Mapping Coursebooks with Students’ Proficiency Levels and Oral Communicative Abilities: A Case Study of a Senior High School in China

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Abstract
Nowadays, people need to learn English for communication, but not all learners succeed in language use to communicate. This is especially the case of Chinese students. They have difficulties in English oral communication, though they can get high scores in English standardized tests like TOEFL and IELTS. This discordance may be caused by many factors and an important one is probably the coursebooks that are used, as coursebook is the bridge to link up objectives with students’ abilities. To solve this problem, the Ministry of Education in China has made a lot of attempts in improving coursebooks used, teaching methodology, education system, National College Entrance Examination (NCEE) and so on. This study aimed to find out the results of the improvement of coursebooks used in China, students’ proficiency levels and oral communicative abilities after using the new coursebooks, addressing three questions: 1. what are the communicative levels of the coursebooks used in China? 2. What are students’ general proficiency levels after studying the coursebooks? 3. What are students’ oral communicative abilities after studying the coursebooks? The subjects were 59 third year high school students. The results showed that the coursebooks used were highly communicative as a whole but with weaknesses in input and activity; the students’ proficiency levels were at the average level like before and the students’ oral communication abilities were still very poor. The findings suggest that the changing of the coursebooks did not help in cultivating communicative ability in students. The coursebooks still lack important characteristics of authentic input and communicative activities that require students to exchange information.

Key word: coursebook analysis; objectives; proficiency levels; oral communicative abilities; NCEE
Background

As English develops into a lingua Franca for international communication, more and more people need to learn English for communication (Byrne, 1976), so more and more people from many countries start to learn English. McKay (2002) points out that young people and adults are involved in the study of English today in classroom around the world since English is an international language that plays important roles in all aspects of life in our age of globalization. However not all English language learners are successful in their language use to communicate.

In China, many teachers complain that Chinese students’ oral communicative abilities are poor and it is difficult to make them communicate freely and express their ideas clearly (Liu & Yu, 1998; Rao, 2001; Xu, 2004; Zhuang, 2007). Even students complain about themselves on their inability to communicate. In my experience in learning English as a foreign language in a Chinese-speaking context for many years, I have noticed that many Chinese students were very weak in oral communication in English. Many Chinese students have difficulties in English oral communication, even those who can get high scores in English standardized proficiency tests, such as TOEFL and IELTS. This is especially true to some Chinese students studying abroad. Many found that they could not understand others or open their mouths to communicate with others when they first went abroad, although they have got high scores in the English language tests. In China, high English test score doesn’t mean good oral communicative ability. This problem has been discussed by teachers, students and experts in China for a long time. Many factors affecting Chinese students’ oral communicative abilities have been discussed, such as coursebooks, teaching methodology, education system, National College Entrance Examination (NCEE), learning styles and strategies.

As this is a matter of serious concern, English education reformation was called for and the government has been devoting itself to the reformation for many years, but students’ oral communicative abilities are still very poor. Firstly, as the communicative language teaching (CLT) is widely used and recommended, the Ministry of Education and schools promote many activities and competitions to encourage teachers to apply CLT in their teaching (Liao, 2004). Secondly, the proficiency test NCEE which is used to evaluate students’ proficiency levels when they graduate from senior high schools was improved to be more communicative year by year. Thirdly, the coursebooks have been revised for many
times to be more communicative. However, the Chinese students’ inability to communicate orally is still common (Chen, 2009; Fan, 2009; Cai, 2009).

One of the causes of the problem of Chinese students’ inability to communicate might be the coursebooks used, because coursebooks are the reflection of objectives and the tools used to achieve objectives. Coursebooks are very important in language teaching and learning; they facilitate the teaching. Cunningsworth (1995) argues that coursebooks are best seen as a resource in achieving aims and objectives that have already been set in terms of learner needs. In terms of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), it requires not only teachers to teach communicatively, but also the coursebooks to be communicative, and in this aspect, authentic texts and activities are very important. Larsen-Freeman (2000) and Gatbonton & Segalowitz (2005) point out that adherents of CLT advocate that the use of language material authentic to native speakers of the target language is the best way to overcome the typical problem that students cannot transfer what they learn in the classroom to the outside world and to expose students to natural language in a variety of situations. To check whether the materials are communicative, Nunan (1989) deals at length with communicative task and provides a framework for analyzing communicative tasks with the assumptions that these tasks can facilitate the development of communicative ability.

Moreover, there is another factor that might have an effect on the outcome of the English language teaching, National College Entrance Examination (NCEE), which is a proficiency test used to test students’ abilities when they graduate from high schools. It is a tool used to measure the result of studying the coursebooks. NECC is very important for Chinese students because it is nearly the only way to decide whether students could go to colleges or what kinds of colleges they could go. The total score of the test is 150 and the passing point is 90 (60%). Most of the students take the examination, and their scores are used as a criterion to enter colleges.

This study sets out to investigate the coursebooks used to see whether they could facilitate students’ learning to communicate, to check the level of their proficiency and their communicative ability after the use of these coursebooks and to use the information gained to determine the effects of the coursebook on their ability to communicate.

**Research Questions**

Three research questions were addressed in this study:
1. What are the communicative levels of the coursebooks used in China?
2. What are students’ general proficiency levels after studying the coursebooks?
3. What are students’ oral communicative abilities after studying the coursebooks?

Research Methodology

1. Coursebooks
The set of coursebooks, *Senior English for China (Student's Book1A, 1B, 2A, 2B and 3) (2007)*, were analyzed to check whether they are communicative and their communicative levels. They were edited by *People’s Education Press* and used by most of the senior high school students all over the country.

2. Research subjects
The subjects were 59 students from one third year senior high school class at one senior high school at Henan Province in China. The population of the third year students in this school is 2245 in 36 classes of about 60 students each. All of them have learned English for many years and English is the main subject for them. One class (59 students) was randomly selected as the subjects of this study using the random sampling method.

3. Research instruments
Three instruments were used in this study: task evaluation criteria, National College Entrance Examination (NCEE), and an oral communication test.

3.1 Task Evaluation criteria
The evaluation criteria were adopted from Nunan (1989)’s framework for analyzing communicative tasks which includes six main components: goals, input, activities, teacher role, learner role and settings. The details of the six components are as follows:

**Goals:** Nunan (1989) cited the subcategories of communicative goals from Clarck (1987) which includes 6 main goal areas (p. 50): establishing and maintaining interpersonal relationships; exchanging information, ideas, opinions, attitudes feelings, and to get things done through interactions; acquiring information from more or less ‘public’ sources in the target language e.g. books, magazines, newspapers, brochures, documents, signs, notices, films, television, slides, tape, radio, public announcements, lectures and written report etc.; using this information from more or less ‘public’ sources in the target language in some way; listening to, reading, enjoying and responding to creative and imaginative uses of the target language e.g. stories, poems, songs, rhymes, and drama; for certain learners, creating them
Input: activity is the rehearsal for the real world or text slightly adapted to suit the students, but still retain most of its authentic features.

Activities: being authentic in terms of reflecting real-world tasks, and promoting learners to apply newly acquired linguistic knowledge to real communication; being designed to help develop the accuracy of learners' target language including fully authentic (skill using) and semi-authentic (skill getting), and fluency of learners' target language.

Learner roles: the centre of class; negotiative, be part of a social group; moving from dependence to autonomy as learning progresses.

Teacher roles: facilitator, participant or director.

Settings: promoting learner-centeredness, i.e. learners are involved in learning through doing or using the language learned; providing learners with opportunities for genuine interactions which have a real-life purpose to them.

The coursebooks consist of the total of 58 units and there are 8 tasks in each unit. 464 tasks were analyzed totally. Each task was analyzed according to the evaluation criteria. The frequency of each item in the criteria was counted. Based on this data, one communicative task should match more than one sub-item of the goals, input, activities, learner roles, teacher roles and settings.

3.2 Oral communication test

In order to examine students’ oral communicative ability, two tests were used. The first was a listening and responding test. The test format is based on IELTS speaking test. Students were asked to listen to a text of a hotel advertisement twice and respond to it. They should give comments on the place talked about in the text (e.g. its setting, attraction, price) and discuss whether they want to visit the place or not, and why. Secondly, there was a speaking test adapted from the IELTS speaking test. Students were asked 4 questions about himself/herself and 4 questions about some familiar topics. Each of them was asked to discuss all the questions.

3.3 NCEE

The proficiency test is the national college entrance examination in China. It is organized every June. This English test paper consists of 3 main integrated skills: listening, reading and writing. Speaking test is not included. It consists of listening (20 multiple choice items), grammar and vocabulary (20 multiple choice items), cloze test (15 multiple choice items), reading comprehension (20 multiple choice items), error identification and correction
(a passage including 10 errors) and essay writing (about 100 words). The test takes two hours and the total score is 150 points. The passing point of the test is 90 (60%).

4. Data collection

Only quantitative data was collected. The tasks in the coursebooks were analyzed one by one to check whether they met the criteria or not. Then the percentage of communicative tasks out of all the tasks included in the coursebooks was calculated.

The oral communication test was conducted in May, 2011. Firstly, the listening and responding test was carried out in a language lab. Secondly, the speaking test was conducted using interview method. The responses of both listening and responding test and interview of each student were recorded and scored by two experienced native English speakers according to the IELTS speaking test scoring band.

Then, students took the NCEE in June, 2011 and the scores were published by the National Education Committee after the test. Both the total score of each student and the average score of the whole class were collected.

5. Data analysis

In order to answer all the three research questions, the descriptive statistics data was used.

For the coursebooks analysis, frequencies and percentages were employed to describe the number of communicative tasks in the coursebooks as compared to all the tasks. Then the frequencies of the six components in the criteria were analyzed. The data of both students’ listening and responding and speaking performance was analyzed using descriptive statistics. The collected scores of students from the test paper will be quantitatively analyzed by descriptive statistics.

Findings

The findings are organized according to the three research questions of this study.

1. Research question 1: what are the communicative levels of the coursebooks used in China?

The frequency and percentage of communicative task was provided in the six components according to the task evaluation criteria in the table below.
Table 1. The frequency and percentage of communicative task

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Goals</td>
<td>377</td>
<td>81.25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Input</td>
<td>292</td>
<td>62.93%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activities</td>
<td>340</td>
<td>73.28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learner roles</td>
<td>463</td>
<td>99.78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher roles</td>
<td>456</td>
<td>98.06%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Settings</td>
<td>459</td>
<td>98.92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td></td>
<td>85.70%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As Table 1 shows, of all the 464 tasks, 463 tasks (99.78%) matched with the communicative learner roles. This was the highest. The percentages of goals (81.25%), teacher roles (98.06%), and settings (98.92%) were very high, while the percentages of communicative input (62.93%) and activities (73.28%) were very low. The average percentage of matching the communicative task was 85.70%.

It can be concluded that the coursebooks are highly communicative. However, the weaknesses of the coursebooks were found in input and activities. This means that a lot of input and activities were not authentic or the rehearsal of real world and lacked communication and practice.

2. Research question 2: what are students’ general proficiency levels after studying the coursebooks?

The descriptive statistics of students’ proficiency test scores are showed in Table 2. The highest score was 132, while the lowest score was 15. The mean of NCEE score of all the 59 students was 92.85 (61.90%). Comparing to the total of 150 points, the 92.85 had just passed the passing point (90). This means that students’ proficiency levels are average.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of students’ proficiency levels

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PROF SCORES</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Valid N</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>15.00</td>
<td>132.00</td>
<td>92.85</td>
<td>23.70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. Research question 3: what are students’ oral communicative abilities after studying the coursebooks?
For the oral communication test, scores of the listening and responding test and the speaking test are showed in Table 3.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics of the listening and responding test and speaking test

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LIS &amp; RESP TEST</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>1.52</td>
<td>.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPEAKING TEST</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>2.50</td>
<td>.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ORAL COMM TEST</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>.25</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>2.01</td>
<td>.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valid N (listwise)</td>
<td>59</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As shown in Table 3, the mean score of listening and responding test (1.52) was lower than the mean score of speaking test (2.50). This might be caused by the test format and content. In the listening and responding test, students should listen carefully first to catch some information. So if students missed some information or are unconfident about the information they got, their oral performance could be negatively affected. While the topics in the speaking test came from IELTS speaking test and they were some familiar topics about students themselves. Therefore, they could do the oral performance better.

The means of the whole oral communication test of all the 59 students were 2.01, which is very low compared with the total of 9 score. As described in the scoring band, the score 2 means that the students paused lengthily before most words and had little communication possible, only produced isolated words or memorized utterances, could not produce basic sentence forms, and the speech is often unintelligible. At this band, students failed to communicate. So it can be summarized that students’ oral communicative abilities are very poor.

**Discussions**

The findings show that the coursebooks after improvements are highly communicative in whole with the weaknesses in input and activities. Students’ oral communicative abilities are still poor. This goes together with the complaints of Liu & Yu (1998), Rao (2001), Xu (2004), Zhuang (2007), Chen (2009), Fan (2009), and Cai (2009). Students’ proficiency levels are average compared to the poor oral communicative abilities. This proves the saying that many Chinese students have difficulties in English oral communication, though their proficiency levels were higher.
However, the in-depth investigation of the coursebooks revealed that the coursebooks may still be one of the causes since it has weaknesses in input and activities. This means that a lot of input and activities are not authentic or the rehearsal of real world. Most of the input texts were written for the purpose of teaching English. It was also found that most activities are individual work, so communication and cooperation with others couldn’t happen. The inauthentic input provided inauthentic exposure for students and that coupled with the insufficiency of opportunities to communicate or rehearse the real language situations. So the knowledge they learned is just text language and practice which was not communicatively meaningful. This may cause students’ inability to communicate, because without authentic texts and authentic activities, it is very difficult for communication to happen. Therefore, more activities in pair or group work are needed to provide opportunities to students to communicate with others in English.

Moreover, as Meng (2009) points out teacher may be one factor affecting students’ inability to communicate, because they have to teach large class, and so it is difficult to handle communicative tasks in the classroom. Rao (2001)’ study suggests that another factor, student may play a part. He finds that students like non-communicative activities more than communicative ones. However, the problem should be analyzed in whole. This, in turn, suggested that other factors such as teaching methodology, learning styles and strategies, or education system should be investigate that whether they come into play.

Recommendations

This study is a case study in one high school in China. So it can not present all the high schools in China. Then it is necessary to conduct a study to cover much more schools in China.

There are two main sets of coursebook widely used in China. In this study, only one set of coursebook is analyzed. Therefore, further investigation should be done with another set of coursebook named Senior High English to see if it lends itself to communicative language teaching.

References


