

Teaching and Learning English by Doing

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Abstract

Various teaching approaches have been tried in the teaching of English as a foreign language from the traditional grammar-translation approach, the direct approach, the audio-lingual approach, the cognitive approach, the natural approach, to the communicative approach and the task-based approach. In order to explore an effective College English teaching method, the author of this paper has experimented on "teaching and learning English by doing" in recent years. With a description of the present teaching situation and review of relative pedagogic methods, part of the teaching plans for two units of New College English Book Three and an analysis of the teaching plan by comparing it with other teaching approaches available, the author of this paper concludes that "teaching and learning English by doing" is an effective language teaching approach worth studying and practicing.

Keywords: teaching by doing, learning by doing, College English

1. How do we teach English?

The teaching and learning of English was accompanied with the expansion of British colonies and it has been accelerated after World War Two due to the rising of the United States of America, a new superpower, and the wide use of internet. It is a universally accepted truth that English has been playing the role of world language for it is the most important information carrier and global business language.

As is known, English is very important for learners in China, not only because it is the global business language, the internet language, but also because it is the only compulsory subject for almost all students at all levels. College English in China has been hailed as a tremendous achievement in the history of foreign language teaching in the world with the biggest number of learners and their remarkable progress in the language. College English is a most important course, which usually lasts for a continuity of four semesters, much longer than any other course though it is a hard nut for college students to crack. It is essential that college students pass CET4 before graduation, in key universities in particular, otherwise they will be deprived of the degree.

Therefore, the CTE4 (College English Test band 4) passing rate is increasing. In this context College English is test-oriented, focusing on language knowledge and input abilities but ignoring application efficiency. The steady increase in vocabulary and reading speed and continuously renewed passing rates of CET4 and CET6 (College English Test band 6) have not necessarily guaranteed upgraded abilities to use English as a tool. A latest online survey shows that, though the great majority of non-English majors in Chinese colleges usually pass CET4 before they graduate and they spend much of their effective study time on College English, only less than 5% of them have achieved efficient communication without difficulty.² It was reported in *EF English Proficiency Index* by Education First in 2014 that China ranked the 37th among the 63 sample countries and area surveyed, showing low efficiency level in spite of slowly rising³, which is disproportionate to the scale of College English in China and the attention paid to by both teachers and students.

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²http://en.eol.cn/kuai_xun_4210/20131108/t20131108_1037580.shtml

³ <http://liuxue.ef.com.cn/epi/spotlights/asia/china/>

In China, English is such an important subject in examinations of various kinds and at different level that the study of English teaching and learning, especially the study of College English teaching and learning methods, has been a hot issue. College English teachers and scholars are making tireless efforts to research on pedagogics concerning College English and they have gained both quantitative and qualitative fruits. After the domination of Latin and Greek origin grammar-translation method in the teaching of languages from the 17th to the 19th century, diversified methods have been proposed and put into use such as the direct method, the oral approach, the audio-lingual method, the cognitive approach, the natural approach, the task-based approach, the communicative approach, etc.. In China, the grammar-translation method played a leading role in English teaching since the establishment of Tongwenguan⁴ in 1862. De facto, it had not been fully abandoned by some English teachers until the emergence of the audio-lingual method and the communicative approach. Up to now the call for rethinking of the value of the traditional language teaching method is echoing from time to time (Zhang, 2007). Experimental efforts have been tried to integrate the traditional approach with communicative approach (Yang, 2008; Liu, 2015). So far most of the language teaching approaches have relationship with the communicative approach to varying degrees.

In the late 1970s the natural approach was developed on the theoretical basis of Stephen Krashen's second language acquisition and monitor model with an aim to produce spontaneous output of language after considerable amount of comprehensible language input through content activities and language activities. This teaching approach has exerted widespread influence on the teaching of English at all levels in China since it makes learning more interesting with diverse classroom activities in an authentic communication environment. Yet, the results are not as encouraging as expected (Feng, 2007).

In the 1990s, the task-based language learning, also called task-based instruction, referred to as a branch of communicative language teaching method, was introduced into China, which focuses on the use of authentic language and enables students to do meaningful tasks in the target language. Another language teaching method, the content-based instruction(CBI), usually used to prepare students to acquire the language while using the context of any subject matter like history or science so that they can learn the language by using it within the specific context(Valeo, 2013). A quantitative study by Zhang and Yang shows that CBI brings better outcome than Skill-Oriented Instruction (SOI) in developing language knowledge, language skills and disciplinary knowledge, (Zhang & Yang, 2011).

While the grammar-translation teaching approach is teacher-centered, students being passive receivers of knowledge, the task-based language teaching (TBLT) or task-based instruction (TBI), focuses on the use of authentic language and enables students to do meaningful tasks in the target language. The Task-based language teaching method, advocated by N. S. Prabhu, is widely used in ESP (English for specific purpose)teaching. Business English teaching and learning is task-based, because it aims to equip learners with the necessary skills and language knowledge to do business in English, such as writing business letters, giving business presentations, attending business meetings and participating in business negotiations. In College English teaching, the task-based teaching method is highly appreciated and promoted, but it does not deserve the reputation as it is boosted in academy, partly because the teachers are too concerned about communicative approach to focus on what the communication is for.

2. What do we teach English for?

With so many teaching methods available and so many College English teachers working wholeheartedly, College English teaching should have been a greater success than it turns out. But unfortunately, many students are not content with it and the absence rates of College English class are not low (Liu, 2015). Before they go to college, they have been good masters of English as far as vocabulary and grammar are concerned. The minimum vocabulary for high school graduates is 3500 by **Course Requirements for High School Students** issued by Chinese Ministry of Education in 2003, which implies that nearly no gap exists between the English high school students have learned and that of average College English learners if their English cannot be upgraded significantly. Some college students complain that they have no idea what they have gained from College English. What are the reasons?

⁴The earliest institute established in 1862 in Beijing to train translators and other talents for the Westernization Movement in Qing Dynasty.

Before any reasons can be analyzed, the purpose of College English classroom should be done. Traditionally, learners usually learned English by reading essays, stories and poems, which is still a popular practice in the teaching of College English though other subjects have been used as a medium of language teaching since content-based instruction was proposed. Different teaching methods have been applied, but it is not easy to change students from passive learners into active and autonomous users of the language in the whole teaching process. What they learn is language knowledge instead of language skills, referred to as *langue* by Saussure. According to Ferdinand de Saussure, *langue* is different from *parole*, the latter being the precise utterances and use of *langue*. Language teaching aims at the application of language knowledge, which involves both language knowledge and language skills. Jakobson, a pioneer of structural analysis of language, distinguished six functions of languages, namely, referential function, expressive function, co native function, poetic function, phatic function and metalingual function. Whatever languages are used or learned, they are selectively performing the six functions. Regarding English learning, learners may learn words, phrases, sentences and grammatical and pragmatic knowledge to fulfill these purposes. When they learn to say "hello" and "How are you?" they are learning English to greet others, using English to perform the phatic function. When they give orders or ask somebody to do something in English they are using English to perform its co native function.

College English may fail to motivate learners if teachers only try to indoctrinate language knowledge into the learners. How to teach and learn English, which is used for performing functions? John Dewey, an American philosopher and educator, whose philosophy of education have had profound influences on education in the United States, advocated the instrumentalism (also called pragmatism) of learning-by-doing rather than rote learning and dogmatic instruction, which is widely used in education and economic activities.

Learning by doing has been paid sufficient attention to in psychology and economics. Kenneth. J. Arrow, the youngest Nobel Memorial Prize winner in economics, stated that one empirical generalization is so clear that all schools of thought must accept it, although they interpret it in different fashions: learning is the product of experience. He believed that learning can only take place through the attempt to solve a problem and therefore it only takes place during activity. Learning by doing is also proved by the learning curve, an important term in economics, which is a graphical representation of the increase of learning with experience. A supporting theory in absorbing foreign capital and foreign technology (FDI-foreign direct investment) is learning by doing. China has benefited sufficiently from the idea of learning-by-doing in the economic development and technique progress since the 1980s.

Consequently, College English should improve language knowledge and language skills particularly, and teaching and learning English by doing is a useful approach to accumulate learners' experience that leads to enhanced skills.

3. Empirical Teaching Plan

In China, College English Reform demand from students for academic purpose and future career have been echoed in the academia and education authorities. Instead of a matter of to be or not to be, College English Reform is actually a matter of what to be (Li, 2014). In order to explore a more efficient teaching method to help students with their English learning, learning English for a purpose and for performing functions, the author has been experimenting on "teaching and learning English by doing" for four batches of students from 2008 to 2014 in Wuhan University. The following is part of the teaching plans for Unit One and Unit Three, New College English Book Three.

3.1 Teaching Plan for Unit 1: Personality (total time-180minutes)

3.1.1. Teaching Objectives

- 1) To summarize words for describing personality (refer to Preparation 1&2)
- 2) To understand one's own personality
- 3) To analyze the reasons for shyness through top learning
- 4) To learn to use the words in In-Class-Reading passage to describe the misery of shyness and try help the shy people to overcome shyness by building self-confidence

3.1.2 Teaching Procedures

Part One: Preparation (45minutes):

- 1) Greetings, Introduction to the new textbook and requirement statement (5minutes)

- 2) Pair work: make a list of the words about personality by filling the blanks in Preparation and share the list (15minutes);
- 3) Individual work: state your personality and one of your friends' personalities (10minutes);
- 4) Group discussion: whether personality is inherent or nurtured; whether personality affects one's success or not (3-5 reporters /15minutes)

Part Two: Top-reading and Bottom-reading (45minutes)

A. Top learning

- 1) What type of writing do you think it is?
- 2) What is the main idea of paragraph one and the role it plays in the whole writing?
- 3) If Paragraph one is the introductory part, does the next paragraph belong to this part? Why or why not?
- 4) Is there a topic sentence in paragraph two?
- 5) What does "in contrast" suggest?
- 6) Now you know Paragraph Two and Paragraph Three are the second part, which are the reasons for shyness and how to overcome?

B. Bottom-learning: important words and phrases focused (omitted)

Part Three: Sitcom (45 minutes)

Students work in groups to design a situation in which a friend is so shy that he/she encounters some problems. They should make use of the language and ideas they learn from the In-class-reading passage to analyze the reasons for shyness, and try to offer some help.

Part Four: Listening Practice (45 minutes, omitted)

Teaching Plan for Unit 4: Career Planning (180 minutes)

3.2.1 Teaching Objectives

- 1) To summarize words concerning occupations, job market, job hunting and career planning
- 2) To express one's own occupation preference, reasons for the choice
- 3) To understand the difference between job and career
- 4) To get some useful advice on career planning from the In-class reading passage
- 4) To practice job interview

Part one: Preparation (45minutes)

- 1) Pair work: figure out the occupations of the people in the pictures and names of other jobs, and describe the responsibilities (15minutes)
- 2) Pair work: use examples to differentiate career from job (10minutes)
- 3) Group work: portray the career you are likely to pursue in the future, why, how (20minutes)

Part two: Top- learning of In-Class-Reading Passage (45minutes)

- 1) What does the author mean by career planning?
- 2) Why are some student's inefficient planners?
- 3) What are the serious flaws in the way of decision making?
- 4) What's the connection between decision making and career planning?
- 5) Why is "Study you" regarded as the first key to career planning according to the author?
- 6) The second key is "Write your career goals down". Do you think writing something down makes difference?
- 7) Are you used to reviewing your plans and progressing periodically with another one? If so, share with other students your experience. If not, are you going to make a change?
- 8) If a person finds his career does not fit him at his forties, do you think it is too late to make a change? Why or why not?
- 9) Does career planning solve all the problems?

Part three: Job Market Simulation (90minutes)

- 1) Students work in groups to design their companies, departments and each member's responsibilities. In each group there should be at least a secretary, head of HR. They should decide what positions they offer, minimum requirements, pay policies, employment procedures. Job interviews are encouraged (15minutes).
- 2) Job market is open and there are two halves when the members in a group are further divided into two squads.

Each group stands for a company and possesses a exhibition booth. The first squad work as HR recruiting officials in the first half while the rest go job hunting in the job market. In the second half, the two squads change the roles (45minutes).

3) Recruitment announcements. Three or four reporters from each group should make brief presentations to publicize the employment result and procedure. They should introduce their companies (one reporter) and report how many job positions they offer, how many job applicants they have got, what procedures the recruitment underwent (another reporter), who they decide to employ and why (a third reporter)(30minutes)

Part Four: Listening Practice (omitted, 45minutes)

4. Teaching plan analysis

On the basis of **National Curriculum requirements, Wuhan University Teaching Schedule for College English band 3** requires that students, usually freshman in the second semester of their freshman year, learn New College English Book Three focusing on six units for 48 teaching periods in 18 weeks. The teaching time for each unit is 6 periods and each period lasts 45minutes. Since each time students have two successive periods the teaching schedule for each time is 90 minutes.

Students in Wuhan University are good English learners as far as College Entrance Examination scores are concerned, and most of them have strong desire for English efficiency, especially in communicative skills. Under these circumstances, teaching and learning English by doing is worth trying and it has been appreciated by students in the classes the author teaches. They work enthusiastically when they are learning by doing pair work, group work, presentation and other activities when they can show their creativity and teamwork. However, students respond indifferently to most of the teacher-centered teaching.

Teaching and learning English by doing is content-based and task-based. But not limited to content and task: Content-based language teaching (CBLT) is an effective and motivating way to develop higher levels of communicative ability (Roy Lyster, 2013). CBLT usually refers to teaching non-linguistic content such as business or science through the medium language that students are learning. There are four parts in the teaching procedure. New College English Book Three covers a variety of topics.

Unit	Topic	Category
1	Personality	psychology
2	Myths and Legends	literature
3	Social Problems	sociology
4	Career Planning	human resources
5	Language	language education
6	Man and Animals	social science
7	The Joy of Travel	tourism
8	Nature and Nurture	social science
9	Music	music
10	Reflections on Life	philosophy

Obviously, College English is not meant to teach psychology, sociology or human resources in English. Yet, the teaching of English is inseparable from the contents it conveys.

Part One exposes students to the words, phrases and sentence patterns through stimulating content. By making students summarize content-based language materials, words and phrases in particular, and involving students in content-based discussion and representation through pair work and group work, the teacher creates an relatively authentic language environment, a discourse context in which the language points are embedded so that students can make connections between language and background knowledge creatively. Task-based Language learning focuses on asking students to do unitary tasks like making phone calling, visiting doctors while teaching and learning by doing involves multi-dimensional activities like sitcom, job interview and many other activities in which students can make full use of their creativity and imagination, leading to diverse performances.

Teaching and learning English by doing goes beyond total physical response: Total Physical Response is a listening and responding centered means of passively learning the structure while teaching and learning by doing is actively involving students in the whole teaching procedure. Part Two is an outline of content-based questions.

It is the students' responsibility to ask and answer proper questions to present their understanding of the passage and it is also an effective way to facilitate understanding. When students are occupied with asking and answering questions they are learning English by doing, by thinking, responding and expressing in English. In Part Three of Unit One, the sitcom, students use English in a comprehensive way to perform functions like referential function, expressive function, conative function, poetic function, phatic function and metalingual function, which go beyond listening and responding.

Teaching and learning English by doing includes communicative approach but it is not limited to it: In Unit Four students use the language materials they learn from the reading passage and some constructive advice on career planning by question asking and answering, job interviewing and career planning. In Part Three of Unit Four, the Job Market Simulation, the comprehensive part of doing in English, is the learning process itself. They visit the job market, get necessary information, adapt their expectation to the job situation, introduce themselves through resume and interview, and have themselves accepted by potential employers, which cover communicative abilities and other abilities that are hard to learn without practice. In Part Three, Unit One, before students play a sitcom they should design a situation in which a friend is so shy that he/she encounters some problems by making use of the language and ideas they learn from the In-class-reading passage to analyze the reasons for shyness, and try to offer some help. They work in groups to dramatize the play, designing the setting, i.e., the time and place, the background, the characters, the relationship between the characters, the dialogue, the plot and the climax. In the play, they should greet, communicate, express, define, persuade, and argue. They use English to perform referential function when they explain shyness. They perform expressive function when they express their sympathy for the shy person and willingness to offer help. They are performing the conative function when they are correcting the shy person's problem and telling the person what and how he or she should do. In all personal interactions the phatic function is absolutely indispensable. And some students even use English in the poetic way for effect in the play. Communicative approach has an emphasis on learning to communicate through interaction, namely, communication is the purpose. But in teaching and learning by doing, communication is not only the purpose; it is the learning procedure itself.

5. Conclusion

Historically, different foreign language teaching approaches have been advocated and tried successively, but not a single one has been all-powerful. With the change of teaching situation and development of linguistics and pedagogy, innovative methods have been proposed and experimented by researchers and teachers. Learning by doing is not a newborn thing. It has been widely used in the studies of economics and the practice of economic activities though it was initiated in education. Since the experiment of teaching and learning English by doing by the author has been appreciated by the subject classes from 2008 to 2014, four batches in total, more research work should be done regarding theoretical basis, teaching procedures and syllabus designing to make it feasible and more efficient.

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