

LITERACY IN LANGUAGE LEARNING AT FU HSING KANG

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Abstract

At Fu Hsing Kang College, in addition to military training, students have to receive civil education and English has been taught for many years at Fu Hsing Kang College as it is one of the subjects required by the Ministry of Education. English teaching at Fu Hsing Kang has gone through several stages from purely military terminology oriented to four skills oriented. Several years ago, a series of reformative EFL (English as a Foreign Language) program was introduced to enhance a FHK cadet's English proficiency, so as to keep his or her professional knowledge up-to-date. Therefore, this study aims at reviewing the different English teaching stages as well as evaluating present teaching strategies and methodologies used in the EFL classroom in order to find better ways to improve students' English abilities. Furthermore, findings of this study could be used for school authorities to improve students' English level.

Keywords : Fu Hsing Kang College , English Teaching EFL

INTRODUCTION

As a military academy, Fu Hsing Kang College (FHK) has an educational system differing from that of general colleges and universities since it combines military training with university education. Its goal and mission is “to cultivate professional talented officers within an interdisciplinary military education that integrates humanities, social and military science for national use.”¹ Therefore, in addition to military training, a cadet has to receive civil education, too. To put this into practice, the Ministry of National Defense and the Ministry of Education regulate subjects taught in the military academies and English is one of the required subjects. Therefore, to cope with the educational goal of cultivating outstanding military leaders equipped with military know-know and academic knowledge, current EFL (English as a Foreign Language) program targets at enhancing FHK cadets’ English proficiency level so as to arm them with the necessary tools to face the challenges encountered in such an internationalized world. This is because the internationalization and the globalization of human activities have made English to be the most widely used language among nations. Different people choose English to communicate with each other and the ability to communicate efficiently in English has become crucial for people of different walks of life. This phenomenon in which English is used as an international language has justified what Newsweek magazine indicated in 1982: “Like it or curse it, English is the closest thing to a lingua franca around the globe.”

LITERATURE REVIEW

The issue of language teaching and learning has been discussed and studied in a lot of books and researches. On the learning side, many studies show that motivation is a key to learning a foreign language well (Brown, 2000; Lumsden, 1994). According to Brown (2000), “motivation is probably the most frequently used catch-all term for explaining the success or failure of virtually any complex task.” Researches have been conducted to investigate on human motivation for many years. Some theories suggest that motivation sources come from specific situations, which

¹ As stated on FHK’s website: www.fhk.edu.tw

means motivation is deeply rooted in the student's immediate learning circumstances. Some theories show that the orientation of motivation comes from a succession of the student's past experiences in the social world (Clément & Gardner, 2001; Dörnyei, 2001). Some theories state that learner's self-efficacy is the source of motivation (Brookhart, 1998). However, in the case of Taiwan, the personal background, family environment, and teaching environment may affect English learning motivation in the EFL context (Yu, 2003).

On the teaching side, the language teaching profession had gone through a series of changes and adaptations, most of which had their origins in an attempt to find the best way—"the one true way" (Strasheim, 1976)—to teach a foreign language. For years, scholars and language practitioners in their long search of the "one true way" to teach a foreign language have led them to group themselves as empiricists, rationalists, methodologists, etc. According to Omaggio Hadley (2001), "the common premise behind the search for a unitary approach to learning and teaching seems to be that there exists an ideal method which, once discovered, will unlock the door to language proficiency for all learners and will make the learning process swift and effortless."

LANGUAGE TEACHING

The very nature of our English teaching is affected by our own attitude towards the language and its speakers, and by the attitudes we instill in our students. As English is a compulsory subject in our schools, to be learned and used by each and everybody irrespective of personal likes and dislikes, prejudices or reservations, it is necessary that the teacher should adopt a positive attitude towards the language.

The students should be made aware of both the immediate benefits derived from oral and written communication in English and the wealth and variety of knowledge and information gained through the active use of the language.

Attitude and motivation go hand in hand. Teachers who complain that their students are unmotivated should look again at their own attitudes inside and outside the classroom. Lessons presented with a lack of enthusiasm are received with indifference, and indifference can turn into hostility towards both the subject and the teacher. Attitudes of encouragement, understanding and sympathy are appreciated by the students, and if the teacher moreover shows a willingness to correct mistakes without reproving, to devise and participate in verbal games and to present his/her

LITERACY IN LANGUAGE LEARNING AT FU HSING KANG

subject matter with obvious enthusiasm, the students will respond with warm affection and spontaneity. In short, they will use English because they want to, not because they have to.

Nevertheless, under present admission policy, the admission standards for cadets are comparatively low, so their learning and grasping power is low. Now, even if teachers use the whole language in the classroom, they won't be able to understand everything. When FHK students first enter the school, on one hand, their overall English ability is not good enough to use the whole language teaching; and on the other, students are faced with a closed education, that is, they are not exposed to the outer world. Moreover, the previous textbook, American Language Course (ALC), a military textbook with military glossary, does not reflect the language of the real world but rather targets at learning a certain field of language communication for specific purposes. For instance, students learn different military ranks and jargons as shown in table 1. The four skills of language –listening, speaking, writing and reading—are not emphasized and students seldom have the opportunity to go to language labs for drillings.

U. S. Armed Forces Officer Ranks		
Navy	Air Force, Army And Marine Corps	Pay Grade
1. Admiral	General	0-10
2. Vice Admiral	Lieutenant General	0-9
3. Rear Admiral (upper half)	Major General	0-8
4. Real Admiral (lower-half)	Brigadier General	0-7

Table 1 shows the different ranks used in the U. S. Armed Forces, and is taken from ALC Book 16 Lesson 2.

“Language teaching,” as indicated by Widdowson, “can be seen as a principled problem-solving activity: a kind of operational research which works out solutions to its own local problem.” (1990: 7) Therefore, to overcome these problems encountered in English teaching at FHK, a landmark curriculum reform was introduced in the academic year of 2001: ability grouping and brand new textbook.

FHK teachers have always wanted to find ways to improve teaching quality and better learning efficiency. Although the practice of grouping students according to their ability has always been controversial, FHK teachers thought it might worth

trying it since the linguistic competence of FHK students is so irregular. Grouping students based on their linguistic competence, on one hand, might permit high achievers to benefit from having competition with one another and low achievers to benefit from not having competition with more capable classmates (Su & Lin, 2003) . On the other hand, it permits teachers to make instructions easier in a homogeneous group.

Students are placed into three levels of classes according to their English ability, which is measured by the ALC (American Language Course) placement test². Students with their scores above top 30 percent on the test are placed in the upper classes mainly assigned as Class A, below bottom 30% in the lower classes as Class C, and those in between in the middle classes as Class B. Students come from different programs and departments but of the same grade year.

The textbook is also changed. American Language Course is no longer used and is replaced by Cambridge English Worldwide³ which emphasizes four skills and Word Power on vocabulary building. Nevertheless, after two years of trial the book did not accomplish what the teachers had originally planned for: elevating students' English ability. According to a rather informal survey students found Cambridge English Worldwide rather easy thus boring. Moreover, the book focused on speaking and listening but students seldom had opportunities for language drillings in labs. To address this problem, the textbooks currently in use is Skyline⁴ which also emphasizes four skills, Master GEPT Vocabulary⁵ to correspond with the GEPT Intermediate level and Selected Essays for Recitation⁶ to improve students' writing ability.

TEACHING METHODS

When it comes to language teaching, in terms of broad approach, there are two ways to teach people to use a language: 1) __move step by step from form to meaning,

² ALC placement test consists of two parts: part I is listening and part II is reading.

³ Written by Andrew Littlejohn and Diana Hicks and published by Cambridge University Press. The book has 6 levels: starter, 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5

⁴ Published by Macmillan and the book has five levels: 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5.

⁵ Published by Beta Multimedia Publishing.

⁶ Published by 常春藤。

adding together different bits of the language which have been isolated for learning. Item by item, the teacher provides the students with a model, gets the students to copy the model, and gets the students to personalize the model by using it to express something they want to say; 2) __move from meaning to form, that is the teacher puts the students in a situation where they want to communicate something, encourages them to communicate as best as they can, and focuses the students' attention on the forms used to achieve communication. By focusing sometimes on form and sometimes on meaning, the teacher tries to get students to take advantage of both subconscious and conscious learning. In addition, the teacher encourages them to think about and become better learners.

Communication, feelings, rules, practices and strategies give strength to the current ELT (English Language Teaching) scene. Communication is at the heart of modern ELT. People usually learn English because for some reasons, in some way, they want to be able to communicate in English.

Communication is part of the learning process:

- As we communicate, we make our formally learnt language more automatically available.

- During meaningful communication, we acquire language subconsciously.

- When we are making an effort to communicate, we develop strategies of communication which helps us learn.

- We communicate in order to get, give, or exchange information.

- We communicate in order to do things and to get things done.

- The way we communicate with someone expresses and develops our relationship with that person.

- People from different societies and cultures mean and do different things by what they say. They have different ideas about politeness.

- One can never be absolutely sure what someone is going to say. So, as a foreign language learner, we need to know how to: a) __get my message across; b) __get things done; c) __be polite; d) __avoid judging other people according to one's own values; e) deal with the unexpected.

These issues are especially important in ELT, because so many people are motivated to learn English as the language of international communication. We, the teachers, must not, however, think that these issues can be separated from the grammar, pronunciation and other parts of the language system itself. So, English

language teachers have to balance the teaching of the English language system with the teaching of an ability to communicate in English.

How to teach language then? It is said that students need to be exposed to language in order to study it. They need to understand its meaning, understand its construction and practice it.

It is seen that students can be exposed to language by the teacher using it for them to listen and to see by listening to tapes, by reading texts and by looking at computer printouts. In each case, the students are given chances to see or hear the language before they are asked to produce it themselves.

Nevertheless, it is a big challenge for English teachers to teach these cadets because FHK students are different from other colleges' and universities' students. As mentioned earlier, Fu Hsing Kang College is a military academy, therefore, in addition to civil education cadets must also receive regular military training; and sometimes the importance of military instructions surpasses regular education. When this happens, that is, after strenuous work, cadets often come to class exhausted, low spirited, having no interest and no motivation to learn. As a result, students gradually lose their motivation to learn English and English becomes the subject that most students fail to pass. Table 2 and table 3 show the number of cadets who failed the subject "English" in comparison with other required subjects.

Chinese	English	Communist Theories	International Relations	Oral Communications
2	16	0	6	0

Table 2 Number of people failed 1st semester of academic year 2005, 2nd year of college

Chinese	English	Ideologies of Dr. Sun Yatsen	Introduction to Arts	Computer Science
0	4	0	0	0

Table 3 Number of students failed 1st semester of academic year 2005, 1st year of college

To arouse cadets' interest teachers must provide activities that simulate such an environment as much as possible by using different techniques and methods. Currently, teaching methods used in the classroom are: GEPT, TOEFL, videos and

Internet resources.

GEPT/TOEFL

As mentioned above, present teaching is divided into four to six different groups based on students' English abilities. For students grouped in Class A their general English proficiency is supposed to be better than Class B and C. In addition to the textbook Skyline some other materials are used to reinforce their learning, especially their listening and speaking abilities. In this regard, GEPT or TOEFL is used based on students' preferences. Taking the example of Class A of the sophomores, GEPT placement test is used and teaching materials are selected from "Everyday Intermediate English,"⁷ "English 4U,"⁸ "Landmark English,"⁹ and "General English Proficiency Test."¹⁰

First, pictures of the part A of the GEPT listening comprehension is shown without playing the questions. Students have to explain in English what they think about the pictures and what the pictures may ask. Second, questions are played and the students listen and answer them. Third, answers are compared and discussed and finally questions are played again with the transcripts. For short answers and conversations similar process is done. In this way, students get the opportunities to practice their linguistic expressive and communicative skills.

As for TOEFL, students are engaged in similar activities with the focus on problem-solving skills.

Videos

Videos or movies are widely used in today's classroom because they provide a variation to the monotonous class routine and students can benefit from the type of language that is used in the real life scenarios rather than just merely "classroom" English. Here the application of modern technologies is quite welcome and suitable.

⁷ 專業全民英檢中級中高級月刊，專業全民英檢出版股份有限公司出版。

⁸ 活用空中美語中級，空中美語文教事業出版。

⁹ 捷進空中美語中級中高級，空中美語文教事業出版。

¹⁰ GEPT 全民英檢中級聽力模擬測驗，洪宏齡編著，書林出版。

In the past videos were played with Chinese subtitles covered, but now, using DVDs subtitles can either be turned off or switched to English subtitles instead of the Chinese ones. Some of the movies selected are educational videos like “Family Album,” “Living in the USA;” TV series like “Friends;” theatrical movies such as “Family Man,” “What Women Want;” or just any movie that is connected with English.

First, videos or movies are played without Chinese subtitles. While watching the movie, students are asked to listen and write the keywords and key phrases that they hear and can grasp. This type of exercise is done for some time and then it is switched to the whole sentences. In other words, students’ watch the TV or movies and they listen and write starting with the basic vocabularies, phrases, and simple short sentences to the long and complicated ones with formal and informal vocabularies. Once they have written down all the vocabularies and sentences the teacher goes through every vocabulary and sentence written by the students explaining the meanings and checking their answers. The teacher explains the proper usage of the vocabularies, phrases, idioms, and slang in sentences as well as colloquial English sentences. Afterwards, students are asked to construct sentences using the newly acquired vocabularies, idioms, phrasal verbs, etc. Afterwards, students are required to write the comments in English about the movie watched and the teacher has to make sure that the students use their own words and do not download from the Internet. Finally, with the portfolio, the teacher makes corrections and asks students to redo or rewrite the commentary with proper understanding. As can be seen, this is rather a long process which may require 2 to 3 times writing so needs patience with students.

The following is an actual example taken from students’ classroom activity and the movie watched is “Family Man.”

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Airline announcer: This will be the final boarding call for Flight 2 to London Heathrow.2. Jack to Kate: Ok, I’m not even going to say it, Kate. Maybe it’ll be like I never left.3. Kate to Jack: Wait! I have a really bad feeling about this.4. Jack to Kate: About the plane? You think it’s going to crash? Don’t say that.5. Kate to Jack: No. Look, I know that we’ve talked about this a thousand times. And we agreed that going to London was the right thing to do. But in my heart, this feels wrong. Don’t go, Jack.6. Jack to Kate: You mean don’t go at all? What, what about my internship.7. Kate to Jack: No. Believe me, I know, I know what an incredible opportunity for you.8. Jack to Kate: For us, Kate.9. Kate to Jack: For us. But I’m afraid that if you get on that plane... |
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LITERACY IN LANGUAGE LEARNING AT FU HSING KANG

10. Jack to Kate: Look, we're at the airport. Nobody ever thinks clearly at the airport. So we should just trust the decision we already made. You've been accepted to one of the best law schools in the country. I've got this internship at Barclays Bank. We have a great plan, honey.
11. Kate to Jack: You want to do something great, Jack? Let's flush the plan. Let's start our lives right now, today. I mean, I have no idea what this life is going to look like, but I know that it has the both of us in it. And I choose us.
12. Kate to Jack: The plan doesn't make us great, Jack. What we have together, that's what makes us great.
13. Jack to Kate: I love you, Kate.
14. Kate to Jack: I love you, too.
15. Jack to Kate: And one year in London is not going to change that. A hundred years couldn't change that.

With subtitles turned off, students are able to come up with the following words, phrases or sentences:¹¹

words	phrases	sentences
final call flight heart opportunity airport decision honey change	bad feeling about this a thousand times a hundred years	Don't go Jack. For us, Kate. I love you, too. I choose us.

Next, using the words and phrases written down students are asked to make new sentences.¹²

Student's sentence	Teacher's correction
1. I call my friend yesterday. 2. He is a man of good heart. 3. I went to the airport to leave my friend. 4. I love you, honey. 5. I have a bad feeling about this.	1. I <u>called</u> my friend yesterday. 3. I went to the airport to <u>see</u> my friend <u>off</u> .

¹¹ The example was taken from a B2 class student; Freshman year.

¹² The example was taken from the same B2 class student.

Internet Resources

Many resources on the Internet can be a useful tool in the classroom. One great advantage of the Internet is that “students become engaged in web-based activities that offer opportunities to interact using ‘authentic language’ and that provide access to people, information and programs” (Kaim, 2003). Another advantage is that it allows both teachers and students to easily find updated information on a certain topic mentioned in the textbook so as to enhance general knowledge related to the topic discussed or purely background information of the material taught. In one chapter of “The Active Reader 1”¹³ it talks about the invention of Coca-Cola; in this case, the teacher can go to Coca-Cola’s website (www.cocacola.com) and find more detailed information about the company. The website is well designed with lots of information and flash version that provide both teacher and students alike with great fun and enjoyment.

Below are some of the most regularly used websites in the writers’ English classes and proven to be quite effective for teaching grammar and other related linguistic skills.

1. www.englishpage.com. This site contains free online English lessons and ESL/EFL resources.
2. www.skylineenglish.com. This site is part of the Skyline website dedicated to links to websites related in content to the course book units.
3. www.onestopenglish.com. This site provides teacher with solutions for English teaching.
4. www.esl-lab.com. This site helps students improve their English listening comprehension skills through practice with self-grading listening quiz pages.
5. www.starfall.com. This site is designed mainly for children but it can be used to teach pronunciation and phonics and other reading activities to lower achievers. It is a free website featuring animated books and interactive games.

¹³ The Active Reader 1 is used in Freshman year. It is published by Macmillan.

SUGGESTIONS AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Current EFL program is influenced by various factors: lack of teaching tools and equipment, limited teaching hours, limitations of students' English ability.

First, an ideal environment has to be established as FHK doesn't have enough language lab facilities. The textbooks currently used demand much more listening comprehension activities but students cannot do language drillings in the classroom. As indicated, current English instruction is based on five or six groups divided according to their English competence and the teaching of these five or six ability groups is conducted simultaneously at different classrooms. As Skyline puts emphasis on the listening and speaking skills this means at least five or six language labs are needed for language practices. However, the school does not have enough language lab facilities.

Second, every class in addition to the regular two-hour class should have another two hours of language lab in order to practice speaking and listening. Freshman, sophomore and junior students have two hours of English per week while senior students, before June, 2003, there wasn't any English class at all. In the summer of 2003, the Ministry of Defense gave an English Placement Test to all the cadets of the seven academies with the intention of evaluating their overall English competence and of using test outcomes as reference for language ability. The policy in itself is well intended because it gives students a strong motivation to keep studying English as it is no longer a required credit thus not taught in senior year. The Ministry's English Placement Test is given to senior students some time prior to their graduation to test their general English ability and since students do not have English instructions in their senior year, it is not difficult to guess that they performed rather poorly on the test. To remedy the situation school authorities instructed to add two hours of English class to the existing curriculum of senior students. However, this policy of English placement test is discontinued due to unknown reasons, unfortunately. Although each grade year has two hours of English class per week, teachers find that they are not enough to practice every language skill. If another two hours are added and used for enhancing listening and speaking abilities will greatly help to upgrade students' overall English competence.

Third, as stated in the very beginning, due to the Joint College Admission

Examination system, generally speaking, the admission scores for military academies are rather low compared to other colleges and universities, therefore, students' learning and grasping power is low. Now, even if teachers use the whole language in the classroom they won't be able to understand everything and this makes both students and teachers alike feel frustrated. Nevertheless, conducted rather in an informal way, 83% of the FHK cadets expressed their desire to conduct the class in English only. (Yen & Shiue, 2003) .

CONCLUSION

From the findings of present study it is suggested that for future instruction teachers should use English as much as possible and avoid explaining the content in Chinese in case that students don't understand the meaning (Yen & Shiue, 2003) . Moreover, school authorities should facilitate teachers with a better teaching environment such as constructing more language labs so every group has the same opportunity to access labs and do language drillings. In addition to the regular two-hour class instruction every ability group should have an extra two hours of lab to practice speaking and listening. Teachers are applauded for their efforts in arousing students' learning interest by trying different teaching techniques and methods. And finally, ability grouping is quite new at Fu Hsing Kang College. Since students are classified into three different levels according to their English proficiency differentiated teaching techniques and objectives should be established. More importantly, different textbooks with different materials to study should be applied to correspond with each level's teaching goals. Having said this, current practice of using the same textbooks for the three different levels should be reexamined and reevaluated. Nevertheless, the effects and results of this dramatic change on English teaching require further study and analysis.

In conclusion, the results and suggestions of present study may be served as a reference for school authorities to improve students' English level and upgrade EFL teaching and learning at FHK.

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