

A Preliminary Study of English Conversation Instruction
at the Universities in Taiwan

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中文摘要: 此研究報告針對國內各英語學系所開設之會話課程做一全面調查, 範圍包括該科之教學目標、授課內容、上課方式、及評量方法, 並就前述各層面之研究發現, 做分析評估。報告中並就如何改進我國大學階段之英語會話教學, 提出相關建議。

關鍵詞: 英語會話、課程設計、教材教法、大學

Abstract: This paper investigates the teaching approach of the English Conversation course currently offered in the English departments at the universities in Taiwan. Via surveys sent to the Conversation instructors in 16 different programs, information concerning what is taught, how it is taught, and why it is taught and taught in that way is gathered and critically examined. Suggestions for how the course can be more adequately and effectively instructed are made.

Keywords: English Conversation, course design, teaching materials and methods, universities

One of the major goals the English/Foreign Language and Literature curricula in the universities in Taiwan set out to achieve is to teach students how to communicate effectively and appropriately with native speakers in a diversity of situations. English Conversation class, as one means to this end, i.e., to improve specifically students' conversational ability, is offered in many campuses. Despite its growing popularity, the conversation class is somewhat "an enigma in language teaching" (Richards, 1990). Both the content and teaching techniques of conversation classes vary widely. This research project, as an initial attempt to ascertain this phenomenon, aims to investigate the pedagogical approach currently adopted for the course in the English/Foreign Language curricula at the tertiary educational level, namely what is taught and how and why it is taught. The findings this project derives can shed light not only on how English conversation is conceptualized and instructed by local university teachers, but more importantly on how adequately and effectively such conceptualization and teaching approach can prepare students in their

ability to conduct English conversation spontaneously and fluently.

Relevant literature

Literature directly concerning this research inquiry is at best scant, if not outright absent. Meager as the research is on currently employed pedagogy for the course English Conversation, ample studies were found pertaining to the topic of English conversation as a unique discourse genre or a form of spoken English. These studies of secondary relevancy to the project can generally be categorized into 1) discourse/conversation analysis studies (e.g., Brown & Yule, 1983a; Cook, 1989; Chun, Day, Chenoweth, & Luppescu, 1982; Geluykens, 1993; Goffman, 1976; Gumperz, 1982; Jefferson, 1972; Maynard, 1997; McCarthy, 1991; McLaughlin, 1984; Nouguchi, 1987; Richards & Schmidt, 1983; Richards & Sukwiwat, 1985; Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974; Schegloff, 1972; Wardhaugh, 1985), 2) teaching of spoken English (e.g., Brown & Yule, 1983b; Brown, 1994, 1994; Bygate, 1987; Littlewood, 1992; Tarone & Yule, 1989), and 3) teaching of English conversation (DeCarrico & Nattinger, 1993; Dornyei & Thurrell, 1992, 1994; Eckard & Kearny, 1981; Golebiowska, 1990; Jones, 1981; Kaplan, 1997; Keller & Warner, 1976, 1979; McClure, 1996; Nolasco & Arthur, 1987; Richards, 1990; Richards & Sukwiwat, 1985; Shih, 1986; Siskin & Spinelli, 1987; Sze, 1995). The divergent topics of interest contained in the above three types of research, while testifying for the multifaceted and intricate nature of conversation and the complexity and diversity involved in the instruction of the course, more importantly help pinpoint several important issues which need to be addressed by this very study.

One of the questions the study aims to answer, as suggested by the literature, concerns the content of the course, that is, to ascertain to what extent the content is directly related to English conversation as a unique discourse genre (i.e., including discussion of such issues as “conversation process,” “conversational rules,” “conversational strategies,” “functions and meanings in conversation,” “social and cultural contexts”), and to what extent the content is concerned primarily with training of general oral English proficiency with no specific emphasis on conversational competence. Related to this inquiry is the question of what type of conversation--transactional talk (that in which the primary focus is exchange of information) vs. interactional talk (that in which the primary focus is establish and maintain social relations)(Brown & Yule, 1983b; McCarthy, 1991)--is taught or emphasized in class. In addition to the course content, the study also intends to investigate the instructional approaches (specifically direct vs. indirect approaches) adopted for the course. Two more issues the study will pursue are how the instructor perceives the course itself, students taking the course, and his/her experience of

teaching the course, and how students are evaluated.

Methodology

To attain a picture representative of the teaching approaches of English conversation at the tertiary educational level in Taiwan, the study resorts to questionnaires as the primary research method. For the purpose of strengthening the data and mending the limitations of surveying, interviews with instructors who volunteered to talk to the researcher were originally intended, and yet, for some unexpected personal reason, were unfortunately not carried out. The questionnaire constructed in two language versions--Chinese and English--includes: 1) 6 fill-ins for attaining certain demographic and background information of the instructor and the course (e.g., the instructor's nationality, school(s) taught, years of experience in teaching English conversation, general nature and size of the class), 2) 35 5-point-scale statements for investigating the instructor's attitude toward and some pre-specified teaching practices adopted for the course, and 3) 4 open-ended questions for soliciting the instructor's conception of English conversational competence and the content and activities employed for the course. 90 teachers (47 Chinese and 43 foreigners) who were instructing English Conversation in 16 different Departments of English/Foreign Languages and Literature were first identified and then contacted by mail for soliciting their help with filling out the questionnaire. 35 completed and returned the questionnaire, making the responding rate 38.8%. 34 of the 35 returned questionnaires are valid; among them, 19 were from Chinese teachers, and 14, foreign teachers, who were at the time teaching in 12 different universities.

The answers to the first part of the questionnaire, the 6 fill-in questions, were recorded and tallied. A simple frequency count was applied to analyzing the responses to the scaled statements, the second part of the questionnaire. That is, for each question, the respondents' answers on the 1-5 point scale are tallied for locating those frequently, and at times, infrequently selected responses. With regard to the answers to the open-ended questions, content analysis was adopted for the coding.

Results and Discussion

The findings show that there were both encouraging and baffling signs about the teaching practices adopted. It is encouraging to know that most of the respondents had a positive experience teaching and thus were willing to teach the course, that most were at least somewhat confident in the way they instructed the course, that most employed multiple types of material and learner-centered activities to arouse students' interest, meet their needs and maximize their oral participation in class, and that some amount of attention has been directed to cultivate students' discourse, sociolinguistic

and strategic competence, in addition to their grammatical or linguistic ability. There are, however, also some perceptions and practices of the respondents that are puzzling or even debatable. Most of the respondents appeared to rely more on indirect than direct approaches to teach the course; as a result, students, though given a lot of opportunities to speak English, were unlikely instructed explicitly on the discourse features and communication skills directly conducive to conducting English conversation. Students, for participating in primarily task-oriented communication activities, were practicing mostly transactional talk but short-changed in interactional talk, which many scholars argue is the quintessence of conversation and poses more difficulty for non-native speakers to master. Related to the use of indirect approaches is the lack of a clear “conversation” focus in the teaching materials selected. Some of the materials were for teaching discussion, speeches, or other forms of communication, but not conversation specifically, and many of the materials were chosen mainly for the reasons that they could arouse students’ interests and/or motivate them to talk. The dialogues contained in many of the textbooks used often focus on presenting information or vocabulary/expressions related to certain topics but overlook explaining important discourse features and imparting useful conversational skills. Most of these sample dialogues also fail to capture the characteristics of naturally, spontaneously occurring speech and thus convey a false impression of the language typically exercised in conversation. A great deal of emphasis placed by most of the respondents on students’ grammatical or linguistic competence, provided that most of these students were said to have intermediate or advanced level of spoken English proficiency, is another practice that the respondents may want to reconsider, for too much stress on grammatical/pronunciation accuracy and vocabulary learning may psychologically inhibit students from speaking up or deter them from partaking in any spontaneous interaction with native speakers. The commonly held impression that English-speaking native teachers, for their linguistic and cultural advantages over non-native instructors, are preferable in teaching oral training courses is also brought to question. The evidence in the study suggests that in addition to spoken English ability and target cultural literacy, teachers’ personal interest, academic training, and knowledge of students’ home culture, particularly their learning mode and style, should be taken into consideration as well.

Suggestions for Future Studies

As a preliminary attempt to explore the teaching approach of the English Conversation course in the English/Foreign Languages curricula in the universities in Taiwan, this study has left certain aspects desired for improvement by future studies on this line of research. First, a 38.8% return rate of the questionnaire can certainly

be increased. In addition to questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, which the study originally set out to pursue, can be conducted to verify and substantiate the responses obtained from the questionnaires. With this study as the ground work, a statistically designed and pre-tested questionnaire can be constructed and used as the instrument in future studies for more focused and specific inquiries on this topic. Besides refining the methods for the inquiries along this line of research, different but related lines of research can be taken by future studies, e.g., to empirically investigate the effects of direct and indirect approaches on cultivating students' conversation competence. Surveying students' needs and perspectives concerning English conversation as how they experience so as to incorporate them into the teaching approach is another area of interest that can be explored by future research.

Conclusion

This research project hopefully has shed some important light on how the course English Conversation is perceived and instructed in the English/Foreign Languages curricula at the universities in Taiwan, but more importantly, on how adequately and effectively such perceptions and teaching approaches can prepare students in their ability to conduct a fluent, spontaneous English conversation. As the term "an enigma in language teaching" suggests, what should be taught and how it should be taught in the English Conversation course has long been mystifying to the instructor of the course. This and two other attempts taken by the author (Chang, 2001a, 2001b) may mark the beginning of a language teacher's efforts to untangle the puzzle, but surely more studies and joint endeavors are needed to further "demystify" the course.

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