Classroom Observations at a Rural Chinese University from a European Perspective

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questions:

- what is a “normal” Chinese university today (outside of world cities, far “beyond” Fudan or Tongji University in Shanghai)?
- what is “surprising” in the (BA English) classroom from an European ELT student perspective?
- how can we (as Europeans coming from a certain learning and teaching tradition) react appropriately, politely, effectively?
- is there one way of language processing because we all have the same brain structures? or are we tuned into personal learning habits, strategies and general “advice is impossible”?
- what would advice to individual Chinese students, teachers look like? and which topics should be taught and discussed in an ELT summer school for “normal” “rural” Chinese university teachers?
1 Teaching Materials

- relatively old, occasionally reprinted
- spelling and grammar mistakes (also ppts)
- explanations, notes and translations in Chinese in textbooks (e.g. British & American Culture)
1 Teaching Materials

eexample pronunciation class:

- 2 conflicting phonetic sets confuse students (IPA vs. American native speaker: lengthening symbols, stress indication after syllable, digraphs)

- phonemes taught in alphabetical order, not in production groups (front vowels, liquids)

- emphasis should be on contrasts between Chinese and English
1 Teaching Materials

*Inside Out – Advanced* (Macmillan) book series comprehensible, learner-friendly and well-written (e.g. hedges)

- encourage students to use books in library
- include other teaching materials, such as newspaper articles, films, songs
- use additional materials ??
- books have 16 detailed units with 4 skills integrated
2 Learning/Teaching Environment

use of media:

→ either screen or blackboard
→ only few possibilities of combining ppt + notes on the blackboard
2 Learning/Teaching Environment

- classes:
  - large
  - necessary to reach students in last rows
  - unsuitable facilities
    - small booths → no space for writing
    - separations between booths highly influences clear listening and classroom interaction

- repeat in chorus
2 Learning/Teaching Environment

- **time pressure/management:**
  - individual feedback
  - wrap-up, summary/outlook

- **additional teaching material:**
  - PowerPoint presentations
  - sound samples for pronunciation
  - songs, games, etc.
3 Cultural Adaptation

“lingua franca instead of California”

“A lingua franca (originally Italian for "Frankish language" - see etymology below) is a language systematically used to communicate between persons not sharing a mother tongue, in particular when it is a third language, distinct from both persons' mother tongues. This can also be referred to as working language or bridge language.” (wikipedia 30/09/2010)

→ more examples from an African, Indian, European perspective
3 Cultural Adaptation

culture specific peculiarities

- e.g. lexicon: *public schools*
- explicit: *fee paying schools*
  - not only easier
  - taking into account that there are no fluent (native) speakers

- e.g. pragmatics (politeness):
  *Would you mind opening the window?*
  explicit: *Please open the window.*
4 Surprising Learning Habits

students:

- like to speak in chorus
- are shy, not really talkative (also the case in Germany)
- ask no questions
- accept everything the teacher says
4 Surprising Learning Habits

students:
- wait for teacher to repeat in Chinese
- use only Chinese to communicate with each other in class
- use a bilingual dictionary instead of a monolingual dictionary (e.g. cell phone dictionaries)

→ teachers should encourage students to check words in context (syntax codes, sample sentences)
4 Surprising Learning Habits

students:

■ are usually well-prepared (homework)
■ help each other, ask/look around for help → only in Chinese
■ read out answers from books instead of using their own words
5 Surprising Teaching Habits

- more Chinese in the classroom than English in Germany: teachers perceive translation as the last resort
- important that teachers use only English
- use synonyms, rephrase, examples
5 Surprising Teaching Habits

teachers:
- give only short instructions and explanations, and leave not enough reaction time
- are too focused on books → classes seemed more like lectures, but also very interactive classes
6 Methodology

- In order to give advice, we need to know what exams look like.
- Only observed one lesson each.
- Same patterns in every class:
  - Focus on text work.
  - Little student-teacher interaction.
  - Students in last rows not integrated.
  - Little time for practising.
6 Methodology

- no feedback for students
- to improve: all 4 skills (listening, speaking, writing and reading) have to be taught and practised
7 Linguistic Background Support

- many unused books are in the library
- many good examples in the Macmillan *Inside Out* series

BUT linguistic terminology is not for 1st year students, teachers have to “translate”:
- synonym = same meaning
- conceptualised = imagined as
- hedging = face-saving strategy
7.1 Lexicology

paradigmatic vs. syntagmatic relationships
(exchange) (combine)

some lexicology is in text processing systems:
- synonyms
- antonyms
- collocates??
- semantic prosody? (*rot, cause*)

7.2 Cognitive Linguistics

Language does not reflect reality, but how a speaker/writer conceptualises reality (e.g. information, gold nuggets/dust)

Conceptualisations of prepositional meanings:
- Cognitive basis/paths: local → temporal → metaphorical
Explaining prepositional choices

- *at* is conceptualised as a point
- *in* is conceptualised as space with 3 dimensions
- *on* is conceptualised as space with 2 dimensions

E.g. *at vs. in the stadium*
*in the street vs. on the road*
*in a car vs. on a bus*
Conclusion: more questions

- with whom can we discuss these observations?
  - the teachers involved were keen to get our perspective (even advice) but we hesitate
  - PhD students at Chinese University of Hong Kong (even from Mainland China) were not sure either how “normal” our observations and interpretations were?

- can we collaborate on an equal level of partners?
  - German MA students make errors (“students which”), not only informal language adaptations (“how did it taste?” sense of “what did it taste like”?)) that can be accepted as *lingua franca* English (even when it is not traditional Standard English)
  - Chinese university teachers make other errors and adaptations, but are we all aware of these in the same way?

- which of these questions can be answered through further discussion, through more participatory observation or through more intensive research - in a collaborative project?

and the initial questions are still not answered