

Teaching English Speaking to Civil Servants with Task-based Approach: A Rationale for Second Language Curriculum Design

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ABSTRACT: *The paper primarily adopt a task-based language teaching which supports ‘learning by doing’ in second language learning. The project designs a four-step learning procedure in a speaking project to Chinese local civil servants which support by government. The opening step invites learners to activate what they already know about the topic. The second step provides input with an explicit demonstration of a task model in each topic. In the third step, students gain valuable discussion skill as they talk about and act the topics through role-play, simulation, and discussion. The last step is the assessment. This course is designed to provide Chinese public officials an opportunity to practise English in the daily communication of their office duties, to gain a knowledge of common cultural routines and beliefs, and to explore conversational topics in various contexts.*

KEY WORDS: *Public Officials, Curriculum Design, English Speaking, Task-based Language Teaching*

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I. INTRODUCTION

In China, fluent English communication skills are required to public officials in almost all of their everyday work, in particular, those who work in Overseas Affairs Office, Tourism Bureau, and Foreign and Economic Cooperation Commissions. Good English communication skills can bring advantages to civil servants in aspects of providing services, engaging in successful international cooperation, job promotion, and self-satisfaction. Taking the target learners’ needs into consideration (Graves, 2000), this course is designed to provide Chinese public officials an opportunity to practise English in the daily communication of their office duties, to gain a knowledge of common cultural routines and beliefs, and to explore conversational topics in various contexts.

II. EXPERIMENTAL AREA

The experimental area is Zhoushan city, Zhejiang province, China. I have chosen to focus on civil servants in this city as my target students, because I personally worked as a part-time interpreter and language trainer for assisting local government in foreign affairs from 2005 to 2018. My experience provides me with detailed knowledge of students’ interests and needs, and thus helps me shape the curriculum. In designing this course, as Graves (2000, p.102) states, learners’ background information and needs, including students’ language proficiency level, ‘intercultural competence’, ‘interests’, ‘attitudes’, and ‘learning preferences’, are considered into all stages in the curriculum process, from the course design, implementation, to assessment and evaluation.

III. TEACHING METHODOLOGY

This course will adopt a task-based language teaching which supports ‘learning by doing’ (Nunan, 2004, p.12). The features of the task-based language teaching are especially supportive of teaching adults because a task-based curriculum is designed not only to provide learners with an opportunity to rehearse some out-of-class performance, but also to activate their emerging language skills (Nunan, 2004). All the learners are full-time employees in the local government. They spend extra time learning English and expect to acquire a high level of language proficiency in a short period of time. In performing each task, the learner’s active involvement and immediate personal experience is central to the approach (Ellis, 2003).

The learners are aged between 25-45, with higher educational degrees completed in China, and years’ experience in the local government. Most of them learned English domestically or had a short period of studying abroad. They can read in English appropriately, but find it hard to listen, speak and attend to the sociocultural and sociolinguistic aspects of English communication. By getting familiar with a range of general topics in foreign affairs, it is anticipated that by the end of the course, the civil servants will become more confident in speaking accurately and fluently, and better understand the appropriateness of using English in a variety of situations involved in governmental services.

The task-based language teaching has a rehearsal rationale and a close relationship to the real world (Nunan, 2004). For public officials, issues or situations relating to governmental services are most attractive to them. In the course content, tasks and topics are tied together in two ways. Firstly, in terms of lessons, the course is organized through the principle of task chaining, including, greetings, making requests, calling abroad, receiving foreigners, setting up a meeting, inviting a foreigner to visit, meeting at the airport, introducing investment police, starting up a company, visiting a factory, visiting abroad, dealing with immigration situation, checking in/out at the hotel, and treating a foreigner to dinner. Secondly, at a broader syllabus level, the course is tied through the macro-function (protocol, office duties, receiving a foreigner, and visiting abroad), micro-functions (check-in counter, taking a taxi, asking for directions, shopping, treating a foreigner to dinner, and seeing a foreigner off), and grammatical and culture notes (sentences structures, grammatical terms, and slang).

IV. COURSE FRAMEWORKS

In order to achieve the goals with a task-based instruction and meet the students' needs, the course develops a four-step learning procedure. The opening step invites students to activate what they already know about the topic. A combination of learner's own personal experience and the target task can promote classroom learning (Ellis, 2003). The teacher helps them to familiarize with some of the key words and expressions in the topic in this stage.

The second step provides input with an explicit demonstration of a task model in each topic. The lessons are to be viewed in video recordings or listened to in audio-tapes. By observing and practising a task, students acquire language and gain an insight into contents and behaviours associated with specific contexts. Imitation and repetition are practised after watching the models, for these kind of exercises have an advantage in second language acquisition by 'developing the ability to perform a particular task quickly' (VanPatten, 2003, p.83).

In the third step, students gain valuable discussion skill as they talk about and act the topics through role-play, simulation, and discussion. Simulation can be described as 'simplifications of real-world situations' (Savignon, 1997. p.190). Research has shown that simulation provides meaningful and enjoyable opportunities for adult learners to develop metalanguage effectively (Maclean, 2005, cited in Rost, 2009). Role-play, as Nunan (2004, p.60) claims, encourages the 'transformation' of knowledge within the learners, rather than the 'transmission' of knowledge from the teacher.

The last step is the assessment. At the end of each task practicing, students are required to perform what they have learned in the classroom. Self-evaluation and portfolios are used as evaluation and reflection at the end of each lesson. Marks vary in different levels of accuracy, complexity and fluency. Self-assessment, as Nunan (2004, p.149) claims, enable the learners to become 'self-directly' and 'responsible' for their own learning. By assessing the learners' progress, portfolio is supportive to test adult learners for it encourages learners' learning autonomy and reduces anxiety (Nunan, 2004; Ellis, 2003).

V. CONCLUSION AND COURSE SPONSORS

This course is designed to provide Chinese public officials, who work in Overseas Affairs Office, Tourism Bureau, and Foreign and Economic Cooperation Commissions, an opportunity to practise English in the daily communication. It designs for helping them to gain a knowledge of common cultural routines and beliefs, and to explore conversational topics in various contexts.

The project is sponsored by the local government and central government. The cost of the course is free to students. Due to the students' availability and administrative concerns, the time frame of this course will be over a four-week period, involving five days a week, with three hours teaching each day. The course will be taught in classes ranging from twenty to thirty students. Instructional materials, such as speaking and listening materials, pictures, maps, video recording, PPT hand-outs, and worksheets, will be supplied by teachers. Classroom, computers, the Internet, and other teaching assisting devices are provided by Chinese local government to teaching English speaking to civil servants with task-based approach

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