Research on Chinese ESP Teaching and Practice

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Abstract. If you have had previous experience as a teacher of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), your first question on receiving your current assignment to teach ESP may be: "How is ESP different from EFL?" The major difference between ESP and EFL lies in the learners and their purposes for learning English. ESP students are adults who already have some familiarity with English and are learning the language in order to communicate a set of professional skills and to perform particular job-related functions. An ESP program is therefore built on an assessment of purposes and needs and the functions for which English is required.

Introduction

ESP is part of a larger movement within language teaching away from a concentration on teaching grammar and language structures to an emphasis on language in context. ESP covers subjects ranging from accounting or computer science to tourism and business management. The ESP focus means that English is not taught as a subject divorced from the students' real world; instead, it is integrated into a subject matter area important to the learners. EFL and ESP differ not only in the nature of the learner, but also in the scope of the goals of instruction. Whereas in EFL all four language skills; listening, reading, speaking, and writing, are stressed equally, in ESP a needs assessment determines which language skills are most needed by the students, and the program is focused accordingly. An ESP program, might, for example, stress the development of reading skills in students who are preparing for graduate work in engineering; or it might stress the development of conversational skills in students who are studying English in order to become tour guides.

The Role of the Teacher

The role of the teacher depends to a large extent on the function he performs in different activities. We will examine the roles of controller, assessor and organizer in details and also take a brief look at some other roles a teacher may play in teaching such as the roles of prompter, participant and resource.

The Teacher as Controller

The teacher plays the role of controller when he is totally in charge of the class. He controls not only what the students do, but when they speak and what language they use. Clearly the introduction of new language often involves the teacher in a controlling role, particularly at the accurate stage.

It is important to realize, however, that this control is not necessarily the most effective role for the teacher to adopt. Indeed if he wishes the students to use language in any way, then control will have to be relaxed since if all the language used is determined by the teacher the student will never have the opportunity to learn properly.

The teacher as controller, then, is useful during an accurate reproduction stage and in general during lockstep activities. But even during immediate creativity, for example, it is vital that this control should be relaxed to some degree and during communicative activities or the practice of receptive skills, the teacher as controller is wholly inappropriate.
The Teacher as Assessor

Clearly a major part of a teacher’s job is to assess the student’s work, to see how well they are performing or how well they performed. A difference has to be made, however, between correcting and organizing feedback.

During an accurate reproduction stage, where the teacher is totally in control, he will be correcting student’s error and mistake. His function is to show where incorrectness occurs and help the student to realize what has gone wrong and to put it right.

Where students are involved in immediate creativity, or where they are doing a drill –type activity in pairs, the teacher may still correct, but such correction might be “gentle”. Gentle correction involves showing that incorrectness has occurred, but not making a big fuss about it. For instance, he might say things like “Well, that’s not quite right… We don’t say ‘he goed…’ we say ‘went’”, but should not insist that the student then repeat the sentence in the same controlled way. Where students are working in pairs or groups in a fairly controlled situation the teacher may inject this type of correction without completely destroying the atmosphere since he is not stopping the activity in the same way as he would if he asked for repetition and then insisted on a short drill.

Organizing feedback is major part of assessing students’ performance so that they can see the extent of their success or failure. The teacher waits until an activity or task has been completed and then tells the students how well they did.

We must make a distinction between two kinds of feedback, content feedback and form feedback. Content feedback centers on the content or subject matter of an activity: it aims to give students feedback on their degree of communicative efficiency. Form feedback, on the other hand, tells students well they performed in terms of the accurate use of language. Most correction during the presentation stage is a type of form feedback. Where communicative activities are taking place the teacher will record particularly common errors and mistakes. After giving content feedback he can then ask students what was wrong in the examples he corrected. This may then form the basis for a mini-presentation of language which the majority of students are getting wrong. The teacher should take care not to make form feedback dominant after communicative activities: content feedback should usually come first and the teacher must decide when form feedback is appropriate and when it is not. It is vital for the teacher to be sensitive to his students in his role as assessor and to realize when correcting is appropriate.

The Teacher as Organizer

Perhaps the most important and difficult role the teacher has to play is that of organizer. The success of many activities depends on good organization and on the students knowing exactly what they are to do. A lot of time can be wasted if the teacher omits to give students vital information or issues conflicting and confusing instructions.

The main aim of the teacher when organizing an activity is to tell the students what they are going to talk about (or write to read about), give clear instructions about what exactly their task is, get the activity going, and then organize feedback when it is over. This sounds remarkably easy, but can be disastrous if the teacher has not thought out exactly what he is going to say beforehand.

The organization of an activity and the instructions the teacher gives are of vital importance since if the students have not understood clearly what they are to do they will not be able to perform their task satisfactorily. The organization of an activity can be divided into three main parts. In the first the teacher gives a LEAD-IN. Like the lead-in for presentation or for the treatment of receptive skills this will probably take the form of an introduction to the subject. The teacher and students may briefly discuss the topic in order to start thinking about it. When the lead-in stage has been accomplished the teacher INSTRUCTS. This is where he explains exactly what the students should do. He may tell the students they are going to work in pairs and then designate one member of each pair as A and the other as B. At this stage, particularly in a monolingual class, it may be a good idea to get a translation of these instructions to make sure the students have understood. In certain cases the teacher may well organize a demonstration of the activity before giving instructions. Finally the teacher INITIATES the
activity. He gives a final check that students have understood. e.g. “Has anyone got any questions… no? … Good. Then off you go!” The teacher may ask the students to see if they can be the first to finish, thus adding a competitive element which is often highly motivating.

Students Groupings

In previous parts we have often talked about activities where students work in pairs or in groups. We will now consider briefly relative merits and used of various students groupings. We will examine lockstep, pair work, group work and individual study.

Lockstep

Lockstep is class grouping where all the students are working with the teacher, where all the students are ‘locked into’ the same rhythm and pace, the same activity. Lockstep is the traditional teaching situation, in other words, where a teacher-controlled session is taking place. The accurate reproduction stage usually takes place in lockstep (although this is not necessarily the only way it can be done) with all the students working as one group and the teacher acting as controller and assessor.

Lockstep has certain advantages. It usually means that all the class are concentrating (although this may not always be so), and the teacher can usually be sure that everyone can hear what is being said. The students are usually getting a good language model from the teacher, and lockstep can often be very dynamic. Many students find the lockstep stage (where choral repetition, etc. takes place) very comforting. There are, in other words, a number of reasons why lockstep is a good idea.

There are also reasons, though, why the use of lockstep alone is less than satisfactory. In the first place, students working in lockstep get little chance to practice or to talk at all. Secondly, lockstep always goes at the wrong speed. Both the teacher is too slow for the good students (and therefore there is a danger that he will get bored) or he is too fast for the weak students (in which case they may panic and not learn what is being taught). Shy and nervous students also find lockstep work extremely bad for the nerves since they are likely to be exposed in front of the whole class. Most seriously, though, lockstep, where the teacher acts as a controller, cannot be the ideal grouping for communicative work. If students are going to use the language they are learning they will not be able to do so lock into a teacher-controlled drill. And if they are to gain student autonomy they must be able to do so by using the language on their own. Lockstep, in other words, involves too much teaching and too little learning.

This rather bleak view of lockstep activities does not mean we should abandon the whole-class grouping completely. As we have said, it is has its uses. Where feedback is taking place after a reading or listening task clearly it will be advantageous to have the whole class involved at the same time both so that they can check their answers and so that the teacher can assess their performance as a group. Where pair and group work are to be set up clearly the whole class has to listen to instructions, etc.

Pair Work

Pair work seems to be a good idea because it immediately increases the amount of student practice. In a class of forty students, for instance, we can see that at any one time (in an oral pair work exercise) twenty students are talking at once instead of one. Pair work allows the students to use language and also encourages students’ cooperation which is itself important for the atmosphere of the class and for the motivation it gives to learning with others. Since the teacher as controller is no longer oppressively present students can help each other to use and learn language. The teacher will still, of course be able to act as an assessor, prompter or resource. With pair work, then, students can practice language use and joint learning.

Certain problems occur with pair work, however. Teachers are often worried about the use of the students’ native language in monolingual groups. Usually, however, students will use English if they are motivated to do so and the teacher explains what the reason for the activity is. In correctness is another worry, but as we have repeatedly said accuracy is not the only standard to judge learning by: communicative efficiency is also vitally important and pair work encourage such efficiency.
Group Work

Group work seems to be an extremely attractive idea for a number of reasons. Just as in pair work, we can mention the increase in the amount of students talking time and we can place emphasis on the opportunities it gives students really to use language to communicate with each other. When all the students in a group are working together to produce, for example, an advertisement, they will be communicating with each other and more importantly co-operating among themselves. Students will be teaching and learning in the group exhibiting a degree of self-reliance that simply is not possible when the teacher is acting as a controller.

In some ways group work is more dynamic than pair work: there are more people to react with and against in a group and therefore a greater possibility of discussion. There is a great chance that at least one number of the group will be able to solve a problem when it arises and working in groups is potentially more relaxing than working in pairs, for the latter puts a greater demand on the students’ ability to co-operate closely with only one other person. It’s also true to say that group work tasks can often be more exciting and dynamic than some pair work tasks.

Of course the worries that apply to pair work (like the use of the students’ native language, noise and indiscipline) apply equally to group work: the problems do not seem insuperable, though, and the solutions will be the same as those for pair work.

Once again the biggest problem is one of selections of group members. Some teachers use what is called a socio-gram where, for example, students are asked to write down the name of the students in the class they would most like to have with them. This technique certainly tells the teacher who the popular and unpopular students are, but will not help to form groups of equal sizes since popularity is not shared round a class in such a way. At the beginning of a course a socio-gram will anyway not be appropriate since students will often not know each other.

Group work offers great potential. It can be used for oral work, tasks where decision have to be taken, joint reading tasks, listening tasks, co-operative writing and many other things: it also the great advantage of allowing different groups of students to be doing different things in the same classroom.

Summary

The students’ abilities in their subject-matter fields, in turn, enhance their ability to acquire English. Subjectmatter knowledge gives them the context they need to understand the English of the classroom. The ESP class takes subject-matter content and shows students how the same information is expressed in English. The teacher can exploit the students’ knowledge of the subject matter in helping them learn English faster.

References


Reference to a book:


