

An Action Research on Cultivating Chinese Sophomore EFL Student Teachers' Teaching Competence during Intensive English Course

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ABSTRACT: The main training model of Chinese EFL student teachers is the cultivation of English pragmatic integrating competence with EFT method learning. This paper provides an alternative model for training EFL student teachers' teaching competence in Intensive English course utilizing action research in a teaching learning project. The participants were 26 sophomore EFL student teachers at Leshan Normal University in China. The results show that training sophomore EFL student teachers' teaching competence preliminarily in Intensive English course is possible and the range of teaching competence mainly includes learn lesson design, classroom performance and assessment.

KEYWORD: Higher Education; Pre-service education; Teaching Competence; Action Research; Intensive English Course

1 INTRODUCTION

In the English departments of normal universities or teachers' college in China, English majors usually undergo much training in 4 language skills during in the 1st two years. To evaluate their English in the first two years, they are going to take the exams of CET 4, CET 6 and TEM 4. Then, they will learn EFT methods in addition to English literature, linguistic and translation during the 2nd two years so as to prepare their future teaching at primary or middle schools (Pride and Liu, 1988). During all the courses Intensive English Course which aims at cultivating students' integrating language pragmatic competence such as language knowledge, language skills, and learning strategies (Yang Liming, 2010) takes up a largest proportion and it usually includes 384 periods in the 1st two years. In contrast to Intensive English, EFT methodology course, which usually has 64 periods in the 3rd year, takes up far less proportion. Although the proportion of ELT courses is increasing in some universities, the current situation of course structures is out of proportion, and much emphasis is put on English language knowledge and skills (Zhou Weicheng, 2009; Zuo Jv, 2011). Moreover, the proportion of ELT teachers with professional qualifications has increased greatly over the years, but the quality of the teaching force is still rather low and cannot meet the demands of ELT reforms initiated in recent years (Yu, 2001; Nunan, 2003; Zuo Jv, 2011). Thus,

adequately dealing with the relationship between training of English language skills and cultivation of English language teaching competence is greatly important; it could enhance the qualities of EFL student teachers in Chinese higher education. This paper outlines an action research project which was undertaken with a group of 26 sophomore EFL student teachers on their teaching competence during the Intensive English course at Leshan Normal University in China.

2 ENGLISH TEACHING COMPETENCE

Teaching competence is very important in teaching profession. There are different opinions on teaching competence, yet none is able to elaborate fully the many facets of teaching competence. Teacher competence is defined as the ability of a teacher to deal adequately with the demands of the teaching profession using an integrated set of knowledge, skills and attitudes as manifested in both the performance of the teacher and reflection on his or her performance (Mirjam Nijveldta, etc., 2005). Jack Richards (2010) proposed ten dimensions which seem to be at the core of expert teacher competence and performance in language teaching: the language proficiency factor, the role of content knowledge, teaching skills, contextual knowledge, the language teacher's identity, pedagogical reasoning skills, learner-focused teaching, theorizing from practice,

professionalism, and membership of a community of practice. The Dutch Ministry of Education (2005) developed a standard for all secondary education teachers which includes pedagogical, organizational, interpersonal, relational, reflective, organizational, and methodological areas of teaching competence. The literature reveals a large range of the nature of teaching competence, but there is a lack of student teacher competence (Admiraal, W. Mark Hoeksma, etc. 2011). Based on previous studies, the researcher formulates a framework of a Professional Standard for Sophomore English Student Teachers (SEST) to evaluate what teaching competence can be trained during Intensive English course (Table 1).

Table 1. A Professional Standard for SEST

Teaching Design	Teaching Performance	Teaching Assessment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ·Teaching contents ·Teaching aims ·Teaching procedure 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ·Classroom discourse ·Motivating peers ·Applying teaching aids ·Interpersonal skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ·Specific teaching objectives ·Consistency of teaching objective, teaching procedure and results. ·Proper context

3 INFUSING TEACHING COMPETENCE INTO INTENSIVE ENGLISH COURSE

We chose Intensive English as the course in which the teaching competence was cultivated because this course takes up the largest proportion among all the courses as mentioned above. More importantly, the overall objective of this course is most similar to that of Chinese primary or middle school English which aims at cultivating students' English integrating pragmatic competence which includes language knowledge, language skill, learning strategy, culture and affect (Education Department of the Republic of China, 2011). Actually, Intensive English is the extension of overall objective of primary or middle school English which includes learning strategies, language skills and knowledge, and culture (Yang Liming, 2010; Xie, Yuli, 2011).

4 METHOD

4.1 The Teaching Learning Project

There were four phases in the teaching learning project which includes instructions, preparation, teaching presentation and assessment. In the first phase, the teacher told the student teachers what to teach, how to teach in the very first orientation lesson. In the second phase, the student teachers would prepare their lessons for 4 weeks during which the researcher organized workshop in which the teacher has revised their lessons face-to-face and gave them instructions to their problems or

difficulties. In the third phase, each student teacher presented a lesson in ten minutes while other student teachers acted as both students and teachers. After the presentation, the students were supposed to use the Professional Standard for Sophomore EFL Student Teachers as a tool to evaluate their lessons and gave some suggestions. In the last phase, the researcher collected and analyzed all the materials from the project through lesson plans, classroom observation, and interviews.

4.2 Design of the Study

4.2.1 Research Questions

This research aimed to find the answers to the following questions: "Whether is it possible to train sophomore EFL student teachers' teaching competence without affecting their language skill training during Intensive English course?" "If yes, what teaching competence can be permeably trained?", "If no, what will lead to the training of teaching competence?"

4.2.2 Participants

The participants were 26 sophomore EFL student teachers in the researcher's Intensive English class. They had a heterogeneous make-up as other 7 classes (every class had 26 students) in the same Grade. The 26 participating student teachers in this study have been assigned pseudonyms from Student Teacher A (STA) and Student Teacher Z (STY). Table 2 is about their basic information.

Table 2. The Participants' Basic Information

High School		Gender		Language Proficiency		
Rural area	City	Girls	Boys	CET 4 450-480	CET 4 491-	CET 6
10	16	24	2	13	7	4

4.2.3 Action Research

Action research, a strategy which is basically a way of reflecting on one's teaching or teacher training, is done by systematically collecting data on one's everyday practice and analyzing it in order to come to some decisions about what one's future practice should be (Wallace, M.J, 2000). Meanwhile, it is kind of problem-focus research which includes inquiry, research, data collection and analysis, reflection, and application to professional action. In this research, the researcher tries to answer the research questions mentioned above by collecting and analyzing the data from participants' lesson plans, classroom observation, and interview.

5 ANALYSIS OF THE TEACHING LEARNING PROJECT

5.1 *Teaching Design*

After analyzing the teaching plans, the researcher found that most participants had all the components of a lesson plan with the researcher's guidance and instruction. As for the teaching contents, all the participants selected 5-6 new words from the texts around the topics such as economy, environment, animals, arts, wars, and technology. After learning the target words with the help of English-English dictionary, the participants set teaching objectives. According to the lesson plans, it is found that almost all the participants had the knowledge objective which was "recognizing the target words" and the ability objective which is "using the words around a certain topic". As for the teaching procedures, the researcher required the participants to adopt PPP (Presentation, Practice, and Production) model of teaching so as to preliminarily cultivate their basic teaching competence. Although any approach has both advantages and shortcomings, it can help the student teachers follow a certain teaching rule. During the teaching learning project, 16.6% of the participants could strictly follow PPP model of teaching to design the activities and presented the vocabulary around a theme in a specific context, and 16.7% of them had only the presentation step. They tried to present new language items in a certain context followed by some controlled practice such as translation, match work, blank-filling, and pair work and then moved on to produce the language in a more meaningful way such as a role play, a drama, an interview, etc.

5.2 *Classroom Performance*

As for the teaching procedures, they were the same as those in teaching designs. Therefore, the classroom discourse was mainly discussed here. By observation, the researcher found that classroom discourse was closely related to student teachers' language proficiency. 7 participants having passed CET 4 and CET 6 could mainly use English to organize their whole classes. 17 participants tried to use English but often made some grammatical mistakes. The left 6 participants who haven't even passed CET 4 had difficulties in using English. While presenting, several participants had the awareness to motivate the peers by asking questions. To increase the efficiencies of teaching, almost all the participants used some pictures. Only 3 participants used videos.

5.3 *Teaching Assessment*

The participants were asked to give assessment to their peers' performance after 10-minute teaching

performance. The main problems they put forward were as follows: low voice, presenting the vocabulary but ignoring students' feedback, making sentences without contexts which often led to Chinglish, feeling very nervous, improper teaching gestures, too much unnecessary classroom discourse, and the selected words which were not closely linked. Observing the above teaching assessment, it is found that the evaluation can not solve practical problems and there's a lack of professional diagnosis, they mainly evaluated teaching based on their experiences which they've acquired in high schools and failed to evaluate from an overall sight. After the student teachers' assessment, the researcher pointed out the main problems: most ability objectives were too general; most of the participants haven't had the stage of production; there's a lack of life-like activities; some words were not used properly in the context; although most of the students have passed CET 4/CET 6, there were a lot of grammatical mistakes. To solve the above problems, the researcher gave some specific suggests such as how to set a specific and measurable teaching objective, how to design a life-like activity, how to use the words in proper context, and how to decrease grammatical mistakes.

6 RESULTS AND FINDINGS

6.1 *Results from interview*

To find out some relevant results of the teaching learning project, the researcher interviewed all the participants after their teaching performance and summarized the data into the following points: The participants had positive attitudes towards training teaching competence in Intensive English course; most participants held the views that they could acquire teaching competence while learning vocabulary; they became less nervous than before; they could learn from each other in this community.

6.2 *Results from TEM 4*

Obviously, the main task of Intensive English course is to train the EFL student teachers' language skills. The premise of teaching competence training is not to influence their training of language skills in this course. To test whether we can train the EFL sophomore student teachers teaching competence without affecting their language skills practice, the researcher tried to analyze the results of 26 participants' TEM 4 in Class A with another counterpart in the same grade (Class B with 26 students). The results are as follows (Table 3): The average score of Class A is 66.5, the average score of Class B is 62.96. For the students who have failed to pass the exam, there are 11 students in Class B, and 4 students in Class A. Based on the above result,

we can conclude that training sophomore EFL student teachers' teaching competence without influencing their language learning is possible.

Table 3. Comparison between Class A and Class B

	50-55	56-59	60-65	66-69	70-75	76-80
Class A	1	3	12	6	2	2
Class B	4	7	9	3	3	0

6.3 Findings

Based on the research, it is found that the following teaching competence can be preliminarily trained in the Intensive English course. First, the preliminary training of a lesson design is feasible. Second, it is possible to train the student teachers the ways to evaluate a lesson with the guidance of the teacher trainers. At last, EFL student teachers' vocabulary teaching can help them acquire some teaching competence which might help them learn English Methodology course in the third year. In addition, there exists a large gap between the student teachers in cities and student teachers in rural areas.

7 IMPLICATIONS FOR EFL STUDENT TEACHER EDUCATION

7.1 Changing the training model: "only depending on EFL teaching methodology"

Implied by the research results, we can change the single EFL student teacher training model which only depends on English methodology course, and we can infuse teacher training into different courses. Anyway, we just choose different relevant subjects which are quite similar to primary or secondary English to train EFL student teachers teaching competence. What needs to point out is the degree of training in different courses is different. For certain, English methodology is most important course in which the teaching competence is trained. The next important course is psychology and general pedagogy followed by Intensive English, listening, speaking, reading, writing, and literature and culture. If all teachers infuse teaching competence into their courses, student teachers' qualities will be highly improved.

7.2 Changing EFL student teachers' dogged beliefs acquired in primary and secondary schools

EFL student teachers' teaching belief unconsciously shaped in primary and secondary schools is dogged, and it's easily seen during the classroom performance. Although the researcher required them to use PPP teaching model to teach the words, some student teachers still used the ways that their primary or secondary English teachers often used. Therefore,

we should change EFL student teachers' dogged teaching beliefs acquired before. To Change it, teachers in different subjects can apply modern teaching beliefs into their teaching and help EFL student teachers form new beliefs unconsciously.

8 CONCLUSION

The research provides another alternative to English student teacher training in China. This research offers a specific way to train student teachers in the main courses during the four years. However, this research is just a trial and needs further research about the components of teaching competence during the low-grade ELT student teachers and makes the infusing training be more efficient.

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