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# English Language Teaching in Action

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# English Language Teaching in Action

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## Preamble

*In the field of English Language Teaching (ELT), different methods or approaches have been developed to enhance the learning and teaching of English. However, many frontline English language teachers may have difficulty in implementing those methods or approaches they learned in their teacher education programmes. One of the problems they are facing is that the application of ELT theories or concepts in their classroom is never an easy task for them. To this group of teachers, there is always a gap between theory and practice. They tend to believe that teacher education programmes can only provide student-teachers with subject knowledge but not pedagogic knowledge. Because of this, this project aimed to develop a DVD to bridge the gap between subject knowledge and pedagogic knowledge in ELT. Through in-depth in-class discussions of three English lessons conducted by three local English language teachers, it was hoped that student-teachers would be able to put theory to practice by applying their subject knowledge to their teaching practice and to start developing their pedagogic knowledge in the end.*

## Abstract

*To bridge the gap between subject knowledge and pedagogic knowledge, a DVD entitled “English Language Teaching in Action” was produced. The DVD captured three different lessons which focused on three different skill areas, namely grammar, reading and speaking. Through viewing these lessons, interviews with the teachers involved and the commentary given by the ELT expert from the Department of Education Studies, Hong Kong Baptist University (HKBU), and the in-depth in-class discussions, student-teachers could examine some current ELT issues in detail and could think of some effective strategies to tackle the ELT-related problems and to facilitate effective learning and teaching in the English classroom.*

## Keywords

Teaching English, reflection, analysed video material

## Introduction

The courses *EDUC 7391 and 7392 Subject Teaching I & II (English)* are core components of the Postgraduate Diploma in Education Programme offered by the Department of Education Studies. These courses aim at enhancing the effectiveness of student-teachers in teaching English language in local schools. They also foster critical thinking and creativity in curriculum design and implementation within the students' subject area. One of the objectives of the two courses is to train student-teachers how to enhance classroom teaching based on current ELT approaches or methods (For different ELT approaches and methods, see Brown, 2001). To better equip our student-teachers with ELT classroom techniques and tasks, they should be exposed to real-life situations found in Hong Kong English classrooms. A DVD demonstrating the high incidence of related issues or concerns in the English classroom which are puzzling or intriguing to English language teachers in Hong Kong (e.g. using authentic materials in the classroom, see Larimer & Schleicher, 1999) would be a good tool to compensate the limitations of classroom simulations. Through discussing the cases in the DVD, student-teachers could share their ideas among themselves easily and examine in depth the effective method(s) used to tackle pupils' problems in learning English as a second language and to facilitate effective learning and teaching strategies. A total of three lessons (each focused on a particular skill area in ELT, namely grammar, reading or speaking) were produced. Questions to consider, ELT

principles and theoretical background were introduced after the presentation of each lesson. As a result, student-teachers could develop a repertoire of effective classroom strategies for ELT and demonstrate how to apply their subject knowledge gained in *EDUC 7391-2* directly to their daily practice.

## Aims and Objectives

The project aimed at producing a DVD of three English lessons which investigated some current ELT issues found in the Hong Kong context. Each lesson was followed by an interview with the teacher involved and a commentary given by an Associate Professor from the Department of Education Studies, HKBU. With the help of the recording, in-class discussions and follow-up activities were conducted after the student-teachers had viewed the recording. These enabled student-teachers to examine the lessons from different points of view, consolidate their knowledge of effective ELT classroom strategies and practise their methods of monitoring pupils' learning in the English classroom. Through the learning and teaching activities, student-teachers could obtain useful information about the real classroom environment in which they are working. Student-teachers would also have a better idea about their future challenges in the English classroom and they could better prepare for their English lessons. The DVD would help student-teachers enhance learning and teaching in the classroom environment more easily.

The objectives of the project were to let the student-teachers:

- be familiar with contemporary ELT principles and methodology;
- know the role(s) of a teacher when dealing with pupils' problems in learning English;
- be familiar with the learning and teaching strategies in the English classroom; and
- be familiar with the ways of tackling ELT issues in the classroom context.

### **Methodology**

The main theme of the DVD was to capture the current ELT issues found in Hong Kong classrooms. Because of this, a local secondary school was invited to participate in this project. The participating school is an EMI girls' school in Shek Kip Mei. The reason for selecting this school was that the project team would like to focus particularly on ELT issues rather than those of classroom management. There are in total three different lessons in the recording, namely (1) Grammar, (2) Reading and (3) Speaking. Each of the lessons was conducted by a different teacher from the participating school. To capture typical English lessons conducted by local English language teachers in their daily practice, all three lessons were shot on the same day according to the timetable of the participating school.

To better understand the overall design of every single lesson, each lesson

was followed by an interview with the teacher involved. In the interviews, the three teachers involved explained their objectives of the lessons, the strategies and techniques used in the lessons in order to achieve the objectives and the rationales behind the classroom activities conducted in their lessons. Although the participating teachers were able to describe the design of their lessons, they did not focus much on articulating the ELT ideas, concepts or theories applied in their lessons. To bridge the gap between theory and practice, the interview after each lesson was followed by a commentary given by Dr Arthur McNeill from the Department of Education Studies, HKBU. He gave some comments on the ELT principles, strategies and techniques found in each of the lessons based on some relevant ELT theories and concepts.

The three lessons were used in three different tutorial sessions at HKBU. During each session, student-teachers viewed the lesson before they were divided into groups of five and discussed the lesson among themselves to identify the ELT issues found in the lesson and the possible ways to deal with the identified problems. After that, each group had to suggest some possible solutions to the problems. The instructor then gave feedback on the suggested solutions given by each group. After discussion, students viewed the interview and the commentary sections in the recording as consolidation of the tutorial session. Student-teachers were sometimes invited to do role-play to demonstrate how to tackle the ELT issues

found in the recording and peer evaluation of the suggested solutions was encouraged during the tutorial session as follow-up in-class activities.

### Results/Findings

The DVD turned out to be a useful instructional aid for both pre-service student-teachers and in-service teachers who were taking the ELT courses. A questionnaire about the usefulness and convenience of the DVD (see Appendix I) was administered to a total of 65 student-teachers of the two teacher education programmes offered by the Department of Education Studies, HKBU. Thirty-nine respondents from the Double Degree Programme were pre-service student-teachers and the remaining 26 respondents were in-service teachers taking the two-year part-time Postgraduate Diploma in Education Programme. The feedback collected from the questionnaire survey was generally positive and it provided useful information for future revisions of the DVD.

There are altogether 14 items in the questionnaire and they are as follows:

1. *The DVD has helped me to comprehend the subject matter more effectively.*
2. *The DVD has increased my understanding of this academic discipline.*
3. *The DVD has been effective in developing my analytical power and critical thinking.*
4. *The use of the DVD has been helpful in my learning of the course EDUC 7391-2.*

5. *The DVD gives opportunity for me to apply and develop the ideas, concepts and theories learned in this course.*
6. *The content of the DVD has been clearly related to the overall objectives of the course EDUC 7391-2 Subject Teaching (English).*
7. *The content of the DVD has been effective in relating theory to practice.*
8. *The content of DVD is current and relevant to my daily practice.*
9. *The content of the DVD is current or consistent with the contemporary knowledge of English Language Teaching.*
10. *The content of the DVD is well-organised.*
11. *The lesson shown on the DVD is challenging for me.*
12. *The lesson shown on the DVD relates to my everyday experiences.*
13. *The lesson shown on the DVD has been useful to my daily practice.*
14. *The interview shown on the DVD has been helpful in clarifying the subject matter.*

To elicit respondents' opinions regarding the design and the usefulness of the DVD, each of the 14 items was scored on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 "strongly disagree" to 5 "strongly agree".

The results collected from the questionnaire survey are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Means and standard deviations of the Double Degree group and the Part-time PgD in Ed. group in responding to the 14 items of the questionnaire

| Item No. | Double Degree<br>Year-one (N1=20)<br>Mean | SD  | Double Degree<br>Year-three (N2=19)<br>Mean | SD  | Part-time<br>PGDE Year-one<br>(N2=26) Mean | SD   |
|----------|---|-----|---|-----|--|------|
| Q.1      | 4.0                                       | .65 | 3.6   | .68 | 4.2  | .54  |
| Q.2      | 3.8                                       | .72 | 3.7   | .73 | 4.0  | .82  |
| Q.3      | 3.9                                       | .67 | 3.8   | .60 | 3.8  | .69  |
| Q.4      | 4.4                                       | .50 | 3.8   | .71 | 4.1  | .65  |
| Q.5      | 3.9                                       | .79 | 3.3   | .89 | 4.1  | .52  |
| Q.6      | 3.9                                       | .59 | 4.2   | .60 | 4.0  | .77  |
| Q.7      | 3.9                                       | .75 | 3.7   | .65 | 4.1  | .82  |
| Q.8      | 3.8                                       | .70 | 3.8   | .69 | 3.4  | 1.33 |
| Q.9      | 4.1                                       | .60 | 4.0   | .75 | 4.0  | .85  |
| Q.10     | 4.1                                       | .60 | 4.1   | .46 | 4.4  | .58  |
| Q.11     | 4.0                                       | .86 | 3.3   | .73 | 3.5  | 1.24 |
| Q.12     | 3.7                                       | .88 | 3.4   | .90 | 3.3  | 1.12 |
| Q.13     | 4.0                                       | .73 | 3.9   | .74 | 3.7  | 1.04 |
| Q.14     | 3.9                                       | .79 | 4.0   | .67 | 4.1  | .63  |

From the data presented in Table 1, it is concluded that the respondents found the DVD useful in the learning and teaching of the ELT courses.

## Discussion

Since most of the existing supporting teaching materials for ELT courses are contrived or developed by overseas publishers, these materials often fail to show student-teachers the actual ELT issues found in Hong Kong classrooms. Because of this, there is a need for the Department of Education Studies to develop some interactive materials for delivering the subject matter of ELT in order to enhance the quality of learning and teaching.

Real classroom situations in the Hong Kong context should be emphasised in local teacher education programmes. However, the dynamic nature of a classroom makes it difficult for student-teachers to focus on a particular aspect of an English lesson in their in-class discussions. This is because a teacher has to handle too many different things at the same time in the classroom, such as pupils' discipline problems, individual learners' differences, various arrangements of resources, etc. All these complications

have a negative impact on student-teachers' analysis of an English lesson. As a result, the learning pace and outcomes of student-teachers could be greatly affected in this respect. The complicated classroom situations also make student-teachers believe that applying theory to practice only happens in ideal cases. In the end, student-teachers will lose their confidence in dealing with ELT issues in the local context.

With the help of the DVD, student-teachers could identify the ELT problems more easily and single out the incident for discussions more efficiently. In so doing, they could acquire the subject knowledge of ELT more effectively and transfer their subject knowledge to pedagogic knowledge when dealing with ELT issues in the classroom more willingly. At the same time, they could build up their confidence in combating the challenges ahead in their teaching practice.

Some of the pre-service student-teachers found that the DVD had not given them enough opportunities to apply and develop the ideas, concepts and theories learned in their courses. This might be due to the fact that they did not have enough teaching practice in local classrooms and it took time for them to develop their pedagogic knowledge.

Some of the in-service student-teachers found the content of the DVD not relevant to their daily practice. When that group of student-teachers viewed the lesson,

some of them immediately pointed out that they were having students with a very low degree of English proficiency and their teaching had to be very simple. Some of them told me that they had to use Chinese in their English lessons in order to help their pupils understand their teaching. As for the Double Degree student-teachers, they were interested in examining the lessons because they could apply the theories and concepts they had acquired in their English courses. For instance, some of them were eager to analyse the sentence patterns presented by the teacher in the grammar lesson. From their discussion, it was quite obvious that they were aware of the issue regarding the syntactic complexity and the semantic complexity of teacher input in a grammar lesson.

Some of the student-teachers found that the lessons shown in the DVD were not that challenging because they might not face the same situation in their daily practice. To train student-teachers to become reflective practitioners, it is necessary for student-teachers to learn how to explore teaching by developing their ability to look objectively at teaching and reflect critically on what one discovers (Richards & Lockhart, 1994). It seemed that some student-teachers still needed more training before they could make use of the lesson information presented in the DVD to develop a richer conceptualisation of teaching and a better understanding of teaching and learning processes.

Some of the student-teachers found that the lessons shown in the DVD did not relate much to their everyday experiences. Perhaps they thought their pupils would not behave in the same way as those pupils shown in the DVD.

### **Enhancement on Teaching and Learning**

According to the in-class observation conducted by the Principal Investigator in the tutorial sessions, most of the student-teachers found the three lessons relevant to their needs. Some of the student-teachers' responses to the lessons during in-class discussion are as follows:

#### **Lesson 1: Grammar**

Student A : "The examples given by the teacher are rather complicated. I think...the structure is SVA (Subject-Verb-Adjective)..."

Student B : "Is she teaching active and passive voice?"

Instructor : "Not really. Look at the first part of each of the examples given by the teacher. What's it?"

Student C : "It's a clause..."

Student D : "No, it's a phrase..."

Instructor : "What kind of phrase is that?"

Student E : "It's a gerund phrase..."

Instructor : "You mean a gerundive phrase? What about examples (b) and (d) then?"

Instructor : "Could you identify the approach adopted by the teacher?"

Student F : "Deductive approach..."

Student G : "The teacher adopted the P-P-P approach in her teaching. At the presentation stage, she gave four examples of the target patterns and then she asked the students to construct their own sentences as practice. Finally, she asked the students to complete a writing task by using the target patterns at the production stage."

#### **Lesson 2: Reading**

Instructor : "What are the approaches adopted by the teacher in her lesson?"

Student H : "The Bottom-up approach."

Instructor : "How do you know?"

Student H : "The teacher taught some of the lexical words at the pre-reading stage to help students understand the text they're going to read."



Instructor : "Is that the only approach you could identify?"

Student I : "The Top-down approach..."

Instructor : "Could you elaborate a bit?"

Student I : "She asked students some questions about the Olympic Games."

Instructor : "That means..."

Student I : "She activated students' knowledge of the topic to help them comprehend the text."

### **Lesson 3: Speaking**

Instructor : "Have you identified any relevant ELT concepts, principles or techniques in this lesson?"

Student J : "The teacher used authentic materials...that's a song"

Instructor : "What is the literary genre of the song?"

Student K : "Narrative..."

Instructor : "What did the teacher ask students to do after listening to the song?"

Student L : "Group presentation. She asked the students to give a new ending to the story..."

Instructor : "What's the teacher intention?"

Student M: "She wanted the students to respond to the song after they have listened to it."

From the above teacher-student interactions during the tutorial sessions, we may notice that the students not only had a better understanding of the lesson observed, but also consolidated the relevant ELT theories, principles, techniques and strategies after viewing the DVD. More importantly, they gained more confidence when dealing with the ELT problems after viewing the DVD.

### **Limitations/Difficulties**

As all three lessons were not simulations, the project team tried their best to record what exactly happened in Hong Kong classrooms in order to capture the true picture of ELT issues for learning and teaching purposes. This was why the project team did not aim at shooting scripted and rehearsed lessons. This made it extremely difficult for the project team to find appropriate teachers and the right schools for the project. Even though some teachers were willing to take part in the project, their lessons were not suitable for the project since there were far too many discipline problems found in their classrooms. After doing many classroom observations in different schools, the project team could only invite a band-one girls' school to participate in the project. However, the school had to conduct the

External School Review (ESR) soon, so the project team started shooting the lessons four months after the ESR so that the participating teachers could prepare well for the ESR. The project team had to make use of the summer to do the editing of the DVD.

As the DVD captured three lessons in three different skill areas, the Principal Investigator had to use the DVD in his tutorial sessions according to his teaching schedule. That is to say he could only use the grammar lesson when he taught that skill area. To have different groups of student-teachers to help in evaluating the DVD, the Principal Investigator intentionally chose three different groups of student-teachers to participate in the evaluation process (two groups of student-teachers of the Double Degree Programme and one group of the Postgraduate Diploma in Education Programme).

As each tutorial session for the Double Degree student-teachers lasted for 1 hour and 50 minutes, there was not enough time for the class to have an in-depth discussion after the student-teachers had viewed the lesson, the interview and the commentary. This greatly affected the effectiveness of using the DVD to facilitate in-depth discussion in the classroom.

### **Conclusion**

It is believed that the DVD "English Language Teaching in Action" has enhanced the learning and teaching of ELT courses. According to the feedback from the

student-teachers of the Double Degree Programme and part-time Postgraduate Diploma in Education Programme, they benefited a lot from viewing and discussing the three lessons captured in the DVD. They generally found all three lessons very realistic and realised that these lessons revealed some of the ELT issues that they were facing or about to face in local schools. Student-teachers also found the interviews with the teachers involved very helpful because they could check if the teachers involved were able to achieve their lesson objectives by implementing their teaching plans and employing their ELT strategies. With the help of the recording of the lessons and the commentary, not only were the student-teachers given the opportunity to look at some current ELT issues in each of the lessons in detail, but also they could demonstrate a better understanding of the ELT theories, principles, techniques and strategies learned in their courses. After the tutorial sessions, student-teachers gained much confidence in dealing with ELT issues in the classroom setting. They also looked forward to having another DVD of the same kind covering more skill areas in the future.

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### Appendix I: Teaching Materials Evaluation Form

As you may probably know, we are developing a DVD, entitled "English Language Teaching in Action", for learning and teaching EDUC 7391-2 Subject Instruction (English). We request your completion of this questionnaire to help us evaluate the mentioned DVD. The information you and others provide will assist us in our continuing effort to provide better learning and teaching of the subject.

Your answers will be handled in the strictest confidence. Your answers will be tabulated with those of others to determine information needs, usage patterns, content requirements, format preferences and overall quality.

Thank you for your time and assistance.

For each of the items below, please select your choice by filling the circle with a pen/pencil.

Key      1. Strongly disagree      2. Disagree      3. Neutral  
            4. Agree                      5. Strongly agree

| 1                     | 2                     | 3                     | 4                     | 5                     | Items  |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|--|
| <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | 1. The DVD has helped me to comprehend the subject matter more effectively.  |
| <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | 2. The DVD has increased my understanding of this academic discipline.   |
| <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | 3. The DVD has been effective in developing my analytical power and critical thinking.   |
| <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | 4. The use of the DVD has been helpful in my learning of the course EDUC 7391-2.   |
| <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | 5. The DVD gives opportunity for me to apply and develop the ideas, concepts and theories learned in this course.                  |
| <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | 6. The content of the DVD has been clearly related to the overall objectives of the course EDUC 7391-2 Subject Teaching (English). |
| <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | 7. The content of the DVD has been effective in relating theory to practice.   |
| <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | 8. The content of DVD is current and relevant to my daily practice.  |
| <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | 9. The content of the DVD is current or consistent with the contemporary knowledge of English Language Teaching.                   |
| <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | 10. The content of the DVD is well-organised.  |
| <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | 11. The lesson shown on the DVD is challenging for me.   |
| <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | 12. The lesson shown on the DVD relates to my everyday experiences.  |
| <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | 13. The lesson shown on the DVD has been useful to my daily practice.  |
| <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | 14. The interview shown on the DVD has been helpful in clarifying the subject matter.  |

END OF EVALUATION