

# Teaching Oral English for College Students in China: Lexical and Syntactical Inputs vs. Conversational Development

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## Tags

Cross Cultural Issues; Internationalization and Global Learning; Language Education; University/Higher Education

## Setting

There has been a long tradition for college students to learn oral English in China, so that hopefully they can effectively communicate with foreigners in English as needed to help them to be more competitive in the job market. It is very common for the college students in non-English majors to study two-year College English across China, covering speaking, listening, reading, writing and translating. Nowadays, there is a growing trend for some universities in China to offer their students the course of Oral English targeting their majors, such as Oral English for Hotel Management, Oral English for International Trade, Oral English for the Healthcare Industry, and so on, in addition to College English. The goal is that students speak fluent English in their professional fields by the time they graduate.

The case is set at Huaihai University in Shanghai. In September the English Department was assigned to teach Oral English for the college freshman majoring in Hospitality Management, whose English level is

elementary high. The objective of the course is to enable students to effectively communicate with guests order to provide quality services for them in the hospitality industry (i.e. reception, housekeeping, bar

## Case

Hospitality Management is the core major for this university and enjoys a strong reputation in China. Therefore this course is important to the head of the English department. He chose a teacher who has rich experience of teaching Oral English. After discussing with the teacher, he selected an authorized textbook widely used for Hotel Business English around the world. The book offers students abundant dialogues, sentence patterns and words and phrases in various hotel business situations, including welcoming guests, looking after guests, reservation inquiries and changes, restaurant and bar, housekeeping problems, checking out, and so on. In a word, the book completely meets the demands for students to learn to speak hotel business English. The course would run through one semester, with 32 teaching hours lasting 16 weeks. The department head expected that the teacher would be successful in this course.

As instructed by the department head, the English teacher carefully prepared lessons, focusing on vocabulary and sentence construction inputs, as well as sentence pattern drills. Throughout the whole semester, he passionately and confidently taught his students how to speak the words and phrases and how to use the sentence patterns in the textbook. He also asked his students to imitate the dialogues presented by the textbook to role-play hotel business situations. It seemed that his students were quite satisfied with his teaching, and so was he. Time went quickly, and suddenly it was the time for the final examination of this course. He made two kinds of questions for the exam: One required students to response to prompts that would be common in the hotel business. Another was a situational role-play prepared in advance. To his surprise, for the first question, most of students did not know how to develop and maintain a conversation and had difficulty discussing the hotel business issues. For the second question, all of the students performed well due to their previous good preparation and recitation practice. The teacher reported to the department head about the outcomes.

After receiving the teacher's feedback, the department head seriously reflected upon his course design and realized why the course design did not reach his expectation. The department head concluded that he had ignored research about the students and the fact that most Chinese English learners speak in English but think in Chinese. When Chinese people conduct dialogue, they always wait for their turn to speak, and are not used to keeping a two-way conversation. In other words, when Chinese speakers have a conversation with each other, they do it like going bowling, while westerners have a dialogue with each other, they do it like playing tennis. The rhythm of conversation between Chinese and westerners is totally different. The course design was lacking instruction on how to pace a conversation in English.

The course will be repeated in the upcoming term, but the course participants will be freshmen rather than older students. The head of the English Department is wondering how to redesign the course to get the best

results, so that students will not only speak professional English in professional fields but also know how to develop a conversation in the western way.

### Discussion Questions

As you consider this case imagine that you were redesigning this course, discuss:

- What is important to know about the students' needs, wants, and backgrounds before you design a course for them?
- How will you get to know the students? Using questionnaire or other methods?
- What would be your goals for student learning?
- How would you find the balance between teaching industry specific knowledge and conversation skills? How many teaching hours would you devote to each?
- What teaching materials and techniques would you utilize in this course?
- How can you help students explore cultural differences related to communication styles?