

Educational Culture in an Online Class: The Case of Filipino-Chinese Interface

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Abstract

One key target of the global education system is the equipping of graduates exhibiting sets of core 21st century competencies. Looking into global competencies vis-a-vis language learning, inclination to English fluency is an edge for pursuing global careers. The imperativeness of accommodating English education in China is first manifested in its Open Door Policy in 1976. However, even after four centuries, the competence of Chinese has little progression with merely a percentage of its population classified as conversational. Resolution now includes enrolling to online English school. This paper is an attempt to identify the themed emerging issues in the educational culture based on the experiences of five Filipino educators. Five problematic educational cultures were identified: 1) culture of hiring practice and training development: overemphasizing online English teaching as a merit of English communication skill and less cultivation of pedagogical skills; 2) culture of teaching: “delight” of the learners as the end goal; 3) culture on training learners: learners are not trained to be autodidact language learners; 4) culture on developing learning goal: putting grammar proficiency and wide vocabulary as the ultimate general goal for learners; 5) culture of developing curriculum content: emphasizing on form over rich context. Examining the regional education system of an online English class allows understanding the interface between the language learner and the educator. Findings show that this interface in an online language class requisites diagnosis to help identify errors for recommendation of case-specific actions, and to serve as an opportunity for the educators’ cultural self-reflection.

Keywords: educational culture, online English class, ESL teaching

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Introduction

To explore the contemporary problems vis-à-vis the educational culture of an online English school for Chinese nationals as perceived by five Filipino ESL educators, an online interview was conducted. Interview respondents were selected through snowball method. Probing was facilitated to answer these two critical questions: “What were the issues of the current educational culture in the online class?”, and “What are the possible modifications or interventions that must be done to address issues?”. Thematic analysis was employed to make sense of and organize the data collected

Understanding the educational culture in an online English school is imperative as Scarino and Liddicoat (2009) noted that it has direct linkage with language learning. Following this proposition, it is important to cultivate continuously a positive educational culture to improve the learning experience of the learners. In this particular study, the educational culture within the system of interaction between the Filipino educators and the Chinese learners was explored. As this study subscribed to the interpretivism research philosophy, worldviews of the respondents were the highlighted narratives on the language learning phenomenon and discourse. Since the respondents did not provide much depth onto the cultural differences and even nuances in learning and teaching between the two interacting cohorts with different nationalities, no intricate micro-analysis was undertaken in this study. Nevertheless, the results were still indicative of the potentially actionable issues at hand as well as a provide starting point for future researchable areas.

In perspective, the agenda to improve English communication is regarded to be attributable to empirical macro studies concluding that countries with English proficient skills are revealed to have strong and flourishing economies since the rise in English proficiency of a nation has a direct relationship to its per capita income (EF EPI Report, 2013 as cited by McCormick, 2013), bilateral trade flows (Ku & Zussman, 2010), and net exports (Ufier, 2015); as well as micro studies showing English language skills positively impacting earnings (Lang and Sinvier, 2006), eligibility to higher paying job opportunities (Angrist and Lavy, 1997), and foreign direct investment inflows (Lein et al., 2011 as cited by Ufier, 2015).

Correspondingly, it is anticipated that learning English is considerably credited by the governments, economists, and education planners as contributory to the expanding commerce since English is the *lingua franca* of global business. These arguments would conventionally lend credence of the language as a critical tool in doing business, but highly likely miss out the equally essential impacts of learning English language on the aspects of the individual’s biological being, cognitive capacities, and cultural interpretative abilities, to name a few. It was found out that compared to monolingual speakers, bilingual speakers have: 1) denser grey matter in the brain which is involved in decision-making, self-control, and speech (Mechelli, Crinion, Noppeney, Ashburner, Franckowiak, & Price.); 2) better linguistic awareness, problem-solving skill, mathematical creativity and visual-spatial memory than their counterparts (Dermont, 2001; Kessler, 1980; Leikan, 2013; Diaz & Klingler, 1991); 3) positive attitudes towards target language and/or the speakers of the acquired foreign language (Bamford & Mizokawa, 1989).

China institutionalized its English education in 1976 with its Open Door Policy. Even after more than four decades, the country registered little progression with merely 1% of its population classified as conversational (Smith, 2017). Currently, there are almost 300 million Chinese students enrolled on online English schools. Filipinos are among the top service providers since English is their second language (ESL). Among the most pronounced advantage of ESL online education is its ascribed utility in terms of providing “well-balanced mix of self-regulated and self-scheduled learning material” (English Club TV, 2018) to the students compared if the same learning goal is undertaken in a conventional school.

Like any action to shift to innovative option, the advent of new ways to learn a language brings about problems as much as it resolves previously identified problems. Hence, improvements of online teaching are sought continuously to ensure that its bad outcomes do not negate its benefits. This study used the cybernetic approach to explore the structures, constraints, and possibilities in an online classroom system. This study likewise regarded educational culture as embedded on each element and so contexts were discussed to identify interactions between and among the elements of the learning system.

Conclusion

1) *Culture of hiring practice and training development:* Overemphasizing online English teaching as a merit of English communication skill and the cultivation of pedagogical skills

Interviewed educators shared their perception of being appreciated, equipped, and competent in their work as online English teachers to be associated with their higher level of English speaking skills than the learners. Further, they felt that their qualities such as outstanding enunciation, wide vocabulary, and even engaging personality can be their leverage for securing better chance of being booked regularly by students. Their perception then implied the connection they ascribed to their fluency with the merit of their worth in the online teaching vocation.

It is logical that English communicative competence can be the most obvious reason for the educators to be hired and pursue ESL teaching profession. However, to attribute the educators' qualifications to mere optics can be limiting in developing their full potential as effective ESL educators. For one, it can be attributed to the lack of coherent framework for their development once they entered the online teaching industry. In particular, they shared that they lacked knowledge on the science of teaching, with emphasis on being acquainted with the formal approaches to effective classroom management. The lack of being knowledgeable on pedagogical approaches, skills, and content especially for the first-time teachers can lead to losing the opportunity to maximizing multi-modal approaches and innovative science-based activities available for usage by the teachers to enhance the language learning experience of the learners. Some stated that the new techniques they used in their class were mostly from the suggestions provided by their team head or training coach. As such, they perceived these resolutions as product of “common sense”, “similar experience”, or “inherent wisdom” of their team heads.

Their perceptions are valid concerns to be examined since having the communication skills does not necessarily translate to having competent teaching skills. Teacher competencies requisite more than the knowledge and skills on the subject matter, in this case the English language, as it includes as well the capability to “mobilizing psychosocial resources (including skills and attitudes) in a particular context” (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2005). If these competencies are met, long-term visions such as pursuing high quality management of online schools can be attained as the actual practice of teaching exhibits multi-method approach deliberate placements, combinations, and integration of pedagogical approaches.

Participants shared that during training, terminologies such as “inquiry-based”, and “collaborative” are shortly mentioned. However, these staple principles on effective teaching could only serve its purpose if clearly understood by the teachers for them to wisely appropriate in their classes based on the needs of their students. To clarify to them to “know why they do what they do” on the basis of learning theories, pedagogical frameworks, and based on empirical evidences are imperative for their professional growth as educators.

Modifications/ interventions: The lack of training development framework particularly on pedagogical approaches is an issue associated with the lack of formal academic educational background of the teachers. It is suggested that training program for the ESL educators should also provide emphasis on discussing the science behind teaching including the pedagogical approaches appropriate for a particular need of the students. There should likewise be an emphasis on discussing the need on personalizing teaching content and pluralizing teaching methods. Their increased awareness on pedagogy could improve the teaching styles of the educators and contents of the curriculum and will eventually develop a culture of a science-based method of and approach in teaching.

2) *Culture of teaching:* “Delight” of the learners as the end goal

One pronounced way to pursue the *delight* of the learners is through the deliberate matching of their teaching styles with the students’ learning preferences. The preferences of learners can be determined using various standard tools. It is said that this concept and practice of connecting teaching style with learning preferences “can help students respond more positively to instructional methods, and inform faculty about effective teaching practices” (Fenton and Watkins, 2012).

The degree of connection between learning and teaching styles is ideally on the prerogative of the ESL educator. Such is a spectrum of extremely submitting to learners’ preferences on one end to neglecting it altogether on the opposite end. For the participants’ cases, they perceived that most often, the culture and expectations from their learners and even the school management pushed them to yield totally to the students’ learning styles even on occasions when they thought that it is best to follow their own judgment of the learning-teaching situation. As exemplified by the respondent, though there are young learners found to possess kinesthetic learning style, demonstrating how “saying thank you” can be functional in their everyday schooling does not necessarily need them to do particular movements. In this case, he

thought that the context of the learning to “say thank you” should be given more emphasis than demonstrating the movement while saying it.

This is similar to the existing challenge towards the validity of learning preference. The scant scientific evidence and merit on the usefulness of the learning style model made education scientists to debunk it and tagged it as “neuromythology”. A teacher’s guided funded by the U.S. Department of Education even furthered that “teaching students in their preferred styles... is an effective learning practice” (as cited by Toppo, 2019) since it is paradoxical wherein implementing learning styles is a unimodal approach consequent to having fixed mindset instead of growth mindset.

Another challenge the educators are confronted with is the lack of accurate assessment of the learners’ preference. Though the learners undergo assessment prior to enrolling to online classes, the results are not fully disclosed to the educators. As such, there are instances when educators improvise ways to assess their learners. The respondents noted that this can be counterproductive since they needed to evaluate the students first which was time-consuming and thus, reduced their actual time spent for the teaching lessons. They said that if only they were given the profiles of their students in advance, they can use the whole session time implementing the custom-fit teaching approaches for the learners.

Meanwhile, the influence of the management to the schema of the educators of what constitute the delight of the students is evident whenever a learner provides feedback regarding their experience with the educator’s class. They shared that they expected a call out from the management only when they received negative feedback. If it involved their teaching style, the resolution of the management was usually to yield to the preferences of the learners. Although this can be unfortunate for the educators who have their own cognitive faculties to appropriate strategies to meet the learning needs of the students, it cannot be separated from the fact that the online English school can only sustainably operate using the profits generated from the enrolled students. Thus, even at instances when learners throw unnecessary theatrics and antics in the classroom, they needed to accommodate their concept of delight. Following this logic, for the school to operate sustainably, the education system has to serve the learners on a manner worthy of their expectations.

Modifications/ interventions: It is important to evaluate and consult the learners of their learning preferences but essentially, in the end, it is the intelligible judgment of the educators that must be executed inside the classroom. Rather than focusing on the delight of the learners, delight on studying the language must be the focus. The learners can be too young or inexperienced to dictate the best strategy that could work for them. So the optimal option is to have the educators lead the lesson delivery. Multi-modal approach or the usage of different learning styles and not strengthening only one style for growth mindset is then appropriate for online classroom to enable enhanced learning and strengthened interconnectivity of their senses for language learning.

3) *Culture on training learners:* Learners are not trained to be autodidact language learners

Training students to be autodidactic language learners is perceived to be the least focus of the learning goals. Educators perceived that the curriculum has limited objectives which mainly cater to the base level of learning outcomes- knowledge, comprehension, and application levels. Further, most of these outcomes merely measure the increased knowledge of the learners to the context of the lesson topics. Although these can be good as short-term goals, in the end, it would be an innovative achievement if the curriculum trains the learners to study and explore language learning on their own.

The nobility of developing autodidact learners can potentially develop the sustainable zeal of the learners to improve their fluency in English language as they improvise their own learning tactics and timeline. As such, the learners will be able to personally invest on ways that can help them be better as English communicators even outside their formal and online schooling.

One major conflict in limiting the learning objectives to the content of the lesson is to inhibit as well their creative expression. For instance, the topics on expressions and vocabulary would provide an impression that these are the best words to say something and untrained learners would program their minds within the specific phrases in expressing their thoughts. This is associated as a problem when language is view as mere collections of words, grammars, and vocabularies which can be taught through rote memorization instead of the communicative exploration of experiencing the foreign language.

The educators perceived that it is ideal for the learners to speak 70% of the time in the class. As educators, they see their role as facilitators. This means that they perceived their role is primarily to guide learning through the provided course material. They also thought as well that they have the discretion to modify sections of the lessons which they thought are unnecessary particularly for advanced learners as well as provide additional references which the learners can study outside the class. In this way, they thought that the learners will be able to form their own thoughts about the additional materials they gathered and indirectly be able to explore their identity as a learner and foreign language speaker.

Modifications/ interventions: To respond to the shift of teaching method of educators to being facilitators of language learning, the curriculum content must have more activities for the learners to innovate expressions and it is the responsibility of the educators to transition the shift from teacher-centered learning to student-centered. This shift facilitates the dependency to the educators be minimized since the learners are trained to be more creative and self-reliant in building their own sets of vocabularies. Additionally, for learners to be autodidacts, educators must be able to identify reputable and appropriate materials which learners can engage with especially outside class. However, recommendations of films, songs, and other creative forms must be done with caution to avoid the learners from adding colloquial expressions to their vocabulary which might be dangerous to use if they lack understanding of its usage, context and cultural implications.

4) *Culture on developing learning goal:* Putting grammar proficiency and wide vocabulary as the ultimate general goal for learners

Since the educators had different types of learners each work shift, they had a wide range of learners' profile that they need to accommodate. One issue that they recognized in the curriculum is its high regards for attaining grammar proficiency. Although it is not completely wrong to aim for attaining mastery on the correct structure of expressing ideas, it may be counterproductive for those who merely aim for functional English. As such, the stance of the educator is in accordance to the Communicative Language Theory (CLT) which indicates that the first goal of language learning is to be understood.

An example cited by a respondent is her farmer student. According to his learner, he wanted to learn how to speak in English so he can negotiate with his small-time clients in selling their harvest. For him, he just needed to be familiar with basic terms needed to talk with their clients and not be fooled easily. To introduce him with economics-related jargons as how their module is structured would be an overkill of learning English, as he said. Some learners even told the educators that to be intelligibly sound might shy away their clients who are mostly non-native/proficient speakers. Further, the educators stated that this technical concept should only be introduced if the learner chose to do so. At the same time, forcing them to master grammar rules and memorize tons of words would give them the unnecessary burden since this can be beyond their personal goal of learning English.

Modifications/ interventions: Proficiency can be a goal, but should not be positioned ultimate as there are students who aim to acquire functional English to sustain their everyday living. Simulators on real topics that they have can also be added as an activity. The key to having a matched personal goal of the learners and the learning goals lies is having an effective learners' profile evaluation.

5) *Culture of developing curriculum* content: Emphasizing on form over rich context

Respondents claimed that the curriculum and the manner the activities are structured are implying that learning about grammar and vocabulary is an effective teaching method for and to experience foreign language learning. As previously argued, this can have negative implications as to how learners view the utility of learning the language. Worst, they might perceive their learning goals to be beyond what they can achieve. Two of the respondents testified experiencing having learners who did not finish their course since they thought that they could no longer meet the pre-determined learning goals. In this sense, the learners might have lost the importance of language learning outside the highly structured engagement with the language.

Educators argued that they considered rote learning as the most static way of teaching English. It should be taken into consideration that in teaching English online, the Filipino teacher is interacting with his or her Chinese learners. As such, there is the intercultural dimension happening within the learning system. This occurs when educators learn another cultural perspective of English learning in relation to another culture, and vice versa. To teach vocabulary is just partial understanding of the language. The full experience is embedded in its culture, meaning-making, and interpretations.

The cultural nuances embedded in the lesson context is essential in keeping the credibility of the online school as it can reflect the extensive research it entails the curriculum developer to produce the lesson materials. A remarkable example provided by one educator was his teaching experience about the lesson on “Birthday Celebrations”. At the end of the class, he observed indifference on his learner’s face. He thought that the student’s indifference is attributable to the lesson being a commonplace. However, when he asked his learner, the student disclosed that birthday celebration was not part of their culture as they view their birth day as not a special day. The learner thought that the context of birthday celebration depicted in the lesson is an extravagance in their culture. Hence, the educator implied disconnection between the dialogues presented in the course material with the reality of his learner. This kind of lapses in the context in the curriculum content can be discouraging or “offending” to learners which may cause psychological noise during their class.

Modifications/ interventions: Highlighting learning language as a social enterprise of meaning-making and interpretations is a paradigm shift from the passive and highly structured approach of teaching language via the route of mastering grammar and expanding vocabulary. To introduce the new paradigm of teaching language, activities involving interactive methods probing, laddering, and debate can be implemented. These activities can cultivate the meaningful “experience” of using words and arranging them based on the capacity of the learner. Mentoring and correcting errors during this language game should be facilitated by the educator.

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