

Student-Centered Teaching in College ESL Classrooms: PPP Model Implementation and Classroom Interaction Dynamics

Fengjunzi Wang*

Department of Foreign Languages, Hubei Business College, Wuhan City, Hubei Province, China

**Corresponding author: wangfengjunzi@hbc.edu.cn*

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Abstract: Against the exam-oriented, teacher-dominated ESL context of Chinese universities with large non-English-major classes, this paper explores student-centered English teaching by examining classroom interaction dynamics and the PPP model. It analyzes the balanced allocation of Teacher Talking Time and Student Talking Time, the organization of individual, pair and group work, and flexible seating arrangements to boost student participation and communicative practice. The study elaborates the PPP teaching sequence and its flexible alternatives, advocating adaptive lesson sequencing instead of rigid linear procedures. It further integrates interactive strategies into different teaching stages to enhance classroom dynamics and learner autonomy. This conceptual research calls for teachers to act as facilitators and promoters to build inclusive, interactive English classrooms.

1. Introduction

Student-centered learning has emerged as a key strategy for creating a more engaging and effective educational experience. Student-centered English teaching is anchored in the belief that an inclusive, interactive, and personalized learning environment fosters a deeper understanding and more effective language acquisition[9]. Some ESL teachers in China tend to convey information to students by explaining, lecturing and dominating the whole class with few interactions between students and teachers or among students, which is similar to the “jug and mug” process: knowledge is poured from a full jug into an empty mug[14] However, teaching English is more than merely transmitting linguistic knowledge about English with “chalk and lecture”. Teachers can also lead students to the “threshold of knowledge” [3] by creating conditions for students to learn independently. Some traditional English teaching is more of a teacher-centered or teacher-controlled classroom. In fact, English teachers as facilitators can be “controllers, promoters, participants and tutors” [5] or “the explainers, involvers and enablers”[14] depending on how teachers manage the classrooms in different ways of organizing and directing the students, how teachers plan different lessons, what methods teachers use and so on so forth. Whether the classroom is autocratic or democratic, the skills, techniques and ways of managing the classroom, planning the lessons and

establishing rapport with students used by the teachers seem to be significant to the practical teaching of English. Furthermore, learning how to teach is not merely about techniques and methodologies of teaching, but also about taking considerations from the learners' aspect: different needs of the students, enough learning opportunities for the students and the students' learning process of an L2 because teaching affects students' feelings, attitudes and motivations which will directly have an impact on the students' learning too.

This essay aims to delve into the practical aspects of student-centered teaching, exploring its multifaceted implications in the educational setting. The discussion will unfold as follows: the initial discussion is the teaching context. The subsequent section discusses classroom interaction including teacher talking time (TTT) and student talking time (STT), individual learning, pairwork and groupwork, and the seating of the classroom. Thirdly, the teaching sequence will be discussed major concerning PPP and alternatives to PPP. The fourth part is about the classroom interactions and sequence of teaching together by emphasizing classroom interactions in the different stages of a lesson sequence. In the last section comes the conclusion.

2. The teaching context

The teaching context is university students who are non-English majors from ESL classrooms. There are some main characteristics of ESL teaching in Chinese universities. Firstly, the students have little opportunity to use English outside the classroom because they are in a non-immersion context. Most Chinese students prefer to use their L1 Mandarin after class and Chinese teachers pay more attention to teaching the accuracy of using the right grammar and vocabulary, rather than creating communication and interaction opportunities in the classroom. Secondly, the size of the classroom is large with several 40 to 60 students which makes the teachers difficult to interact with all the students. Thirdly, Chinese learners tend to be quiet and unwilling to share their opinions publicly probably because of "lacking in critical thinking" [15], being over-dependent on teachers or want to maintain the comfort zone in class without public failure [10]. Fourthly, they are under high pressure to pass English examinations for further education which leads to a negative aspect of "backwash" [6]: teachers are more focused on teaching the key test points about grammar and vocabulary through reading, listening and writing making teaching speaking a very "marginalized topic". Consequently, the ignorance of teaching speaking which is seldom tested in exams makes Chinese ESL teachers more inclined to use the grammar-translation method and audio-lingual method with little classroom interaction instead of more communicative language teaching. Moreover, the pressure of examinations makes time an issue in their classroom management which makes teachers go directly to the knowledge points without noticing the sequence of the lessons. Therefore, as for classroom management, classroom interaction and sequence of lessons which are necessary and important for L2 learning can be problematic which I will mainly discuss in the following parts.

3. Classroom interactions

Classroom interaction is an essential part of classroom management which is the key to teaching language for communication [13] and "generating comprehensible input"[4] for L2 learners but ignored in ESL classrooms in China as mentioned above. Interactions that happen among students or between teachers and students, help to increase L2 learners' creativity in processing their own intentional linguistic meanings, provide students with more opportunities to learn from their peers and make students themselves become more active contributors in their own learning. It also gives students a chance to learn English in a more authentic situation which is useful to non-immersion ESL students. The interaction continuum in the classroom is between teacher-controlled and

learner-managed. If the teacher is in the limelight of the classroom and controls everything, there will be little chance for students to manage their learning and interact with each other. Furthermore, promoting classroom interaction is not simple, it also involves in creating a relaxed and enthusiastic atmosphere. Teachers can also try to encourage students more and build their confidence by taking consideration of their affective and temperamental aspect. Besides, Classroom interactions are complicated and can be well-organized or chaotic, efficient or time-wasting, alert or dynamic, large group or small group and so on. Therefore, the subsequent parts will delve into how to manage classroom interaction effectively.

3.1 Teacher talk time and student talk time

The TTT and STT have a great impact on classroom interaction. In university, some teachers manipulate and dominate the whole class with little STT and the students are busy taking notes of the language points that will be texted in the future. Sometimes, students might switch themselves off and take notes of everything mechanically ending up with learning nothing in the classroom. Some teachers try to give chance to students to express their own opinions and make students participate in the classroom by encouraging students a lot. However, maximizing STT as long as possible without the instruction, scaffolding, monitoring and feedback from the teacher is not an efficient way to promote optimal learning, which can be a waste of time and make the classroom disordered. Although increasing the STT is beneficial for dynamic classroom interaction[12], it still needs to get the teacher involved as a participant and promoter who can guide, help the students to optimize their quality of STT. In fact, what really matters is how to get the students really involved in the lesson with a proper balance between the TTT and STT by reducing the “unnecessary TTT” [14] which might get the students bored and maximizing the STT qualitatively rather than quantitatively.

3.2 Individual learning, pairwork and groupwork

In order to organize the class efficiently and qualitatively during the non-TTT, the teacher can group students by getting the students to work individually on their own, in pairs or groups. “Individualized learning” is useful for learners’ autonomy- developing and self-reliance-promoting [5]. Some Chinese learners do not want to communicate and interact much with peers or teachers so pairwork and groupwork can be used more to provoke greater involvement and participation among Chinese students without creating embarrassment in the whole class. Furthermore, according to Long[8], groupwork as learner-centered activities, produces a much greater variety of speech than teacher-centered activity because activities in a group require students to respond spontaneously and initiatively and give more chances for students to speak. Although different activities in pairs or in groups can noticeably increase individual student talking time in a limited section, sharing each other opinions and learning from peers, it might also cause problems such as uncongenial students in a group, fossilized roles with one student dominating the conversation and uncontrolled, noisy and disordered class[5]. In order to have better management of pairwork and groupwork, the teacher can organize, plan and execute them elaborately. Before the activity, the teacher can create pairs and groups according to friendship and different abilities of the learners and give instructions, demonstrations or examples of how to conduct the activities[5] as scaffolding. The teacher can also use their L1 to give instructions if the student’s English level is really low. During the activity, the teacher can monitor the students discreetly or actively by keeping an eye open for potential problems and offering help to the students with their “ZPD” (zone of proximal development) [11]. In some situations, the teacher can even participate in the students’ interaction[14]with indirect control of the classroom pace. After the activity, teachers should give feedback to students for

improvements and encouragements.

The teacher can use different activities by mixing groupwork with pairwork or individual work which can make the classroom much more colorful and dynamic. Furthermore, some Chinese teachers divided us into different levels with classified seats creating a forceful and autocratic atmosphere which discouraged students from interacting with each other let alone organizing dynamic groupwork or pairwork. It is possible that the “authoritative hierarchical structures and functions” in Chinese history[1] could have an impact on Chinese education setting which makes Chinese students learn passively and unidirectionally in the classroom imagining themselves gaining knowledge from a master. Therefore, in order to give students a new view of teachers to be friends, participants, helpers, promoters instead of “masters”, teachers can try to create a relaxed, friendly and comfortable atmosphere for students in the aims of creating a congruent, free and dynamic interaction activities because a trusting, positive, supportive rapport between the students and the teacher can help to promote useful pairwork and groupwork interaction in classroom.

3.3 Seating

If it is a pairwork, students can sit in pairs; if it is a group discussion, they can sit in separate groups. Movable seating can bring much more convenience to the interaction activities. With the intention of bringing more dynamics to the classroom, there are lots of possibilities for moveable seating[14] in a standard room which give creative inspirations for my future teaching, especially the “buzz groups” and “wheels” which I can use to change groups so that students can interact with more people without worrying that one student might dominate the conversation or uncongenial peers in a group. Unfortunately, seating or the layout of the classroom sometimes can be a “constraint”[12] to students’ interaction. Actually, most desks in Chinese classroom are fixed or semi-fixed with a large size class of 40-60 students [14] which might become an obstacle for teachers to create ideal seating for different interactions in pairs and in groups. However, sometimes even though the desks are fixed, the teachers’ thinking is flexible and creative by asking the students to move: turn around work in pairs, stand up and move around or come to the front. Moreover, the teacher can also move to different places to offer help or spot troubles. Similarly, the teacher always move around among us instead of standing in front of classroom all the time which shows a less-dominating and less-commanding class and more a friendly and relaxed seating. In fact, the objective visual effect of a classroom can also have a potential influence on the classroom interaction. What is the position of the teacher in the classroom? In front of the class ? Or among the students for alternative seating arrangements)? An effective classroom seating arrangement, which takes into account the needs of interaction, can significantly enhance the learning environment.”

4. Sequence of teaching

The art of teaching transcends the mere dissemination of knowledge; it is a strategic endeavor that hinges on the effective sequencing of instructional activities. As educational psychologist Jane Doe eloquently states, “The sequence in which we present information is as critical as the information itself in shaping the learning experience”[2]. This underscores the importance of the sequence of teaching, which is the deliberate arrangement of educational content to optimize learning outcomes. It emphasizes the importance of aligning the instructional sequence with the cognitive development of the learners, suggesting that “an effective sequence respects the learners’ zones of proximal development.”[7] This section will primarily discuss the PPP teaching sequence—comprising the stages of Presentation, Practice, and Production—has emerged as a structured approach to facilitate learning and enhance instructional effectiveness.

4.1 PPP

PPP stands for presentation, practice and production which brings in “structural-situational teaching context” [5] to language teaching under the CLT (communicative language teaching). Firstly, the teacher can present a situation to contextualize the language by establishing a context and clear model sentences drawing out the related information from their schemata. During this situational teaching, the teacher can present students with pictures, songs drama or even a teacher’s talent show. Sometimes “one situation is worth a thousand words” which can also bring in the teachers’ personal charisma and imagination to give more suitable situational lessons creatively. During this situational presentation, the teacher’s job is to contextualize the language into a situation step by step instead of jumping into the fictitious situation directly and roughly which is hard for students to imagine and adjust. Therefore, teachers can give more clues and elicit more by drawing out the ideas and information from the students.

Secondly, after the presentation part, the teacher can practise the target language with various exercises directed by the teacher such as multiple-choice exercises, gap-and-cue exercises, transformations. Alternatively, depending on what kind of English lesson, the teacher can also use drilling under the behaviorist approaches by formatting habit through the accurate repetition of language forms, such as choral repeat, individual repeat and cue-response drills[4]. Thirdly, these error-free repetitions and habit-formation practices can help L2 learners to produce their new language in the sentences of their own which is the last part “production”. The immediate creativity of the production is the output from the inputted language knowledge in previous stages: presentation and practice. It seems that PPP is similar to “restricted exposure, clarification, restricted output”[14]. Furthermore, the situational presentation is with the intention to get learners engaged in a specific context and practice stage is with the purpose of study and practice the language points brought in from the situational presentation so that the students can produce and use their own language which makes the PPP resemble Scrivener’s sequencing lesson[14] components “ESA” (engage, study, activate) [5]. No matter it is “PPP” or “ESA” or “restricted exposure, clarification, and restricted output”, they appear to show a sequence of deductive approaches [4] or top-down process of teaching by narrowing down the situational background context into a specific language point.

4.2 Alternatives to PPP

Teaching process can be top-down or bottom-up: teaching inductively from individual details to whole, or teaching deductively from whole to details which is more like straight lines. However, according to Lightbown and Spada[8], the movements of an L2 learner's developmental sequences are repetitions of particular stages rather than the disappearance of earlier ones, which is similar to the opinion of Harmer[5] that the human learning process is much more "random and convoluted" and produces “alternative PPP” [5], as shown in Figure 1.

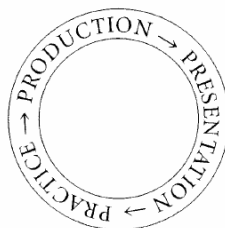


Figure 1. Byrne’s “alternative approach” [5]

Join the three stages in a circle and teachers can decide at any stage they want to start, any stage they want to repeat. In fact, the teacher can change the sequence of teaching or add more sequences into the teaching as long as it works well with students and promote their learning. The sequence of PPP similar to ESA (engage, study, active) can be changed into different orders such as “boomerang lessons” and “patchwork lessons” [5] which is similar to Scrivener’s alternative sequencing lessons[14]. Therefore, there is no fixed and perfect sequence of teaching for every lesson depending on different skills of English, various levels of students, numerous objectives of the lessons and so on so forth which requires deliberateness.

There is a lot to think about how teachers divide one lesson into different stages, how these stages should be related and sequenced and what the sequence between one lesson and the future continuous lesson is. Moreover, no matter how well the teacher planned the lesson, there might be unforeseen situation happened which might change the sequence of teaching. Therefore, in practical teaching, the teachers will take opportunistic teaching into consideration and check the original scheme of the lesson sequence so as to update and amend it.

5. Emphasizing classroom interactions in different stages of a lesson sequence

After discussing both classroom interactions and sequencing of teaching which are two of the important factors about practical English teaching, this section will now turn its focus to the classroom interactions including TTT, pairwork and groupwork and seating in different stages of a lesson sequence. In order to make the class more dynamic, colorful and diversified, the teachers should take the classroom interactions into consideration in different stages of teaching. According to Scrivener’s[14] lesson plan model including stages, procedure, tasks, interactions, aims, time which the teacher can fill in the blanks: what is the different procedure, tasks, interactions, aims, and time in different stages. The interaction of them refer to the interaction happened between teachers and students or students and students. The time means how long this stage takes. However, more things can be added to the stage, for example, seating, TTT &STT, groupwork, pairwork or individual work. If the teacher uses various activities in different stages such as groupwork in one stage and pairwork in another stage, the teacher will also change the seating if they are moveable according to different activities. Therefore, the new lesson plan with more emphasis on classroom interaction will be like Table 1.

Table 1. Modified Scrivener Lesson Plan Model Emphasizing TTT/STT Distribution and Learner Interaction across Teaching Stages

| Stages | procedure | tasks | interactions | aims | time | TTT&STT | Individual Pairwork groupwork | Seating |
|--------|-----------|-------|--------------|------|------|---------|-------------------------------------|---------|
|--------|-----------|-------|--------------|------|------|---------|-------------------------------------|---------|

No matter what kind of sequence of teaching is, emphasizing classroom interaction in each stage is a way to insure the dynamics of your classroom.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has provided a conceptual exploration of student-centered English teaching, with a focus on the PPP model and its alternatives. It has emphasized the importance of classroom interaction, balanced TTT and STT, and varied learning activities to foster an inclusive and dynamic educational environment. The paper acknowledges its limitation in the absence of empirical data and suggests that future research should integrate data-driven evidence to validate the theoretical insights presented. Ultimately, the paper advocates for a pedagogical approach that prioritizes student engagement and autonomy, recognizing the need for continuous innovation in

teaching strategies to meet the evolving demands of English language education. This conceptual research calls for teachers to act as facilitators and promoters to build inclusive, interactive English classrooms, and suggests future empirical studies to verify the proposed pedagogical approaches.

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