you please have a try?
4	Student One	(i) She wants to go to good college.
5	Teacher	(i) ==Yeah.
6	Student One	(i) And get a job to make a lot of money.
7	Teacher	(i) ==Right. Good.
		(ii) It's a very good answer.

[The teacher then asks the students to go on paraphrasing the video contents. After this, she explains that everyone has different dreams and asks the students to talk about their own dreams.]

Generic Pattern: *Turn 1 (i), (ii), (iii)* are a set of move complexes. The contesting teacher puts forward a question here. Like in Extract One, students offer a silent response. Unlike the contestant in Extract

One, the teacher here employs another set of move complexes to keep on encouraging the students to speak. Ultimately, in turn 3 (xv), the teacher approaches one student and encourage her to speak. Then after the student half finish the answer in *turn 4 (i)*, the teacher says "Yeah" to show her approval. And then, after student finishes another half of the answer, the teacher constructs a set of move complexes from *turn 7 (i)* to *(ii)* to show her approval again. So the overall generic pattern here can be: Question $^\wedge$ Silent Response $^\wedge$ Question $^\wedge$ Students' Response $^\wedge$ Approval $^\wedge$ {Students' Response $^\wedge$ Approval}). It can be contemplated from the orientation of the contestant here is to demonstrate the interactive pedagogical strategies.

Speech Function and Grammatical Pattern: From *turn 3 (i)* to *(v)*, the teacher is making questions about the content of the video. She wants the students to make answers but has no responses. So in *turn 3 (vi)*, "For the first speaker, she says what?" We may see that "what" is put at the place of complement. It shows that the teacher is about to give the answers and thus changes the question into a declarative structure. So in *turn 3 (vii)*, she gives the answer herself. Then in *turn 3 (viii)* and *(ix)*, the teacher finds the students don't understand the meaning of "peace corp", so she gives the explanation of this culture-bound phrase. Then in *turn 3 (xi)*, she attaches an elliptical interrogative "right?" with the declarative. It reveals that she is trying to pull students back to answer her further questions. Then in *turn 4 (i)*, we may see that the students begin to make answers. So the teacher's cultural explanation and video paraphrasing in turn 3 (ix) to (xii) can be viewed as the paradigm for students to follow.

It can be seen that the teacher intended to use the video as a resource for students to paraphrase the speakers' language. The unexpectedly cultural input is also to help realize this purpose.

7.3 Culture as the Paradigm of Classroom Behaviour

Extract Three:

Turn	Speaker	
1	Teacher	(i) [approaching the students, smiling] An old saying goes like this,
		(ii) "If you smile to life, life will smile to you."
		(iii) So class, can you please give me a smile? [smiling, with hands opening first then pointing to herself] [[pause – 4 secs]
2	Students	(smiling)
3	Teacher	(i) Very good.
		(ii) Good job.
		(iii) "A good beginning is half the battle."
		(iv) Right. [to the screen]
		(v) ==OK.
		(vi) Today, we are going to learn this text, "Learning Chinese Style." [the title appears on the screen]

Generic Pattern: *Turn 1 (i)*, *(ii), (iii)* construe a set of move complexes oriented to guide the students

to smile. Obviously, it's easier for the students to give a look than answering a question in English. So after the students smile, the teacher shows approval in the next set of move complexes. She then introduces the teaching purpose in the following moves. The generic pattern can be: Demanding Action ^ Students' Action ^ Approval ^ Theme Introduction. It can be contemplated from the generic pattern that the orientation of the contestant here is to employ a relatively manageable activity to lead in the class.

Speech Function (1): *Turn 1 (ii) "If you smile to life, life will smile to you."* and *Turn 3 (iii) "A good beginning is half the battle."* are two irrelevant English sayings. The first encourages people to hold positive attitude towards life; the second declares that the beginning stage is the most important in the whole work. However, we may see that they are webbed together to serve the generic purpose. This has made their meaning and the language around them all changed. First, let's say the speech function of *turn 1 (i)* and *(ii)* is to provide the students with a paradigm of behaviour. This can be seen from *turn 1 (iii)* "*So class, can you please give me a smile?*" "So" here reveals that the saying is the reason why students should smile.

Semantic Pattern (1): In the semantic aspect, the meaning of the word "life" is equalled with "me" here. And the attitudinal word "old" in *turn 1 (i)* is attached with positive meaning. It persuades the students to accept that old saying should be followed and thus what the teacher says is to be followed.

Speech Function (2) and Semantic Pattern (2): Likewise, the speech function of *turn 3 (i), (ii), (iii)* is to praise the students' smiling. So in *turn 3 (iii)*, the word "battle" equals to the whole teaching and learning; and the function of their smiling is amplified and equals to the "good beginning" of their learning and is almost "half the battle" of this process. The teacher persuades the students to believe that their cooperative smiling will significantly contributes to their latter learning.

Grammatical Pattern: These have also made the mood types in *turn 1 (iii)* and *turn 3 (iv)* next to the sayings changed. *Turn 1 (iii)* "*So class, can you please give me a smile?*" is not a yes/no polar interrogative requesting for information, but is attached with the textual adjunct "So class" and the interpersonal adjunct "please". The textual adjunct marks its relation with the previous turns; the interpersonal adjunct makes it more like an imperative. Likewise, in *turn 3 (iv)* "*Right.*" We can see that "Right" is not an elliptical interrogative but a minor clause. The teacher is not seeking for any confirmation but showing an assertive attitude towards the saying. After saying this, she turns to the screen and says "OK" to draw a close to the ice-breaking stage.

From this analysis, we may find that the teacher narrows the meaning of the English sayings and bridges it with her teaching purpose.

8. Conclusion

All the excerpts show that C1L in the mock teaching mediates C2 dissemination in two respects. First, though interactive activities are designed in all the three teachings, the time for interactive activities is

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largely reduced. This is because that the time for mock teaching is half that of the real classroom and that the students in the contest are unfamiliar with the contestant. As a result, the contesting teachers are to swap these students activeness within the time constraints. Second, culture is included as one part of the teaching content in all the three extracts, but there is no explicit cultural instruction in all the extracts. The contestants all narrow down the discussion of culture and embed it in one aspect of the language instruction. This suggests that the contestants all realize that culture is one of the evaluative criteria and therefore involve culture in their teaching. It also suggests that these contesting teachers have to innovatively integrate different teaching contents in their pedagogies to satisfy both the time constraints and the judges' evaluation criteria. The research results shed light on the significance of a teaching skill contest in the pedagogical renovation.

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