



Language teaching is a scientific experiment

Recipient of the Certificate of Merit

Mr CHAN Ho-yin, Tony
(Years of teaching: 10 years)

School

Tsung Tsin College

Teaching Levels

Secondary 4 - 7
(English Language)

Teaching Beliefs

“Active experimentation in conjunction with meticulous reflection transforms research findings into effective teaching practices, and in this process of transformation lies the professionalism of English teachers.”

Interview with the Teacher

Effective teaching and learning of English is achieved through research-based, needs-oriented experimentation in combination with honest reflection, and the foundation for this experimentation is the mutual trust and respect between learners and their teacher.

The word “slick” refers to a skillful performance without hiccups and seemingly effortless. As the panel head of the English Department at Tsung Tsin College, Mr CHAN will be very happy to see all his students and panel members possessing the “slick” quality.

“SLICK” means something more

However, for Mr CHAN, “slick” refers to more than just polished skills. It is an acronym for the key components in English language learning and teaching: “S” for “Skills”, “L” for “Learning strategies”, “I” for “Interest”, “C” for “Confidence” and “K” for “Knowledge”. Mr CHAN strives to include these components in his lessons.

Teaching effectiveness: perception vs objectivity

If Mr CHAN were to be invited to give a talk sharing his teaching approaches, he would probably begin by urging fellow teachers: “Beware of Perceptions”.

One of the questions that Mr CHAN puts forward is: Can we trust our senses and perceptions? When a teacher leaves his classroom, he may say to himself, “This is a good lesson. I have a hunch the students like it.” Is this a fact or just perception?

A pioneer and practitioner of action research at his school, Mr CHAN challenges the generally accepted “perceptions” by initiating a more objective approach supported by scientific research. Mr CHAN holds a Bachelor of Science degree and he thinks like a scientist. If you were to convince him that a certain teaching method is good, you had better show him good reasons with concrete evidence.

Along this line of thinking, teaching effectiveness is not a matter of perception. Action research allows Mr CHAN to measure students’ learning effectiveness objectively. The classroom is where he tries out different methodologies. If a certain methodology proves to be feasible, the next question Mr CHAN asks himself would be: How can we apply this methodology in other classrooms and in other subjects?

Learners’ preferences

Mr CHAN chooses to give autonomy to his students and he sees this as an opportunity to build up mutual bonding. A case in point is the way he processes students’ written assignments. There has been fierce debate on how a student’s essay should be marked. In this regard, Mr CHAN hands the decision-making power over to his students.

Mr CHAN always asks his students questions such as: “Do you want me to mark every single mistake directly on your paper? Or do you prefer me to just write the marking codes?” It is important for the students to understand that they are responsible for their own learning. Making decisions and bearing the consequences are part of the learning process.

Teaching and learning English should be needs-oriented

A devoted Christian himself, Mr CHAN always attempts to practise what he preaches. His teaching approach is shaped by research methodologies as well as the Bible. “I respect human beings. Language is part of human behaviour. People use language to communicate their needs, and language learning and teaching is about meeting these needs.” Mr CHAN would like to think that he is an optimistic, humourous and happy teacher. “At least I got this impression from the students”, he says half-jokingly.



Students are proud of the English game stall they have designed for the English Week.



Research-based English Teaching and Learning

Introduction

The overwhelming complexity attached to the issue of how English ought to be taught as a second language is clearly reflected in the large number of research studies developed in this domain in the past few decades. In order for its findings to have any practical meaning, this vast body of research must be translated into pedagogical strategies and decisions through active experimentations and meticulous reflection in relation to local contextual factors. This article depicts four of my endeavors to achieve this integration.

Task-based language teaching (TBLT)

The TBLT framework put forward by D. Nunan in 2004 includes the following elements and principles:

Six Elements	Seven Principles
1. Schema Building	• Scaffolding
2. Controlled Practice	• Task Dependency
3. Authentic Listening Practice	• Recycling
4. Focus on Linguistic Elements	• Active Learning
5. Provide Freer Practice	• Integration
6. Pedagogical Task	• Reproduction to Creation
	• Reflection

These criteria now serve as the research basis for decision-making in my lesson planning. These guidelines also help me to devise major English teaching projects and provide a framework for conducting class visits and post-visit conferences.

Vocabulary learning

Research in vocabulary learning suggests that word frequency should be introduced to students so that they can make the right decisions as to which words to learn, that both explicit vocabulary instruction and structured incidental vocabulary learning should be encouraged, and that vocabulary strategies should be taught directly. In light of these principles, systematic vocabulary teaching and vocabulary tests have been incorporated into my school's curriculum, and instruction on vocabulary strategies, together with tasks and games that recycle words, now takes up a significant portion of my lesson time. Most importantly, students are cognizant of the importance of vocabulary and their role in the language acquisition process.

Computer-assisted language learning (CALL)

Research evidence in CALL has inspired me to create an online discussion forum (tony-sir.com) for students to practise writing. In this forum, everyone is entitled to write and respond freely in English. Whenever a new entry is posted, points will be added to the writer's formative assessment. The main goal of this forum is to attain more genuine communication among students by enlarging the audience and facilitating interaction. Another aim is to enable students to share their ideas and thoughts by allowing more people to access their writings. Several modifications have been made to the system based on students' feedback and my own observation.

Dictogloss

In dictogloss, students in pairs or groups have to tap into their own linguistic knowledge in order to reconstruct a text that has been read to them at normal speed. This method of consolidating grammar and vocabulary learning through integrating all four macro-skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing, and active use of linguistic knowledge on students' part has been demonstrated in many research studies to be effective. The efficacy of dictogloss hinges on the fact that it encourages students to actively experiment with language principles and to engage in metatalk.

Conclusion

As seen in the above four examples, research informs practice, and experimentation in conjunction with reflection is the catalyst of effective teaching. It is my conviction that only through combining research and practice can the professionalism of English teachers in Hong Kong be further enhanced.

Assessment Summary

Articulated sound language acquisition and pedagogical theories and put educational theories and findings into practice.

Mr Tony CHAN is a teacher of English with sound knowledge in language learning and teaching. He is a strong believer of action research and a reflective practitioner. He constantly reflects and evaluates his teaching practices and research findings to inform his pedagogies.

Mr CHAN makes use of real life situations and authentic materials for language learning. He encourages creative use of the language and designs tasks so that students would enjoy themselves in the learning process. Mr CHAN's efforts in creating fun situations for students to learn English have made him a popular teacher in the school.

Mr CHAN acts as a role model for his students and shares with students various learning strategies that have worked for him, and encourages them to do the same. Mr CHAN also offers plentiful opportunities for students to communicate with him, notably is the online forum, where his students respond actively to the discussion topics.

Putting theory to practice, Mr CHAN planned the lesson observed following Nunan's task-based language teaching framework. He also made use of Wajnryb's dictogloss to practise listening and note-taking with students and encourage them to examine and reflect on the use of past participle and passive voice in a news report. In the post-lesson discussion, Mr CHAN was able to reflect on the methodologies he had adopted and suitability of the materials used.

In the interview, students told the Assessment Panel that they enjoyed Mr CHAN's lessons because he was kind and humorous and he used games, role-plays, competitions etc. to teach them. One student said that he did not like English before but Mr CHAN had changed his attitude and he now liked English. Mr CHAN has obviously won students' love and respect. The Assessment Panel was impressed with the students' effort to respond in English. Some of the students struggled to express themselves but they persisted in using English as a way to show their support for their teacher. Mr CHAN's devotion to his students and his enthusiasm for putting theories into practice were commendable.



Mr CHAN teaches students language skills and learning strategies, and helps them to develop an interest in English.

Way of Access to Information of the above Teaching Practice

Tsung Tsin College

Website: www.ttc.edu.hk

Preferred Way of Dissemination

Workshops or seminars

Contact

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