

# The Enlightenment of the Princeton Model of TCFL on College English Teaching in China

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## ABSTRACT

The methodology of the Princeton Model of TCFL (Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language) is widely used in Chinese language courses in many North American universities and proves to be highly effective in promoting students' language skills and proficiency, with a deep influence in the field of second language teaching. The success of this language teaching methodology also brings inspiration to College English teaching in Chinese universities, especially in terms of teaching methods such as the direct method and listening & speaking methods. This paper aims to explore the application of the Princeton Model of TCFL to College English teaching in China, which is actually a brand new research field both at home and abroad. Though with some challenges, the application of the Princeton Model of TCFL not only arouses students' enthusiasm to express themselves in the target language and efficiently enhances student engagement through active learning, but also markedly promotes their speaking and listening skills.

**Keywords:** Princeton Model of TCFL; College English teaching; the direct method; listening & speaking methods; Chinese students

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Chinese teaching programs of many well-known universities in the United States are very mature in scale as well as outstanding in the language teaching effects, and have great influence and popularity in the second language teaching field, such as Princeton University, Harvard University, University of Wisconsin and many other famous private and public universities [1].

These Chinese programs all follow the teaching philosophy and strategy of Mr. Zhao Yuanren, a master of linguistics and a pioneer in Chinese teaching in the United States. Among them, the Chinese program of Princeton University is the leading flagship in the field of TCFL (Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language). It is Mr. Zhao's language teaching philosophy that laid the foundation of the Princeton model of TCFL in terms of curriculum design, textbook compilation, teaching process and teaching methods, which is widely adopted in many top universities in the United States [2].

Scholars in China and abroad have abundant discussion and research on the teaching methods related to Princeton model of TCFL. For example, Professor Zhu Yongping, the Chairman of East Asian Languages and Cultures Department of the University of Notre Dame, wrote several papers on Princeton model of TCFL, such as "Ask while already knowing the answer: A discussion of the skill of putting relative questions to students—Discussions of the Princeton model for teaching Chinese as a second language (2)" [3]. In his papers Professor Zhu discusses the relevant questioning techniques and explores listening

& speaking methods and the direct method used in the Princeton Model. Professor Zhou Zhiping, the head of the Chinese Department of Princeton University, also published the paper "Zhao Yuanren in the History of Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language" to illustrate Mr. Zhao's contribution and influence in the field of TCFL [4]. There are also many relevant papers in the TCFL community in China that analyze the advantages of the Princeton Model and its influence.

However, the above-mentioned research status is only limited to the field of Chinese teaching and research. There are definitely similarities between Chinese teaching and English teaching in terms of second language teaching methods. College English teaching could also draw on the experience of the Princeton Model of TCFL and further carry on the curriculum reform in domestic colleges and universities. But it is a great pity that few scholars at home and abroad have done relevant research to explore the possible ways to improve college English teaching methods in China.

The author of this paper was fortunate to be selected for Sino-US Fulbright Foreign Language Teaching Assistant Program and gained some valuable Chinese teaching experience in the University of Notre Dame in 2014-2015, who also worked in the summer program of Notre Dame in Beijing in 2019 (Notre Dame's Chinese teaching mode is based on the Princeton model) and observed the Princeton in Beijing language program in 2018. With all the first-hand experience acquired, the author hopes to make relevant research and practice to adapt Princeton Model to College English teaching.

## 2. THE NEED OF APPLICATION OF THE PRINCETON MODEL OF TCFL TO COLLEGE ENGLISH TEACHING IN CHINA

It is widely acknowledged that language acquisition should center on the mastery of skills, not just the comprehension of language knowledge. Students who master the knowledge of the grammatical structure of the language can be handy in taking the test, but not necessarily able to communicate with others with proficiency in this language. One of the erroneous zones in domestic English teaching is that language knowledge should be instilled into students, and English classes are commonly teacher-centered, aiming to help students achieve high scores in exams. Even in college English classes, teachers would spend most of the time lecturing on texts and vocabulary, while students just sit there silently and passively rather than actively express themselves or communicate with others.

The consequence of this long-term test-oriented English teaching is that the majority of students are comparatively weak in speaking, listening and communication skills. Although having been learning English for nearly ten years, a large number of students still can not or dare not express their opinions in English, with a lack of self-confidence in verbal expression as a collective feature.

In sharp contrast, under the training of the Princeton Model, undergraduate students in the Chinese programs of American universities like Princeton University or University of Notre Dame, even with a zero base of Chinese language, are able to carry out fluent daily conversations in Chinese with a standard and authentic pronunciation after taking only two semesters of Chinese courses, which is undoubtedly a brilliant success in the field of second language acquisition.

The huge contrast in the effects of second language teaching between Chinese and American universities stimulated the research motivation of this paper. There are similarities and commonalities in the concepts and methods of second language teaching, and the Princeton Model of TCFL will bring much inspiration to College English teaching in China, hopefully changing the current spoon-fed way to a skills-focused teaching style. However, this research area is almost a blind spot in the academic field at home and abroad.

The success and efficiency of the Princeton model of TCFL brings deep reflection on domestic college English teaching, that is, the significance of applied teaching of language skills. This application-oriented language teaching model can effectively enhance students' English listening and speaking ability, stimulate students' interest in learning, and enhance their subjective initiative in class, so that they can truly use English to exchange ideas and express themselves, instead of being deaf and mute in the classroom. With the background of globalization, English should not only be a tool to deal with exams, but a bridge to communicate with the world.

## 3. THE APPLICATION OF THE PRINCETON MODEL OF TCFL TO DOMESTIC COLLEGE ENGLISH TEACHING

Based on theories of behaviourist psychology and structural linguistics, Princeton Model of TCFL paves way for English teaching in domestic universities, providing many teaching theories and methods, such as listening & speaking methods, the direct method, and relevant questioning techniques, etc.[2], all of which could be applied to College English classes to reform curriculum design and teaching methods. Thus English teaching could focus on the cultivation of listening and speaking ability and the practice of practical skills, achieving the classroom mode of 'less lecture and more practice' and ensuring that every student has ample opportunities to participate in language practice or discussion activities in every class.

Combined with the actual situation of College English class size (about 35 students), the curriculum, textbooks and given class hours, the author of this paper applied and adapted the following teaching modes and methods of Princeton Model of TCFL to College English teaching in Wuhan University of Technology.

### 3.1. The Direct Method

#### 3.1.1. The Direct Method of the Princeton Model of TCFL

One of the main teaching methods is 'the direct method' in the Princeton Model of TCFL. Through the creation of an authentic context in the classroom, combined with relevant questioning skills, the language practice could be both interesting and skill-focused.

The textbooks and teaching modes of Chinese language courses in American universities center on fostering listening and speaking skills based on authentic language materials. In class teachers create scenes close to the real-life and guide students to truly realize the use of language through consistent oral practice.

For example, in a Chinese class in the first-year Chinese course in the University of Notre Dame, there are the following vocabulary and sentence structure exercises:

#### Vocabulary:

旅行

- 你喜欢旅行吗?
- 你常常去旅行吗? 春假的时候, 你出去旅行了吗?
- 你常常去哪儿旅行? 就你一个人去旅行吗?
- 你常常跟谁一起去旅行? 你喜欢跟朋友旅行还是自己旅行?
- 你想去哪儿旅行?

#### Sentence Pattern:

V+完+O

- 上完课，你想去哪儿好好预习课文 / 生词 / 语法 / 做功课？
- 平常写完功课以后，你会做什么？
- 你先吃晚饭还是先洗澡？（回答范例：我吃完晚饭再洗澡。）
- 考完试以后，你觉得高兴吗？你会好好玩儿吗？

This type of classroom questioning design is a typical example of ‘the direct method’, which emphasizes direct learning, direct understanding and direct application. This method advocates the use of oral materials as the teaching content, underlines the approach of imitation to learn a foreign language, and directly establishes the connection between language practice and externally personal experience of learners, with the learning philosophy “it’s better to speak out than to listen only” [5].

Under this guiding principle, combined with listening & speaking methods and relevant questioning skills, Princeton Model of TCFL uses well-designed question settings based on contexts of real-life scenes, so that students can bring in their personal life experience, express themselves in target sentences via connecting with real life, and acquire target vocabulary or sentence structure through repeated practice.

Moreover, these questions are designed to be close to life and very lively and interesting. Every student has something to say and is naturally attracted to these questions, which generates their desire for self-expression, so as to achieve the simultaneous advancement of language knowledge and interpersonal skills.

### 3.1.2. The Application of Direct Method in College English Class

Accordingly, in the teaching of vocabulary and sentence patterns in College English courses, especially for daily-life vocabulary, a similar approach can be adapted to guide and encourage students to speak. For example, in the class the teacher first explains the usage of vocabulary or sentence pattern to help students establish a grammatical system of the target language, and then changes the model sentence to lead the students to practice the vocabulary or sentence pattern they have learned. In the form of daily conversations, students’ practicing on vocabulary or sentence pattern is the basic core of classroom teaching and learning.

In class, teaching activities are arranged in the sequence of listening, speaking, reading, and writing, focusing on pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary, which order also accords with the teaching procedure. The steps of the teaching process can be divided into five steps: demonstration, imitation, strengthening, comparison and practice. Students develop language habits through a lot of listening and speaking dialogues and thus master a highly generalized language structure, so as to acquire the target language faster and better.

For example, for the second-year undergraduate English course Learn American English from American TV Series, the author of this paper employed the above teaching

method to design questions for vocabulary exercises as follows:

#### Example 1.

Vocabulary: V. spoon-feed

Example sentences:

--You spoon-fed him a good defense, and he is not stupid. He went with it.

--Some students are unwilling to really work. They want to be spoon-fed.

Questions designed:

- Have you been spoon-fed by your teachers?
- Do you think your teachers are still spoon-feeding you in college?
- Do you want to be spoon-fed?
- Do you think the spoon-fed way of teaching is effective?

#### Example 2.

Phrase: VP. freak out

Sb. freak out \ Sth. freak sb. out

Example sentences:

-- He totally freaked out when he saw the armed robbery.

-- The armed robbery totally freaked him out.

Questions designed:

- Will you freak out if you see a cockroach in your dorm? (A picture of a cockroach flashed out on the PowerPoint) And what would you do with it?
- When would you freak out?
- Were you once freaked out by something?

In the traditional college English class, the teacher-based approach is mainly adopted to teach vocabulary and sentence patterns. For instance, the teacher first informs the students of the usage of the vocabulary, gives an explanation of the example sentences, and then asks students to complete some vocabulary-related exercises such as cloze, blank filling or translation, and that is all for the part of vocabulary learning.

The essential purpose of this teacher-based teaching method is to have students understand the meaning and usage of the vocabulary and thus they could solve the exam questions and get a high grade. But this teacher-centered approach ignores learners’ practical mastery of the language, that is, whether they can really use the vocabulary or sentence pattern to express themselves. Students just understand the language knowledge, but they couldn’t really command the language itself. In real life, most students still cannot use the vocabulary correctly or even pronounce it accurately.

In contrast, based on the relevant questioning techniques from the Princeton Model of TCFL, the questions designed above in the course Learn American English from American TV Series can lead students to relate their own experience and use the vocabulary they have learned to express themselves correctly after they understand the usage of vocabulary. In addition, some question designs further promote students’ critical thinking, such as asking for students’ opinions on the effectiveness of the traditional spoon-fed way of teaching, which makes English lessons not only for language learning, but also

full of different perspectives and views, creating a truly student-centered creative learning environment.

For the learning of vocabulary and sentence patterns in College English classes, the application of the Princeton Model of TCFL has brought students a new world, enabling them to have a brand new and efficient classroom learning experience.

### **3.2. The Listening & Speaking Methods**

#### **3.2.1. The Listening & Speaking Methods of the Princeton Model of TCFL**

The listening and speaking methods advocated by Mr. Zhao Yuanren, are also the dominant methods employed in TCFL class in many American universities. The teacher guide students to practice key vocabulary and sentence patterns with the approaches of “lead singing”, “solo singing” and “unison singing” [3], while correcting students’ pronunciation errors at the same time.

According to the theory of listening and speaking methods, language acquisition is a process of habit formation, which requires repetitive training in verbal speech and emphasizes practice methods of imitation, memorization, substitution and repetition [2]. In the class of the Princeton Model of TCFL, the teacher leads students to practice new vocabulary and sentence patterns by constantly asking and answering questions through the whole class. When the teacher asks a question, students are supposed to blurt out their answers instantly without reference to the textbook.

The basic steps are as follows:

1. The teacher reads the target words or a paradigm sentence for students to follow and then corrects the students’ pronunciation. This is called “lead singing”.
2. Using the target words or sentence patterns, the teacher asks questions that are related to students’ life or they are interested in, and invite some students to answer them respectively. This is “solo singing”.
3. The teacher leads all students to “sing in unison” excellent sentences given by students in “solo singing”, which can be repeated many times. Besides, the teacher could also invite more students to “sing alone” to correct their pronunciation and grammar [5].

#### **3.2.2. The Application of the Listening & Speaking Methods in College English Class**

In College English class the teacher can refer to the listening & speaking methods of the Princeton Model of TCFL and follow the practical approaches of demonstration, imitation, reinforcement and comparison, guiding students to practice key words and sentence patterns via “lead singing”, “solo singing” and “unison singing”, while correcting their pronunciation errors. In addition, these approaches can also be used in imitation and correction of English intonation, which is a perfect

illustration of the Output Hypothesis and output modification in the second language acquisition of ESL [6]. In domestic College English class, the average number of students is often more than 30. Therefore, in a 45-minute class, there are very few opportunities of oral practice per person if students are individually asked to answer questions. Under such circumstances, the “unison singing” method proves to be very significant and effective in increasing the average individual speaking time in class.

The teacher keeps asking questions, inviting students to answer individually and then speaking with all students in a chorus, so that every student must be very concentrated and dedicated all through the class. This approach also ensures that in every class every student has plenty of opportunities to orally practice words and sentence patterns and truly make progress, with their listening and speaking ability enhanced simultaneously, the outcomes of which are impossible to achieve under the traditional teacher-centered teaching mode.

## **4. THE EFFECT AND CHALLENGES**

### **4.1. The Effect of Application of the Princeton Model of TCFL to Domestic College English Teaching**

The teaching practice of the application of the Princeton Model of TCFL to College English course in Wuhan University of Technology has been carried out for several years, with immediate and apparent effects. The classroom interaction is enthusiastic; students’ interest has been aroused and their expression skills have been improved, which further promotes their subjective initiative in English learning. Positive feedback from students also prove the feasibility for the further deepening of this model in the reform of College English teaching.

In addition, the Princeton Model could apparently improve students’ test performance. For example, in the final exam in the first semester of the academic year of 2018, the average score of sentence translation questions of the four classes that implemented the Princeton Model is much higher than that of classes of other instructors who did not adopt this model. This shows that the Princeton Model of language teaching has great advantages in developing both students’ test-taking ability and practical language skills.

### **4.2. Challenges of Application of the Princeton Model of TCFL to Domestic College English Teaching**

Whereas, the successful application of Princeton Model of TCFL to College English teaching is restricted by various conditions, with considerable challenges and limitations as follows:

First, this mode puts high demands on the abilities of both teachers and students. On the one hand, English teachers need to be able to access, familiarize and master this teaching method by themselves, and devote enough time and energy to teaching design and preparation. On the other hand, most Chinese students have been accustomed to the teacher-centered class and the passive and silent way of learning since childhood. To be able to adapt to the interactive question-and-answer Princeton teaching mode, students need to actively change their minds and behavioural patterns, which also requires a long-term running-in process between students and the teacher. Moreover, to ensure the teaching effect and students' adaptability to the new teaching mode, it is best not to change the teacher during the two-year course study period, which is actually difficult to realize under the current course selecting system.

In addition, to achieve the best effects of this interactive question-and-answer teaching model, the number of students in the class should be as small as possible. For example, there are only 4 or 5 students in a Chinese language class in Princeton University. However, the student number in an English class in domestic universities could be 30-40. With an insufficient number of teachers and too low teacher-student ratio, the teaching effect will not reach the desired ideal state.

Finally, the need of renewing textbooks and related teaching materials could also be a great challenge. To match the implementation of Princeton Model, textbooks and teaching materials selected should be closely related to students' daily life or social hot topics. Therefore, a unified textbook reform is required, which is rather difficult to realize in the short term.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Though there are many challenges in the application of Princeton Model of TCFL to domestic college English class, this mode does effectively engage students in class participation, play an important role in promoting students' speaking and listening skills and help create an authentic and interactive English learning environment for ESL learners. This application-oriented Chinese teaching model also realizes the internationalization of language teaching methods, bringing much inspiration to the curriculum reform of the domestic college English course.

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