A Study of the Views of EFL University English-Major Students and Native English-Speaking Teachers towards Conversation Classes in Taiwan

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study is to investigate native English-speaking teachers' teaching beliefs and practices, whether their beliefs and practices match students' needs and expectations in conversation class. Subjects of the study were 100 English major students from a private science/technology university in southern Taiwan. A survey was filled out by these subjects to investigate their needs and expectations in conversation class. Five native English-speaking teachers from the same department were interviewed for their teaching beliefs and practices in a conversation class.

The results of the study indicated that the native English-speaking teachers all adopted communicative language teaching (CLT). All the teachers very seldom corrected students' mistakes while they were speaking. They believed if they corrected students' mistakes too often that would be provoking anxiety to students and students would stop talking. EFL students believed that teachers should correct students' grammatical mistakes and mispronunciation in class as the immediate correction helps them learn. The students in the study preferred to have "individual talk with teacher", and "correcting students' pronunciation" as effective activities in a conversation class.

Key words: English conversation class　native English-speaking teachers　communicative language teaching (CLT).

Introduction

Since the 1970s', there has been a growing interest in communicative language teaching (CLT) both is second and in foreign language contexts (Breen and Candlin, 1980; Canale and Sawin, 1980; Savignon, 1997). By definition, CLT shift the focus from the teachers to students who must have the opportunity to take part in meaningful communicative interaction in order to respond to communicative needs. CLT also emphasizes on authentic language input, real-life situations of language practices and creative generation of language output. It needs a language environment to provide authentic input and requires opportunity for the students to produce the language output in a real life way. It also implies the employment of highly qualified teachers to manage the creative classroom.

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners often lack access to native speakers models for their linguistic input and to actual samples from everyday social interaction. Native English-speaking teachers (NESTs) can provide authentic linguistic input, intonation, pronunciation and communicative models for real-life situations. They can also create an authentic language environment for students. Average people believe that NESTs seem to be more qualified teachers for CLT method. For the past few years, more and more NESTs were employed to teach conversation classes at the tertiary level education. The main intentions of hiring NESTs are to offer authentic linguistic input, communicative models for everyday real-life situations, and to develop communicative competence for EFL students in Taiwan.

While many studies report on teachers' perceptions in implementing communicative language teaching, few studies have looked at learner attitudes and perception with respect to classroom practice. No study has explored teachers' beliefs and students' expectation toward conversation class. The purposes of the study are to investigate the teaching beliefs and practices of NESTs and the expectations of EFL students toward conversation class. The study will attempt to answer the following research questions:

1. What are NESTs teaching beliefs and principles toward conversation class? How do NESTs translate their beliefs and principles into the implementation of the conversation class?

2. What are EFL English-major students' expectations toward conversation classes at a private science/technology university in Taiwan?

3. Do NESTs teaching practices match EFL English-major students' expectations in a conversation class? What are the similarities? What are the discrepancies?

Literature Review

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) has been regarded as the major innovation of the language teaching method since the mid-seventies (Hymes, 1971; Jakobovits, 1970; Savingon, 1972). Even though CLT has been found to be successful in ESL context, its success in EFL context has still remained a controversial issue (Anderson, 1993; Sun & Cheng, 2000). The reason why CLT has been regarded an innovation in language teaching is that it focuses on the development of learners' communicative competence, such as their ability to use linguistic knowledge appropriately in everyday real-life situations (Hymes, 1979). By definition, CLT shift the focus from the teachers to students who must have the opportunity to take part in meaningful communicative interaction in order to respond to

communicative needs. CLT also emphasizes on authentic language input, real-life situations of language practices and creative generation of language output. It needs a language environment to provide authentic input and requires opportunity for the students to produce the language output in a real life way. It also implies the employment of highly qualified teachers to manage the creative classroom. CLT requires a considerable amount of exposure to target language. It also requires a learner-centered, communication-oriented language teaching based on learners' needs in a supportive and non-threatening classroom environment. The learners are involved in activities which offer them real situations and purposes to communicate (Richards& Rodgers, 1986; Harmer, 1991).

Richardson (1996) argues that beliefs refer to psychologically held understandings, premises, or propositions about the world that are felt to be true. Richards and Lockhart (1996) indicate that teachers' knowledge and beliefs provide the basic framework which guides the teachers' actions in class. In other words, teachers' actions and teaching practices in classrooms reflect their knowledge and beliefs. Pajares (1992) went steps further and concluded that teachers' beliefs had a greater influence than teachers' knowledge on their lesson planning, decision-making, and classroom practices. Teachers often come to class with their own values and attitudes about learning and teaching that shape their language teaching behaviors and teaching styles (Gayle, 1979; Johnson, 1995; Savignon, 1976).

Research Methods
1.Subjects

A total of 100 students from the two-year system program participated in this study. Fifty-five of them were senior students, and the other forty-five students were junior students. There were ninety

female students and ten male students. They aged from 21 to 30 years old. All of them had studied the English language for more than ten years.

There were six full-time NESTs in the Applied English Department when the study was conducted. One of them was unwilling to participate in the study. Five out of the six full-time NESTs were interviewed for the study. The five NESTs all had a master's degree and majored in different academic fields such as Linguistics, Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) and Literature. Three of them were British and the other two were Americans. There were four male teachers and one female teacher. The length of their teaching experiences ranged from two years to eleven years in Taiwan and various countries (such as Japan, Korea, United States, and United Kingdom).

2.Instruments

A total of 33-item survey was designed and developed by the researcher based upon extensive literature review and informal interviews of several students. The purposes of the survey were to elicit responses from EFL English-major students regarding their motivations and expectations for attending conversation classes, their perceptions of helpful activities in conversation classes, the selection of themes and topics in conversation classes, their strategies for improving their communicative competence. The survey was distributed to the participants who had taken at least one semester of conversation classes under the instruction of those NESTs.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect data from the five NESTs. Each interview lasted from 30 minutes to 45 minutes. The interview questions covered the areas of NESTs' teaching principles and beliefs toward conversation classes, their selections of teaching materials and

topics, their teaching practices, their perceptions of helpful activities for conversation classes, and their suggestions for students to improve their speaking skill..

Data analysis

The data collected from students' surveys would be entered into a spreadsheet. The data will be analyzed with Microsoft Excel. The results will be presented in charts.

The answers to interview questions from five NESTs was compiled and categorized, respectively. The researcher compared and contrasted those answers in terms of teaching principles, beliefs, teaching practices, the use of teaching materials, and course expectations.

Results and Discussion

This section will discuss the results of the students' survey, which consists of six areas: 1. motivations for students to attend a conversation class, 2. skills to learn in a conversation class, 3. important factors when they speak English, 4. students' perceptions about effective activities for a conversation class, 5. selection of topics and/or themes, 6. effective strategies to improve speaking skill.

1. Motivations for students to attend a conversation class

The students shared some motivations to attend a conversation class. For example, most (87%) students agreed that their motivation to attend a conversation class was mainly because they wanted to communicate with foreigners. In addition, three-quarters (75%) of the students believed that attending a conversation class could help they get a job. More than two-thirds (70%) of the students indicate that attending a conversation class could help them understand the lifestyles and cultures of foreigners. However, the participants had a different motivation. More than half (53%) of the participants agreed that they could get to know more foreigners after they took a conversation class, whereas 38% were neutral and 7% disagreed.

Table 1. Percentages of students' responses to motivations for attending a conversation class (N=100)

	SA/A	Neither A nor D	D/SD
1. Finding a job	75%(75)	8%(8)	9%(9)
2. Getting to know more foreign friends	53%(53)	38%(38)	9%(9)
3. Graduation requirement	56%(56)	27%(27)	6%(6)
4.Understanding foreigners' lifestyles and cultures	70%(70)	27%(27)	2%(2)
5. Communicating with Foreigners	87%(87)	11%(11)	1%(1)

SA= Strongly Agree ; A= Agree ; D= Disagree ; SD= Strongly Disagree

Some of the NESTs mentioned that they have heard that English conversation ability is the key to find a good job. However, teacher A asserted that attending a conversation class could not ensure their conversation ability. Instead, only if students are active and willing to open their mouth, conversation class then could be helpful.

2. What to learn from a conversation class

The results of this section indicated that the majority (88%) of the students wanted to learn standard pronunciation in a conversation class. More than three-quarters (80%) of the students revealed that they wanted to learn to detect different English accents in a conversation class. Almost two-thirds (65%) of the participants wanted to learn to speak with an English accent in a conversation class.

Table 2. Percentages of students' responses to what to learn from a conversation class (N=100)

	SA/A	Neither A nor D	D/SD
1. English grammar	32%(32)	53%(53)	14%(14)
2. Pronunciation	88%(88)	11%(11)	1%(1)
3. Detecting different English accents	80%(80)	18%(18)	2%(2)
4. Speaking with an accent	65%(65)	28%(28)	7%(7)

SA= Strongly Agree ; A= Agree ; D= Disagree ; SD= Strongly Disagree

Regarding pronunciation, every teacher interviewed in the study agreed that pronunciation was important to some extent. Teacher E suggested that students should model clear pronunciation. Teacher C indicated that pronunciation is important but perfect pronunciation is meaningless.

All the teachers had totally different opinions about learning to speak with a standard British/American accent. None of the teachers believed that accents were important. All the teachers asserted that everyone should have his own distinct accent. Even native speakers have their different accents as well. Teacher B said accent is not so much we can do about it, except through boring practice. Teacher D mentioned that our accents did not need to be the same or similar but just comprehensible. Additionally, he did not like Taiwanese speak with American accent, he would prefer to hear a Taiwanese accent.

3. The important factors during an English conversation

The results of this section demonstrated that Chinese students' emphasis on pronunciation, with a majority (89%) of students believed they should focus on pronunciation, and 73% of the students indicated that intonation, pitch, and rhythm were important when having an English conversation. Almost three-quarters (72%) of the students expressed their hope of using more difficult words when having a conversation. Regarding the issue of fluency vs. accuracy, more than two-thirds (69%) of the students agreed that fluency was more important than accuracy. However, the other statement—"accuracy is more important than fluency", only 19% of the students agreed with the statement. There were 65% of the students had a neutral attitude toward the statement, and 16% of the students rejected the statement. It was probably the

students believed that accuracy was also very important in their mind.

Table 3. Percentages of students' responses to the important factors during an English conversation (N=100)

	SA/A	Neither A nor D	D/SD
1. Fluency is more important than accuracy	69%(69)	21%(21)	10%(10)
2. Accuracy is more important than fluency	19%(19)	64%(64)	17%(17)
3. Pronunciation	87%(87)	13%(13)	0%(0)
4. Intonation and rhythm	33%(33)	53%(53)	14%(14)
5. Using more difficult words	52%(52)	21%(21)	7%(7)

SA= Strongly Agree ; A= Agree ; D= Disagree ; SD= Strongly Disagree

Most teachers proposed that fluency was more important than accuracy. Teachers C said that fluency is much more valuable than accuracy. However, these teachers did not mean that accuracy was not necessary. Instead, they interpreted that after speaking fluently, students then would approach accuracy gradually. Teacher A mentioned accuracy slowly come with practice of making mistakes. Teacher E viewed that if students are in advance class, he would emphasize accuracy while it is not appropriate to emphasize accuracy if learners are at the medium or inter-medium level.

Some teachers provide reasons to clarify why they did not pay much attention to accuracy. Teacher B indicated that accuracy requires a lot of attention. It would hinder the speakers in his flowing words. Teacher C was against the accuracy as he did not want to stop learners from expressing their opinion.

4. The effective in-class activities for a conversation class

The students' perceptions of most effective in-class activities, according to the results of the survey, were individual talk with teacher (88%), teachers' correction of students' pronunciation (82%). Almost three-quarters (73%) of the students indicated that oral presentation was an effective in-class activity. More than half of the students expressed that role play (with 65%), and correcting students' grammatical mistakes (with 63%), were the other two effective in-class activities.

However, the students had a different opinion about two of the effective in-class activities proposed by CLT experts and specialists. Pair discussion activity had only less than half of the students (46%) and groups discussion activity had only (48%) of the students agreed that they were effective in-class activities in a conversation class. Regarding the activity of pair discussion, 42% of the students were neutral and 9%

Disagreed, 3% of the students strongly disagreed that the pair discussion was effective.　On the activity of group discussion activity, 39% of the students were neutral, 11% disagreed, and 2% strongly disagreed that was an effective activity in a conversation class. The possible reason for this result is because students were using the Chinese language all the time during the process of the two activities.

Table 4. Percentages of students' responses to the effective in-class activities for a conversation class (N=100)

	SA/A	Neither A nor D	D/SD
1. Role play	65%(65)	30%(30)	5%(5)
2. Group discussion	48%(48)	39%(39)	13%(13)
3. Pair discussion	46%(46)	42%(42)	12%(12)
4. Written assignment	6%(6)	46%(46)	48%(48)
5. Oral presentation	73%(73)	24%(24)	3%(3)
6. Individual talk with teacher	88%(88)	11%(11)	1%(1)
7. Correcting students' pronunciation	82%(82)	18%(18)	0%(0)
8. Correcting grammar	63%(63)	30%(30)	7%(7)

SA= Strongly Agree ; A= Agree ; D= Disagree ; SD= Strongly Disagree

The teachers had totally different teaching beliefs about the effective in-class activities.　All of the teachers were against correcting students' both grammatical and pronunciation mistakes in class. Teacher A and Teacher B shared the same teaching belief.　Both of them said that " If I keep stopping you and breaking may mess up your conversation", and "If　you have a personal particular problem, say a pronunciation problem, I would not tell the whole class or watch out for this word because you are the only one students mispronounces this word.　It would hurt your feeling".　The effective in-class activities, according to the teachers, were role play, describing pictures and playing games.　These activities were referred by some of the teachers that they were good activities in a conversation class.

5. The selection of topics (or themes) in a conversation class

When it comes to choosing the topics in class, a majority of the students (96%) expressed that the topics should be about daily life.　Almost the same number of students (93%) indicated that the selection lf the topics should base on their interests.　82% of the students wanted the topics to be either British or American culture.

Table 5. Percentages of students' responses to selection of topics (or themes) in a conversation class

(N=100)

	SA/A	Neither A nor D	D/SD
1. Students' interests	93%(93)	7%(7)	0%(0)
2. Teachers' preferences	33%(33)	53%(53)	14%(14)
3. Taiwan culture	38%(38)	45%(45)	17%(17)
4. British/American culture	82%(82)	16%(16)	2%(2)
5. Daily life's expressions	96%(96)	4%(4)	0%(0)

SA= Strongly Agree ; A= Agree ; D= Disagree ; SD= Strongly Disagree

The teachers had a different belief about the selection of topic in a class. Teacher A said that "You would kind of know what is possible to teach them, maybe it's what they should be learning", "teaching what students should learn is much important. Teacher D said that "The topics-offering is a combination between students' interests and teachers' thoughts".

6. Effective Strategies for Students to Improve Their Speaking

What were the effective strategies for students to improve their speaking skill? The results indicated that the students had a preference of five learning strategies. "Speaking more" (94%) was the most popular belief that the students shared. The next strategy was "watching English TV programs" (92%). The third strategy was "memorizing vocabulary" (83%). The other two strategies shared by most of the students were "reading extensively" (82%), and "listening to English songs" (82%).

Table 6. Percentages of students' responses to effective strategies for students to improve their speaking

(N=100)

	SA/A	Neither A nor D	D/SD
1. Extensive reading	82%(82)	15%(15)	3%(3)
2. Listening to English songs	80%(80)	15%(15)	5%(5)
3. Memorizing words	83%(83)	16%(16)	1%(1)
4. Listening to tapes	67%(67)	31%(31)	2%(2)
5. Watching English TV programs	92%(92)	8%(8)	0%(0)
6. Speaking more English	94%(94)	6%(6)	0%(0)

SA= Strongly Agree ; A= Agree ; D= Disagree ; SD= Strongly Disagree

he teachers had some suggestions for students to improve their speaking skill. Two of the teachers asserted that speaking and listening is crucial for speaking ability. Teacher B said "Listening is crucial. If you do not listen, how you can produce the sounds". Teacher E mentioned that "I think listening skill is closely connecting to speaking skill". All the teachers believed the most useful strategy for improving speaking skill is to engage in an English thinking atmosphere. Students should always consider everything in English. Teacher C made a statement, "You can try to thing in English as often as possible, everything I would look at, I would try to say it in English". To live in a foreign country or to visit somewhere foreigners often go both are good ways to get exposed in English environment.

Conclusion

The teachers in the study, they all adopted communicative language teaching (CLT). Giving students a topic to discuss is necessary in a conversation class. Moreover, these teachers taught students in accordance with their levels. All the teachers very seldom corrected students' mistakes while they were speaking. They believed if they corrected students' mistakes too often that would be provoking anxiety to them and they would stop talking. Students would be able to self-correct if they continue to use the language.

Based on the results of the study, the researcher found that there were a few similarities between the instructors' teaching principles and students' expectations. In terms of important factors in a conversation, students and teachers agreed that fluency was more important than accuracy. In terms of effective strategies to improve speaking skill, teachers' suggestions were to develop listening and speaking skills together, to engage in an English thinking atmosphere all the time. Students agreed

and attempted to engage in several helpful activities to improve their speaking skill. The results of the study indicated some discrepancies between teachers and students. In terms of correcting mistakes and mispronunciation is class, teachers and students had different opinions. Students believed that teachers should correct students' grammatical mistakes and mispronunciation in class as the immediate correction helps them learn, whereas teachers in general chose not to interrupt students while they were talking to prevent students from being quiet because of the concerns of making any mistakes. In terms of effective activities for a conversation class, students and teachers had different ideas. The students in the study preferred "individual talk with teacher", and "correcting students' pronunciation". NESTs employed group discussion, which they believed to be effective and helpful, most of the time in a conversation class.

Recommendation

Based on the findings of the study, the researcher has a few proposals, which are aimed to provide students and teachers some guidelines as to choose English conversation courses as well as to adjust teaching approaches and course design. These proposals are listed as follows.

1. **Varying teaching materials**

   Teaching materials should include topics that are related to students' daily-live expression, match students' interests, and help students understand more about both the American and British cultures. Teachers should bring fresh and interesting topics to create students' learning desires. Besides, teaching materials may also include Taiwan culture and foreign cultures in order to broaden students' knowledge.

2. **Diversified teaching approaches and activities**

   Most teachers used group discussion in

conversation classes but the researcher would recommend that providing different activities, such as "role play" and "oral presentation" would enhance students' learning interests. Students like the activities that were challenging and stimulations. They will become weary of having fixed teaching methods. Therefore, teachers should vary their lessons and activities to make plentiful teachings.

3. **Clarifying the meaningless value of "standard" English pronunciation.**

All the teachers had totally different opinions about learning to speak with a standard British/American accent. None of the teachers believed that accents were important. All the teachers asserted that everyone should have his own distinct accent. Even native speakers have their different accents as well. NESTs should clarify the concept of "comprehensible" pronunciation instead of "standard" pronunciation.

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