

# Developing proper EFL teaching methodology within teaching context: A study of vocational English language teaching in a college

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**Abstract:** This study probes into the possible EFL (English as a foreign language) teaching methodologies implemented to improve the communicative competence for majors of civil aviation service in a college (pseudonym CAS) in Guangdong province, China. Classroom observation is conducted for investigation of the teaching context and practice. Ten questions detecting teaching methodologies by Larsen-Freeman and Anderson (2011) are used as a framework to analyze the possible principles beneath the classroom practice. The result shows that there is a disparity between the teachers' objectives and real class methodological practice, especially in improving the learners' communicative competency. It is suggested that taking advantages of the specific context as well as developing contextual CLT (Communicative Language Teaching) methodology would be crucial to improve students' EFL communicative competence for vocational education. Hopefully, this paper would contribute to exploring the EFL teaching in CAS and to other similar contexts of college vocational education, and promote further research.

**Key words:** EFL teaching methodology; College vocational education; Teaching context

## 1. Introduction

With the educational reform and social economic development, cultivating college students' competence for vocational purpose is a major concern. For college students, English communicative capacity is one of the core vocational competencies. In college vocational EFL teaching, the teaching methodology is adopted by teachers with or without awareness in class practices. It serves as an invisible hand that influences the teachers in language teaching and students in learning.

Fruitful research has done on methodologies improving students' communicative competence, especially on Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) (e.g. Li, 1998; Bax, 2003; Hu, 2005a,b; Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011; Dornyei, 2013; Humphries & Burns, 2015 etc.) According to Larsen-Freeman & Anderson (2011), it's hard for CLT classroom practice to be prescribed as a standard or consistent norm as it's diversified by people who understand and interpret it as well as how it's applied in specific contexts. However, there is consensus that CLT falls more in the field of developing learners' communicative competence (Hymes, 1971) for functional and authentic communication.

How EFL teaching methodology serves as a catalyst to bringing out the effective learning outcome is related to its interaction with contexts. Hu (2005b) suggests using "ecological perspectives" (2005: 635) in curriculum innovation and methodology practice. That is, a methodology has to coordinate with contextual factors. Similarly, Bax (2003) also emphasizes that context comes before methodology in language teaching.

This paper studies the possible teaching methodologies implemented in EFL class for majors of civil aviation service in a college (pseudonym CAS) in Guangdong. Observation on the specific micro contexts (i.e. place, time and people relating to CAS) and the EFL classroom practice is elaborated. Ten questions detecting teaching methodologies posed by Larsen-Freeman and Anderson (2011) are used as a framework to analyze the possible principles beneath the classroom phenomena.

In CAS, the teachers intend to cultivate students' communicative competence for vocational educational purpose. However, there is a disparity between teachers' expectation and the real classroom practice, which could be dug out from the teachers' reflection and the observed classroom practice. The rigid patterns of the classroom practice probably results from the teachers' insufficient meta-cognition of developing proper EFL teaching methodology and taking advantages of the teaching context. It's argued that flexible implementation of teaching methodology, such as CLT, would be crucial in EFL teaching. Also, accommodating to and making better use of the context in CAS help to bring out effective teaching and learning. Specifically, two aspects of contextual elements would facilitate to develop proper contextual EFL teaching methodologies. For one thing, improve teachers' understanding of EFL teaching methodology, especially CLT principles and techniques. For another, value authentic contextual resources such as the training centre.

## 2. Context

A methodology can be different in various contexts, due to either people who interpret and implement it or places within which it's specified. Wedell & Malderez (2013) expound 3 core factors constructing an EFL teaching and learning context, i.e. place, people and time. These three aspects affect "classroom norms" "classroom relationships" and "classroom goals" (ibid: 23) and thus, methodology. I observe the micro contexts for EFL teaching among majors of civil aviation service in CAS. There are two main reasons. First, the major is considered as a "brand speciality" in CAS local contexts. That distinguishes the school from other counterparts. Thus there could be some distinguishable contextual factors to be seen. Second, the teachers in CAS are to some extent accustomed to the specific institutional environment. That influences their concrete classroom practice and methodology implementation.

### 2.1 Place

For the CAS context, I first investigate the place where the EFL teaching and learning occurs. The classroom is among the 11 ones of a long corridor. Inside the classroom, windows are open with view of a central playground. Walls are decorated by students, aiming collective

construction of civil aviation service culture. Sky blue wall-painting, pictures of aircraft, clouds and flight attendants are highlighted. Each classroom has on-wall slogans encouraging excellent service orientation and self-discipline, among which, one is in English.

In class, 50 civil aviation service majors are sitting at removable desks and chairs in rows and lines with individual separated. A teacher's desk, a projector, a screen and a blackboard are at the front platform.

Next to the teaching building, there is a civil aviation service training centre nearby, used as an alternative place for teaching and learning. Inside, there are settings of simulating real-work facilities such as the ticket service counter, check-in counter, security inspection machine, aircraft cabin. On the shelf, various aeroplane models are showcased.

CAS is located near a landmark building in the city. The sense of city modernity and busy community service promotes the local developing of vocational education.

## 2.2 Time

The major of civil aviation service in CAS has been established since 2012. Students in the major are required to have a short-term intern program for two to four weeks each semester in some of the city commute stations. During this period, the students offer information service or check-in assistance for local or international passengers. Most of the school time are focused on classroom teaching and learning practice. Since English communicative competence is increasingly required as part of service skills for the majors, the English class proportion has been increased in the whole curriculum design. 80mins' classroom teaching and learning is allocated twice a week for each class.

## 2.3 People

The teacher-students interrelationship is demonstrated by Holliday (1994) as "socio-psychological dynamics within the classroom." (1994: 14). That influences on classroom practice and methodology implementation.

In terms of teacher-student rapports, there are few "pushing teacher" and "pressed students" in CAS, since an upgraded academic diploma is not compulsory for every college student. Upon graduation, students have choices for either job-hunting or having further education. The possible tension caused by exam-orientation is alleviated. Teachers and students are connected more frequent and equal by the use of "we-chat" APP, a technological catalyst for rapport communication.

However, it seems a challenge for teachers to have self-satisfactory EFL teaching in class. According to the teachers' reflection, one of their common challenges lies in the student's insufficient motivation and low language proficiency. As one of the teacher mentions, "Even if I try interactive activities, how can I activate some students who bow their heads sleeping?"

The teachers complain in reluctance but expect with hopes for efficient classroom practice. For effective teaching, the teachers may ask each other for sharing any innovative in-class activities.

In terms of efficient classroom practice, Deng & Carless (2009) mention teachers' choice as one of the crucial influences for conducting effective teaching and learning activities. Thus, teachers' choice and classroom practice within CAS contextual constraints is worth being concerned for digging out if proper teaching methodologies, especially CLT, could be contextually effective in EFL teaching.

## 3. Theoretical framework

Larsen-freeman & Anderson (2011) propose that teaching techniques and principles are "coherent set" (ibid: 23). A methodology comprises classroom practice and its underlying thoughts. That reflects teachers' and learners' "thought-in-action links" (ibid: 21). Thus, when investigating the EFL teaching methodology, what participants do and what they think should be carefully analyzed.

Larsen-freeman & Anderson (2011) pose 10 questions as a framework to probe into CLT principles upon class observations. The questions are also adopted in analyzing various methodologies like GTM, ALM, TBLT, due to its comprehensiveness and in-depth perspective. In this part, I adopt these 10 questions as a framework to look into the thoughts underneath the classroom practice in CAS. One class observation is conducted to investigate the teachers' teaching practice. Though it is not generalizable, teaching features or principles can be revealed within the specific CAS teaching and learning context.

## 4. Methodology

Classroom observation helps in "entering the field and foreshadowing the problems" (Heigham and Croker, 2009:169) of how EFL teaching is conducted in CAS. I visited one classroom practice with prior consent from the teacher and students. The observed classroom is to help the major beginners handle dialogues on ticket service. An 80mins' classroom practice is observed. I sat at the back corner of the classroom, making the video shot and field notes. Details such as timing, classroom size, layout were noted down to discover the teaching contexts. Also, I highlighted the moments that worth further exploring in the margin.

## 5. Finding

In this part, I answer the ten questions(Larsen-freeman & Anderson, 2011), probing into the teacher's undergoing ideas or possible reasons for the teaching practice of the observed classroom.

### 5.1 What are the goals for teachers who use this method?

The goal is to enable the students to communicate for service, especially in information exchange effectively. To do this, the teacher aims at enlarge the students' language input and improve their capacity in information exchange for better communication.

### 5.2 What is the role of the teachers? What is the role of the students?

The teacher is an organizer and leader, who keeps the pace and designs the activities in teaching and learning. The teacher involves the students in group work and monitors their performance, and also acts as a supervisor of classroom discipline.

The students are cooperators who follow the instructions and work with peers. They are learners of collectivism. Besides, They're competitors in learning as they value the group scores assessed according to their performance.

5.3 What are some characteristics of some teaching/learning process?

The teacher designs role-play, pair-work, problem-solving and game-playing for communicative practice. That seems partially in line with communicative language teaching. However, both role-play and dialogues are not based on authentic situations and information gap. In problem-solving, students are offered with substituted information. That's similar to teaching with "display questions" (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson 2013:162) in the methodology of audiolingualism. Also, dialogue memorizing, repetition drills in pairs and whole class are encouraged. Game-playing is to activate the atmosphere and emphasize collectivism for group competition.

5.4 What is the nature of student-teacher interaction? What is the nature of students-students interaction?

In teacher-student interaction, the teacher takes the leading role, giving instruction as the students follow. In peer interaction, students are partners. They cooperate in learning for collectivist group honour.

5.5 How are the feelings of the students dealt with?

Most students could be motivated by group competition, dialogue presentation et al. They enjoy the listening and speaking activities in various forms. However, not everyone is involved. Some are absent-minded or bow their heads sleeping, possibly due to their insufficient interest and proficiency. Their individuality and interpersonal communication are not salient.

5.6 How is the language viewed? How is culture viewed?

Language is of communicative purpose in the real workplace of civil aviation service, such as at the airport and in the cabin. Culture is usually concerned with the corporation or industry of civil aviation service.

5.7 What areas of language are emphasized? What language skills are emphasized?

Communication for "trans-actional meanings" (ibid: 101) is focused. That is, the instrumental purpose of language is salient in teaching and learning. Students' listening and speaking skills are trained for exchanging information with others. Also, vocabulary input is focused in teaching. Reading and writing are not explicitly emphasized in the classroom practice.

5.8 What is the role of students' native language?

English is encouraged to be used. The students practice dialogues in English but communicate in their native language. As the teacher and students share the same native language, they sometimes speak the native language to get instructions across for everyone.

5.9 How is the evaluation accomplished?

Individual evaluation is not restricted to the summative assessment through exam. The teacher assesses students' listening and speaking skills through recitation and dialogue-making for communicative competence.

5.10 How does the teacher respond to students errors?

The students' pronunciation are corrected during their in-class presentations. Some of the mistakes of the students' speaking are tolerant as long as the vital information is comprehensibly conveyed in dialogues.

## 6. Discussion

In this part, challenges and opportunities of implementing and developing proper teaching methodologies in line with the CAS contextual constraints are elaborated.

### 6.1 Challenges

There is a disparity between teachers' expectation to improve the students' communicative competence and real classroom teaching and learning outcome in CAS. Two aspects are inferred to bring about the disparity, i.e. the teachers' hybrid methodologies with low communicativeness and possibly their lack of meta-cognition of proper teaching methodologies.

#### 6.1.1 Teachers' lack of concern of communicativeness

The teachers intend to improve students' communicative competence. Their teaching methodologies remain rigid in classroom practice. As Hu (2005b) indicated, methodology implementation and contextual influences can be detected through classroom instructions. In the observed classroom, techniques relating to ALM such as repetition, memorizing are used for language input. Besides, techniques connecting to CLT such as role-play, problem-solving are adapted as activities. However, with low communicativeness (also see Deng & Carless, 2009). Dornyei suggests that "learners' communicative competence develops automatically through their active participation in meaningful communicative tasks" (2013: 163). However, the authenticity and practicality of the in-class communicative tasks are not distinctively concerned by the teachers.

#### 6.1.2 Teachers' lack of meta-cognition of proper teaching methodologies

In CAS, the teachers have insufficient meta-cognition of teaching methodologies. Communicative language teaching, for example, is rarely considered to be an effective choice to reach their objectives. The current classroom practice is more like a rigid pattern penetrated through years. As one teacher mentioned, "If I try one activity that seems effective, I would prefer to use it frequently." The rigid practice within experience leads to a "perpetuation and consolidation of existing school culture" (Humphries & Burns, 2015: 241). That results in challenges of changing classroom atmosphere and adopting new teaching techniques. The teachers' meta-cognition of developing proper teaching methodologies are crucial in improving students' communicative capacity.

### 6.2 Opportunities & Innovations

Seeking for innovations in EFL teaching among majors of civil aviation service within CAS, I emphasize both accommodating to and

taking advantages of the context for improving students' communicative competence. Hu proposes "ecological perspective" (2005b:654) for curriculum innovation, emphasizing context to be prior concerned. Similarly, Bax (2003) suggests that knowing the influence of context comes before simply adopting the methodology. In CAS, developing proper teaching methodologies such as Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is possible and feasible.

#### 6.2.1 Accommodating to the specific context: CLT is possible.

Alexander & He (1997) contend that drills and patterns would be effective for EFL learning. In the observed classroom practice, the implementation of audiolingualism teaching methodology partially accords with the students' average language proficiency. Teachers prefer ALM for its direct and explicit manifestation. However, CLT could be more practically implemented. As cited in Hu (2005a), Kumaravadivelu (1994) indicates that methodologies can be flexibly integrated or adapted to accommodate to specific contexts to bring out the best learning outcome from learners. CLT helps to improve the students' communicative competence.

#### 6.2.2 Innovations within context: CLT is feasible.

In terms of people within the context, developing teachers' metacognition of teaching methodology, especially of CLT principles and techniques, promotes the contextual CLT implementation.

As direct classroom practitioner, teachers are willing to make change for pedagogical innovation. The more people understand a new idea in a particular context, the more attitude and behaviour changes can be made. (Wedell & Malderez, 2013). Hu (2005a) proposes that teachers' options in classroom instruction can be broadened with an understanding of a methodology.

With understanding and confidence in CLT, teachers may think of many contextualized techniques for classroom communicativeness. That helps to change the classroom atmosphere and could positively influence students' language proficiency and communicative competence.

Meanwhile, looking into places within the context of CAS, using the training centre could be catalyst for proper CLT implementation.

"Creating a context resembling authentic communication is one of the major aims of CLT" (Gatajda, 2017:24). That goes along with the teachers' objectives of developing the students' communicative competence for vocational education. The training centre in CAS is designed for "real work" simulation. "Place" for EFL teaching can be transferred from the traditional classroom to the training centre, within which authentic facilities are offered and working-place-simulated communicative activities realized. In this way, the students could be probably motivated by sense of professionalism in language learning.

## 7. Conclusion

This paper focuses on the EFL teaching context and methodology for civil aviation service majors in CAS college. With the contextual constraints and current classroom practice observed, proper teaching methodologies could be developed and implemented. Specifically, Communicative Language Teaching is ecologically feasible in CAS to improve students' communicative competence for vocational education. Teachers should contemplate on contextualized CLT implementation. Although the argument may not be generalizable to other cases, it implies the possible issues to be concerned about, i.e. interaction between teaching contexts and approaches. The argument is not innovative as numerous research studies have elaborated that. However, it is meaningful pinpointing EFL teaching for CAS civil aviation service majors. It's hopeful that this paper would contribute to study in other similar contexts in EFL teaching and promote further research.

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