Rationale and Evaluation of A Lesson Plan

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1. Introduction

It seems that from 1980 to the present, Kumaravadivelu's (1992) post-method pedagogy which emphasizes on principles of particularity, practicality and possibility appears to apply to every specific language teaching context, and it is suggested by Akbari (2008, p. 642) that the origin of post-method refers to eclecticism. Admittedly, eclecticism is likely to take advantage of the benefits of different methodologies, but as Harmer (2007, p. 51) argues, one of the weaknesses of eclecticism could be that the language instruction is prone to become haphazard and unsystematic for lack of an explicit philosophical theory.

In recent years, theorists appear to put emphasis on the idea that learning is a social process, which means that language teaching should not pay attention to grammatical and lexical instruction, but to language functions and meaningful communicative exchanges such as students' negotiation of meaning in second language learning classroom (Harmer, 2007; Johnson, 2008; Nunan, 2004). These arguments are from the methodology of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), and as for those methods that prevail between the early and the mid 20th century including Grammar-translation and Audio-lingual method, CLT makes them less appealing (Harmer, 2007; Hedge, 2000). As Richards and Rodgers (1986) claim, Grammar-translation method emphasizes on the accuracy of grammatical structures while Audio-lingual method considers foreign language learning as a process of habit formation. In contrast, CLT is meaning-focused rather than grammar-focused. The distinguishing feature of CLT may be the priority given to social interaction between students, and such interaction can be viewed as both the method and the end of language teaching (Yang, 2016, p. 194). Yang (2016) further declares that this characteristic is closely related to sociocultural theory (SCT) put forward by Vygotsky, in which social and cultural factors perform an important function in second language learning. In terms of communicative methodologies, Task-based Learning (TBL) that is regarded by Harmer (2007, p. 51) as the "natural extension" of CLT, also needs to be discussed.

The definition of "task" has aroused a heated debate. Nunan (2004, pp. 1-4) compares real-world or target tasks and pedagogical tasks. Target tasks refer to what people do in daily life using language as a tool (Nunan, 2004) while pedagogical tasks are workplans involving students in conveying meaning and sometimes mobilizing a particular grammatical form to achieve an assessable outcome (Ellis, 2003; Nunan, 2004). In the light of these ideas, a task in the language learning setting can be any communicative assignment that teachers give students in class to enable students to learn the target language use and practice it in the "modified real world".

Cognizant of issues above, the methodology used in my lesson plan is TBL. Compared with form-based teaching methods, TBL includes the communicative tasks that are expected to use the target language to complete in a reasonable order rather than a sequence of linguistic items (Willis & Willis, as cited in Carter & Nunan, 2001, p. 173). Some proponents of TBL demonstrate that involved in real language use and communicative tasks, students of foreign language could learn the target language most effectively (Prabhu, 1987; Willis & Willis, 2007). This could be further supported by the statement of Celik (2017) that TBL could bring about language acquisition which can result in long-term memory in learners' brain. In addition, TBL allows students to utilize the full range of language skills and use language unlimitedly (Celik, 2017; Lindsay & Knight, 2006).

Nevertheless, there also exists criticism of TBL. It is indicated by Littlewood (2007, p. 244) that classroom management would become difficult in implementing task-based language teaching (TBLT), and Li (2003, p. 76) points out that many students do not actively take part in communicative group work and they just waste their time in large-size classroom. Moreover, Lee (2005, p. 201) concludes from a study in South Korean that learners tend to depend on their mother tongue instead of the target language to accomplish communicative tasks. Furthermore, Littlewood (2007, p. 245) also claims that tasks in TBL seem to require few demands on language competence and TBLT may be incompatible with the demands of public assessment.

An elaborate explanation of the choice of TBL for my lesson plan will be presented in the rationale section. Before rationalizing and evaluating my lesson plan, the context needs to be introduced first. The contextual background of this lesson plan refers to an upper-intermediate (B2) class for Chinese students aged around 18 years old who are going to immigrate to the United Kingdom next year after graduating from high school. This lesson conducted by an educational organization is targeted at students who aim to prepare themselves for living aboard, so they want to improve their English language competence, particularly their communicative ability. Then this paper will give a rationale and an evaluation of my lesson plan made up of two task cycles, followed by a brief conclusion.

2. Rationale

The reasons for all my decisions made within this lesson plan will be explored in this section. The grounds for choosing TBL are as follows. Firstly, it suits the teaching environment of this lesson. TBL meets the needs of my students who urgently want to improve their communicative ability. Although Hu (2002, p. 36) suggests that teachers of English language teaching (ELT) in China should help learners build the basis for genuine communication and the development of

communication competence ought to be attached great importance to (Ministry of Education, 2003; Wang, 2007; Wang & Lam, 2010), ELT from my experience is still examination-oriented, and instructors rarely spend time developing students' competence to use language in real life. This may be caused by the large number of students in one class and this problem would be avoided since there are only ten learners in my lesson. As Hedge (2000, p. 71) suggests, intended tasks in meaningful settings are likely to help students rehearse language used authentically outside classroom. Secondly, engaging activities in TBL largely promote learners' intrinsic not extrinsic motivation. Nonetheless, due to the relatively uncontrolled learning atmosphere, students may not follow teachers' steps and focus on a different aspect from teachers (Nunan, 2004, p. 15). This relatively small size of class could address this potential problem. Additionally, the small class size and students' plan for immigration also increase learners' motivation. Thirdly, TBL enables students to learn the target language actively, which is considered as the most effective way of language learning by Nunan (2004, p. 36). Active learning means that students construct their personal knowledge instead of teachers' transmission (ibid). Finally, TBL also promotes collaborative work between learners, which could not only develop students' language abilities but also social skills.

This lesson plan follows a framework created by Willis (1996, p. 52) and it involves a task cycle with pre-tasks before and language focus after. Though Nunan (2004) also puts forward a more specific six-step procedure, the former rubric is more appropriate than Nunan's structure since Willis's framework is more simple and feasible in this lesson which integrates listening and reading instruction supplemented by vocabulary teaching. L2 listening is defined by Rubin (1995, p. 7) as a process when listeners attempt to figure out the meaning of what speakers say through interpreting from the audio and/or the video while L2 reading, as Grabe (1991) defines, is a process that requires various skills of learners to achieve multiple outcomes like comprehension and other purposes. Hedge (2000, p. 229) indicates that the development of listening skills is of great importance as the input from listening is crucial in language acquisition while Grabe (1991) opines that reading is likely to be the most significant ability for language learners in academia. It is further emphasized by Chang and Millet (2014, p. 36) that the combination of reading and listening is more effective in language learning than merely listening. Although the assessment of listening skills in China in most cases requires merely the main idea of listening materials that would always be ignored, most of these materials may also perfectly suitable for reading instruction which at the same time could strengthen the process of training listening skills.

Another goal of this lesson is to raise students' awareness of cultural diversity and being a cultural disseminator by teaching traditional culture of Chinese New Year in English language learning class. For this reason, the texts chosen for this lesson plan are the transcripts of six audio clips from a documentary film of British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) about Chinese New Year. Despite that video may be more informative than audio, students are more likely to treat it lazily without enough attention paid to what speakers are actually saying (Harmer, 2007). As a result, only the audio is provided in class. In the previous lesson, students have gained an insight of Christmas culture, so the teaching of Chinese traditions becomes necessary in order to prevent learners' own culture being submerged. One-way flow of cultural values from English-speaking countries is prone to completely overwhelm the culture of the host country (Rao, as cited in Alptekin & Alptekin 1984, p. 15). It is implied that English as foreign language (EFL) instruction should not be either isolated from or dominated by the target culture, while it should be culturally neutral and learner- centered (Alptekin & Alptekin, 1984; George, 1981). Besides, students should be encouraged to utilize the target language to disseminate their own culture.

2.1 Review and Pre-Task Cycle I

One fundamental goal of the review (stage 1) is to connect the previous lesson with the current one which shares the same topic of the New Year customs but in English-speaking countries and China respectively. This recycling process reinforces students' memory of linguistic items taught before (Nunan, 2004, p. 36). Meanwhile, the review and pre-task cycle (stage 1-3) allow students to get familiar with the topic area (Willis, 1996) and activate their schema, namely the prior knowledge of the world that listeners possess in their mind (Hedge, 2000, p. 232), such as, as far as this specific lesson is concerned, the perceptions of their identity as a language learner and their attitudes towards cultural differences.

In addition, pictures used in stage two facilitate the process of schema activation, which could recall not only students' background knowledge about the message sent from these images but also lexical items that would be mentioned latter in the lesson (Willis, 1996), like firework and dragon associated from pictures. It is of great benefit to activate schema as it could arouse learners' interest and raise their motivation. With the aim to involve students in predicting the topic of listening materials, stage three assists the interaction between the listening texts and listeners. It is argued by Rost and Wilson (2013, p. 8) that it is only when a degree of prediction exists before listening that comprehension could be possible.

2.2 Task Cycle I

In this while-listening phase, the purpose is to explicitly teach students listening strategies. Strategy training for second language (L2) listening is strongly advocated (Rost & Wilson, 2013; Vandergrift & Goh, 2012). There are mainly two strategies combined with listening for main idea (Stage 4) and listening for details (Stage 5) (Vandergrift & Goh, 2012, p. 169). When students are aware of the strategy used in different stages of listening activities, they could become more confident and motivated, thus turning to be skillful L2 learners (ibid). In the next stages (6 & 7), students are required to check answers of the comprehension questions and discuss the effectiveness of the strategies in groups of three, which are considered as interactive processes. In the interactive frame of Rost and Wilson (2013, p. 15), it is claimed that interactive listening tasks would assist language acquisition since negotiation of meaning and the output are required. This stage also forces students to collaboratively work with each other, which would facilitate language acquisition as well (ibid). Besides, learners can perform more confidently and

accurately when reporting to the teacher after discussion with classmates and this collaborative process could lower students' affective filter (Harmer, 2001; Willis, 1996).

Audio tracks are played twice (Stage 4 & 5), which conforms to one of the listening principles emphasizing that once is not enough, as put forward by Harmer (2007, p. 135). By this way, students can be provided with the opportunity to highlight some of the linguistic items of the listening materials (ibid). In the seventh stage, learners are asked to reflect on the listening strategies used while listening. Consequently, after discussing with others they could develop their own set of listening strategies that prove to be effective for themselves. This kind of development is shaped inside learners' heads independently. As Rost and Wilson (2013, p. 15) point out in their autonomous frame, it is not likely that language learners make significant progress in strategy training when lacking independent learning.

Regarding the texts chosen for this lesson, they are authentic and culturally appropriate. Geddes and White (1978, p. 137) propose that authentic discourse can be both as language written or spoken without a pedagogical purpose and as language with such a purpose but having the possibility of being used in genuine communication. Breen (1985, p. 63) further presents that students should be exposed to authentic texts because these texts could show learners target language use in real- world communication. One more to mention, the texts could attract students to engage in class activities as it is highly relevant to their life, especially when the Spring Festival is coming on February 15th, 2018.

2.3 Language Focus I

Moving on to language focus, the aim of Stage 8 is to make students pay attention to vocabulary items (adjectives including amazing, stunning, spectacular and incredible) of the transcripts. As Kelly (1991) presents, lexical knowledge should be valued particularly before learners reach an advanced level. Similarly, Wilson (2003) suggests a balanced method to listening teaching that pays equal attention to both form and meaning. It is pointed out by Rost and Wilson (2013, p. 11) that word recognition plays a significant role in the bottom-up process of listening so there should be various exposures to the same lexical items for students' word recognition. Furthermore, contextualizing words could make these linguistic items more durable than isolating them (Shouten-van Parreren, 1989). This follow-up activity in post-listening phase focus on form in bottom-up processing, which would further stimulate the process of developing successful listening (Hedge, 2000, p. 247).

The subsequent stage (9) attempts to build students' lexicon and develop students' thinking ability through creative and collaborative tasks. This activity developed for recycling lots of words together, raises learners' awareness of enlarging vocabulary through synonyms, and it also increases their motivation by collecting words from prior knowledge (Grabe, 2009). Students' reasoning ability could be cultivated in this stage since students are required to answer "why" instead of simply "what". In addition, this stage enables learners to actively appreciate the language use, namely the genuine use of the adjectives mentioned.

2.4 Pre-Task Cycle II

This phase (Stage 10) encourages learners to contemplate the differences between Spring Festival and Christmas Day. As in the pre-task cycle I, this activity targets at activating schematic knowledge and define the topic that will be covered. One more to mention, it also helps raise students' awareness of cultural diversity which is regarded as an indispensable element for developing "a bilingual and intercultural identity" (Alptekin and Alptekin, 1984, p. 19).

2.5 Task Cycle II

With regard to stages 11 and 12, students are divided into two groups to intensively read the transcripts and each group is required reading three different audioscripts of the six audio materials. Specifically, group A should read passages a, b and c while group B ought to deal with passages d, e and f. These two stages create an information gap as well although every student has listened all listening materials. According to Hedge (2000, p. 57), a gap in information or opinion makes the teaching content and steps unpredictable, which could be necessary for fluency activities. The activity to read the written texts of the audio is based on another listening principle of Harmer (2007, p. 136) that instructors are expected to make good use of the listening texts. Cardenas-Claros and Campos-Ibaceta (2017) point out that transcripts of listening materials have been disregarded in language classrooms, and their study concludes that transcripts are useful for listeners to comprehend the texts and check the spellings of some words.

Another aim of stage 11 is to introduce the strategy of intensive reading while other strategies such as skimming and scanning are not appropriate since learners have been exposed to listening materials twice before. Explicit teaching of reading strategy is advocated by many scholars (Baker, 2002; Janzen, as cited in Richards & Renandya, 2002) because this could make learners a strategic reader who would read effectively and efficiently. In stage 12, students share their ideas with partners, which is also an interactive and collaborative activity. It is suggested by Willis (1996) that it is better for students to learn by themselves and the teacher merely plays the role of a monitor to provide scaffolding. Collaboration and scaffolding are essential concepts in SCT (Lantolf, 2000).

2.6 Language Focus II

There exist two primary aims of this phase and the first one is to enlarge students' vocabulary about Spring Festival and Christmas Day while the second will be explored in the next paragraph. Integrating vocabulary instruction with reading teaching is also to contextualize lexical items which are necessary to reading comprehension (Hedge, 2000). Different from the traditional way of direct vocabulary teaching, students are given with ten word cards and the corresponding pictures of words including turkey, dumpling, candy, tinsel, snowman, firecracker, firework, zodiac, dragon and reindeer. Stage 13 is based on the argument of Grabe (2009, p. 283) that teachers should present lexical items in multiple context since some of the words have been taught in previous class and they are recycled in this stage. With these cards and pictures,

students need to match them, which is a practical technique called dominoes that is proposed by Baker and Westrup (2000).

The second aim intends to raise learners' awareness of cultural diversity by dividing these words into two or three categories associated with Spring Festival or Christmas Day in the following stage (14). As discussed above, students are expected to be culturally neutral (Alptekin & Alptekin, 1984; George, 1981), which means they may appreciate rather than avoid the cultural differences. Therefore, they are less likely to experience culture shock and students may become more curious about the culture of other countries as it is interesting. Additionally, discussing of words in groups when categorizing is viewed by Stahl (2005) as an influential instrument for vocabulary learning.

The final stage (15) is to assign the homework and explain how and what to do for a group presentation next class. There is an attempt to recycle the knowledge what has been taught in this class and to encourage students to attach importance to accuracy since they have ample time for preparation.

3. Evaluation

This section is going to give a critical evaluation of my lesson plan in terms of the texts, the activities and the sequence of these activities. The texts from a documentary of BBC would be treated as authentic texts, which could perfectly fit the topic of Spring Festival and cultural diversity. Having discussed the advantages of the authenticity of these texts in the Rationale, the evaluation part will not regurgitate. Admittedly, authentic text has its disadvantages as well and the listening materials of the six audio clips seem to be difficult to understand since they mainly consist of natural dialogues. As Hedge (2000) indicates, it would be very challenging for students to understand genuine and spontaneous conversations since there may exist many uncertainties such as environmental uncertainty like traffic noise and uncertainty of language like the fast speed. Besides, it is claimed by Rost and Wilson (2013, p. 11) that L2 listeners may have difficulty in comprehension because of a lack of preparation for fast speech phenomena. Nevertheless, students have been familiar with most of the lexical items and they have the background knowledge about the traditional customs of Spring Festival, which would greatly facilitate learners' listening comprehension. The transcripts are used as reading materials at the same time and they are suitable for reading as the density of unfamiliar vocabulary items seems to be at an appropriate level, so learners appear to be unlikely to have trouble in reading comprehension (Hedge, 2000, p. 193).

The following paragraph will evaluate the activities in my lesson plan and the sequence of this specific lesson rather than the methodology of TBL because the rationale section has already explored its appropriacy. The sequence of this specific lesson which appears to be reasonable to a large degree. Nunan (2004) presents that tasks in TBL should depend on each other and it is the case in this lesson. Stage 1 is the preparation for Stage 2, and Stages 1 and 2 prepare the vocabulary for listening process in stage 3. The same applies to the following stages as well. In this case, vocabulary teaching is placed before listening since Cardenas-Claros and Campos- Ibaceta (2017) argue that pre-teach lexical items could aid learners' listening comprehension. In fact, vocabulary instruction also happens after listening (Stage 8 & 9), which could prevent learners failing to grasp the gist of the listening texts owing to their concentration on those words talked about before (Field, 2009). At the same time, because of the great importance of the meaning of some key words to reading comprehension (Yang, 2016, p. 196), the teaching of vocabulary occurs during the reading part as well, which appears to be essential in reading class.

Regarding the selection of the vocabulary to teach throughout the lesson such as in Stages 2, 8 and 13, new words such as "firework, dragon and zodiac", and other words associated with the topic that are taught previously, are chosen because they could largely assist the understanding of the materials and help students be aware of the cultural diversity. Gee (2009, p. 15) argues that words could be regarded as cultural models since they would carry unique cultural meaning in different contexts. For example, dragon in the United Kingdom seems to be evil while in China it is auspicious. Nevertheless, it seems that adjectives in stage 9 such as amazing and stunning are not closely related to the topic of the class. It is presented by Willis (1996, p. 41) that tasks conducted in TBL classroom should be within the range of students' needs. Actually, these adjectives are of great importance for learners to express their ideas about exciting events including the traditional customs of New Year. Moreover, there may also be some words such as "appease and benevolent" that are worth teaching, but it appears to be unlikely that these words could be explicitly taught because of the limit of the time. As Stahl (2005) advocates, teachers have the responsibility for selecting fitting words to teach. On the one hand, some potential problems would occur in this lesson. Above all, students may find it boring to read the transcripts (Stage 11) after listening the audio twice and lose interest in this topic. In addition, some students would avoid using the target language to complete the tasks and speak Chinese when discussing, for instance Stages 7 and 12. Besides, learners may predict the teaching procedures based on the framework of Willis (1996), which would also demotivate students due to a lack of originality. On the other hand, class size of this lesson with only ten learners could possibly solve these problems. It is indicated by Hedge (2000, p. 25) that class size might bring about both potential and limitation. Teachers could monitor students and manage the classroom more efficiently and effortlessly in this small- sized class. However, as Harmer (2001) suggests, there may still be something to be amended when carrying out a lesson plan so instructors should be flexible about designing such a plan.

4. Conclusion

To sum up, this lesson plan underpinned by TBL integrates the teaching of listening and reading skills as well as vocabulary instruction. The structure of this lesson is based on the framework of Willis, which is rather feasible and flexible for teachers to use. In the light of the particular context, the topic of Chinese New Year and its comparison with Christmas traditions could raise students' awareness of cultural pluralism by comparing different traditional norms, and could also prepare learners for being cultural spreaders instead of being dominated by the target culture after immigration. In

addition, in this learner-centered classroom, the lesson encourages explicit strategy training. Although Renandya and Farrell (2011) claim that strategy teaching may be useless for students in low levels, learners in this context are at an upper intermediate level, so they could benefit from explicit teaching of strategies both in listening and reading. Finally, involving the texts and activities, the rationale and the evaluation of my lesson plan inevitably have some overlaps. In general, the authentic texts used in the lesson and interactive and collaborative activities could greatly develop learners' listening and reading skills and enrich their vocabulary.

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