

The Construction of Multi-Dimensional Teaching Environment: A Qualitative Study on the Redesign of All-Encompassing Teaching Materials¹

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Abstract

Under the E-education background, the research of all-encompassing teaching materials (AETM) rises to be an issue of contemporary importance. This study reports on the relationship between AETM use and the multi-dimensional English as Foreign Language (EFL) teaching environment construction. To explore the application of AETM in the classrooms of tertiary course *College English Speaking* in China, this study focuses on how to construct a multi-dimensional teaching environment for EFL teaching through combining AETM and massive information resources. Data were mainly collected by classroom observations and teacher/student interviews. This study finds that the teachers and students regularly cooperate to redesign AETM before, in and after *College English Speaking* course teaching so as to extend learning contents, change learning methods and create authentic communicative environment. Meanwhile, results also show that the students' English speaking proficiency tends to be better compared to the students learning with traditional textbook which only emphasizes the practice of oral skills. Findings imply that teachers should be aware of the importance of language program design, and localized and individualized course model could be implemented in tertiary EFL teaching.

Introduction

All-encompassing teaching materials

(AETM, 立体化教材) refer to the teaching packages with the integration of traditional paper textbook and multimedia teaching resources (including disks, audios, videos, electronic products, etc.) as well as web-based and Internet-based teaching resources. It takes full advantages of various media to inspire multiway interaction and makes teaching design flexible in accordance with different courses, learners and contexts. Therefore, AETM could help to form an open, complete and diverse language teaching platform and meet the teaching requirement of diversity, individuality as well as practicality (Yang & Chen, 2013). Currently, the new requirements of college English course teaching at tertiary institutions in China advocate teachers to use teaching materials flexibly and creatively. The redesign of all-encompassing teaching materials (RAETM, 立体化教材再设计) mainly refers to teachers and students cooperate to moderately add, delete and/or adjust textbook contents and rationally choose and develop other teaching resources (e.g. the Internet resources) to better meet the specific needs to establish a multi-dimensional teaching environment in order to promote students' language ability development. This study aims to construct a multi-dimensional teaching environment so as to create an open educational system, in which each element in EFL teaching, such as teachers, learners, teaching contents, contexts, media, facilities and even cultural atmosphere could interact, influence and

¹ This research is sponsored by 2013 Humanities and Social Science Youth Fund Project of Ministry of Education of China (MoE) (No.: 13YJC740120), 2013 Research Center Fund Project of State

Language Commission of China (SLC) (No.: ZDJ125-4) and 2014 Research Center for Foreign Language Strategies Project (No.: WYZL201402).

effectively change through RAETM. Currently, AETM has widely applied in college English teaching in China's universities, but there is a lack of research on AETM use. This study of language teachers' and students' AETM use and its relation to the construction of multi-dimensional teaching environment provides valuable findings and suggestions which add to the existing knowledge of the college English teaching and learning field.

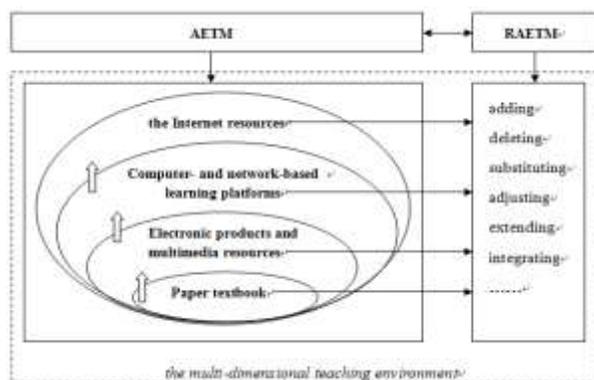


Figure 1. The Conceptual Framework of AETM and RAETM

Literature Review

Researches on Foreign Language Teaching Environment

In China, the foreign language teaching system covers three elements: teaching construction, teaching process and teaching environment (Zhao, 2011; Dong, 2008). In an English as Foreign Language (EFL) teaching system, teaching environment directly influences learner's motivation, learning strategies, academic achievement, etc. However, the previous researches on foreign language teaching mainly focus on teaching construction and teaching process, with less attention paid and empirical studies done on teaching environment comparing with the other two elements (Yu, 2012).

Tracing back to the 1930s in the worldwide scale, the earliest researches on foreign language teaching environment were mainly concerning the interactive relation-

ship of students to students and teachers to students; in the early 1960s, teaching environment was gradually developed into a relatively independent research area and laid emphasis on the physical factors of teaching environment. In the late 1960s, researchers began to take socio-psychological factors into account, mainly focusing on the cognition of teachers and students towards the relationship between teaching environment and student's learning behaviors. After the 1990s, many researches on teaching environment from the perspective of constructivism emerged with the development of computer and networks, information technology and psychological theories, particularly constructive learning theories (Jonassen & Land, 2000; Fisher & Khine, 2006).

Researches on the All-Encompassing Teaching Materials

Teaching material is vital in EFL curriculum and its teaching, enjoys high status and plays a key role in EFL teaching theory and practice. Foreign language teaching material is the important carrier of both language and culture in language teaching. According to its developmental stages, foreign language teaching materials can be divided into four types: the text selection type, the grammatical type, the dialogical type and the communicative type. Now "language teaching materials have developed from emphasizing on the elegance of language (e.g. the text selection type of foreign language teaching materials) and the constructional features of language (e.g. the grammatical types of teaching materials) to laying emphasis on meaning features of language (e.g. the communicative types of language teaching materials) and the social and personal aspect of language (e.g. the teaching materials of new generation)" (Wang & Feng, 2009). Recently, the widely-used teaching materials in China take

computers and networks as the supporting platform in order to encourage students' language communication in and out of classrooms, and many researchers explored how to make full use of multimodal teaching resources and how to design the course. The influential researches on the AETM in China are as follows (See table 1):

Table 1. Analysis of Influential Researches on AETM in China

| Researchers | Year Published | Research Perspectives | Research Content |
|----------------|----------------|--|--|
| Zhuang & Huang | 2006 | Theory construction | Theory and practice of constructing all-encompassing <i>College English</i> teaching materials |
| Ma | 2006 | Development of teaching materials | Main problems in the development of all-encompassing <i>College English</i> teaching materials and the countermeasures |
| Huang & Guo | 2008 | Design of teaching materials | Design of all-encompassing teaching materials based on digital resources |
| Chen | 2010 | Theoretical discussion and material design | Description of and discussion on the development of <i>College English</i> teaching materials of the fifth generation |
| Yu | 2010 | Corpus and teaching material development | Direction of <i>College English</i> teaching material development from the perspective of curriculum integration framework |
| Chen | 2011 | Concept clarification and theory mining | Implementation of the multi-dimensional teaching method with the application of the all-encompassing teaching materials |

Researches on the Redesign of Teaching Materials

Researches on the redesign of teaching materials mainly undertook within the scale of material design or materials adaptation,

and related researches were usually gathered into literature reviews of materials development. According to Weinbrenner (1992), researches on teaching materials had three orientations: process orientation, product orientation and receptive orientation, and the redesign of teaching materials meant a critical acceptance. Cunningsworth (1995/2002) pointed out that the redesign of teaching materials should be decided by the individuality of curriculum as well as the usefulness of resources and the motivation or expectation of learners. Maley (1998) also pointed out that, all learners, teachers and teaching contexts were quite different while teaching materials should assume them as the same; perfect match would never appear among teaching materials, teachers and learners. The distinctiveness of teaching context and the universality of teaching materials seemed to be an irreconcilable contradiction, and the redesign of teaching materials came into existence. After 2000, Graves (2000), Richards (2001) and Tomlinson (2003, 2008, 2011) all tried to make dialectical analysis between the right and wrong of teaching materials, and put forward to a more rational recognition that teaching materials were not always accordant with curriculum, environment and teachers.

Chinese scholars Cheng (2002) and Xia (2003) pointed out that, a specific teaching material could hardly meet the needs of all students or be appropriate for all teaching environments. Teachers should take students' needs and curriculum specialty into consideration when making preparations for their teaching. However, recent researches in China on foreign language teaching did not show much interest to the redesign of teaching materials (Yang & Chen, 2013). Yang (2014) has reviewed 145 papers related to teaching materials published in foreign language core periodicals of China from 2000 to 2013, among which only 18 (12.4%) referred to the use of teaching materials,

including the relationship between teaching materials and teaching practice, the choice of teaching materials, the explanation of micro-linguistic phenomenon in teaching materials, but little attention was paid to the redesign of teaching materials.

Although these researches suggest that certain achievements have gained on foreign language teaching materials research, but not many researches are on AETM and RAETM. Current researches on AETM mainly focus on theoretical discussion and framework construction of AETM, few empirical researches investigate the application of the materials, particularly teachers' teaching practice and students' learning experiences inside and outside the classrooms. This study advocates the redesign of AETM is of great necessity to develop the *three-in-one* teaching mode (teaching contents + teaching resources + teaching models), and construct the multi-dimensional environment of college English teaching. The study also aims to provide guidance for constructing student-centered foreign language learning mode which emphasizes individuality in EFL teaching. Hence, this study adds value to the literature with a comprehensive description of AETM use with an emphasis on its redesign in the *College English Speaking* course.

Research Methods

Research Questions

In order to explore appropriate strategies of applying AETM in *College English Speaking* teaching and explain how the multi-dimensional teaching environment is constructed through RAETM, the study tries to answer the following two questions:

1. How is the multi-dimensional teaching environment constructed through the redesign of all-encompassing *College English Speaking* teaching materials?
2. What learning effects do the students achieve after having studied in the multi-

dimensional teaching environment?

Research Participants and Context

This study involved two first-year classes in a provincial university in Shandong, a higher educational institution located in a large metropolitan city in eastern China. In order to eliminate the effect of English level difference on the measurement of listening and speaking achievement through observation and interview, this study only selected freshmen with similar educational backgrounds as participants. The participants involved in the study were randomly-selected first-year Chinese students in their second semester of tertiary level study, which represented the majority of student backgrounds in the first-year English classrooms. Professor Guo was also selected as the participant in this study, who taught the *College English Speaking* course and whose teaching was based on the redesign of all-encompassing *College English Speaking* teaching materials.

Data Collection

Aiming for the practical application and theoretical reflection of the construction of multi-dimensional College English Speaking teaching environment, this study starts with the theoretical analysis, develops with the redesign of teaching materials, and takes qualitative research method (Creswell, 2008):

1. Define the term *the redesign of all-encompassing teaching materials and multi-dimensional teaching environment*; analyze its theoretical bases through literature review and content analysis;
2. Explore teachers' and students' participation in the redesign of all-encompassing teaching materials and the construction of the multi-dimensional teaching environment through classroom observations; and
3. Investigate the effects of the application of the all-encompassing *College English*

Speaking teaching materials through pair/group interviews.

Data of this study were collected in the provincial university in Shandong from March to June in 2014. The researcher used several data collection methods to investigate all-encompassing College English Speaking teaching material use and analyze its role in improving students' language achievement. In particular, the observation of College English Speaking classes was used to summarize teachers' and students' behaviors of applying all-encompassing teaching material in the course teaching and learning, and pair and group interviews were used to analyze their material use effects. The following paragraphs discuss how each data collection instrument was designed and used.

Classroom observations. The researcher observed two sections of classes each time, one time a week over a 16-week period from March to June in the spring semester of 2014. The observation intended to capture teachers' and students' behaviors of applying all-encompassing teaching material in *College English Speaking* classes. Specifically, when observing the classes, the researcher attempted to document Professor Guo's weekly teaching routines to record how the all-encompassing teaching materials of this course were redesigned and applied in curricular and extracurricular teaching and learning.

Pair/group interviews. A total of two interviews were conducted toward the end of the semester in June 2014. In order to elicit more information, the researcher adopted semi-structured interview. Each interview lasted 60 minutes and were conducted with the participants from the two classes. The intention of selecting pair or group interviews is based on the belief that interviewees in small groups tend to interact and build understanding on the response provided by each other. They may provide detailed description on their own strategies of

material use including how they cooperate to adapt the teaching materials to meet their specific needs in EFL learning. In the semi-structured pair or group interviews, the participants were given the opportunity to elaborate and explain the strategies for adapting all-encompassing *College English Speaking* teaching materials they tended to use, and to describe how effective they thought these strategies were.

Research Procedure

The following paragraphs briefly describe the *College English Speaking* teaching program in RAETM-based multi-dimensional teaching environment in the provincial university in Shandong, China.

The researcher randomly took 60 freshmen of non-English majors from a provincial university in Shandong as the experimental participants (two natural classes, one is the experimental class, the other is the controlled class, all of them have common background and will be taught by the same teacher), drawing on the experience of the integration mode of *College English Speaking* teaching. The empirical study lasts for 16 weeks. The controlled class is taught according to *College English Curriculum Requirements*, and use *The New Era Interactive English* as the textbook. The textbook is the main resource of teaching, and tasks will be given to the students for consolidating and deepening the contents taught in class. In the experimental class, both teachers and students make contributions to the redesign of the textbook in *College English Speaking* teaching with applying Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) theory into the course teaching practice, which can enrich the teaching contents. After class, students in the experimental class continue their study in the form of a Learner Workshop (LW) through autonomous and cooperative learning methods with resources offered by the all-

encompassing teaching materials and developed from the networks. In this way, students' knowledge is extended and the communication-oriented learning environment is established through the redesign of the all-encompassing *College English Speaking* teaching materials. The redesign of the all-encompassing teaching materials could make up the insufficiency of traditional teaching environment and could ultimately form an individualized EFL teaching environment (Yang & Chen, 2013).

Before the experiment, the terms of AETM and RAETM are defined and the theoretical bases on foreign language teaching environment are illustrated. In the experiment, the researcher observed teachers' and students' behaviors of redesigning AETM. After the experiment, the researcher made a detailed description and a systematic analysis on the process of teachers' and students' participation in the redesign of the all-encompassing teaching materials and constructing the multi-dimensional teaching environment to find out the changes on students' language competence (mainly on listening and speaking), learning ability (mainly on autonomous learning and cooperative learning) and other factors related with learners and learning process (e.g. learning interest, learning motivation, learners' self-efficacy, learners' strategies, etc.), and stated the enlightenment of those factors to the future EFL teaching in China.

Findings

All-encompassing Teaching Material Use Process

The study is done to explore how the multi-dimensional teaching environment is constructed through the redesign of all-encompassing teaching materials. The teaching material used in *College English Speaking* course (*The New Era Interactive English*) is redesigned on the basis of Task-

based Language Teaching (TBLT) and the second language acquisition rule of "input→internalization→output". In the experimental class, the teacher selected original English movie clips as the input materials to be used before the major teaching and learning tasks were distributed to students. The teacher and students cooperatively adapted the teaching material by adding, deleting and substituting teaching resources. A theme-driven course design, in which authentic English listening and speaking tasks are planned, enacted and evaluated in the real language-using situations, is used to form the multi-dimensional teaching environment. Thus, the teaching goal of *College English Speaking* course for improving students' communicative competence and intercultural competence can be achieved. The process of all-encompassing teaching material use is shown in Figure 2.

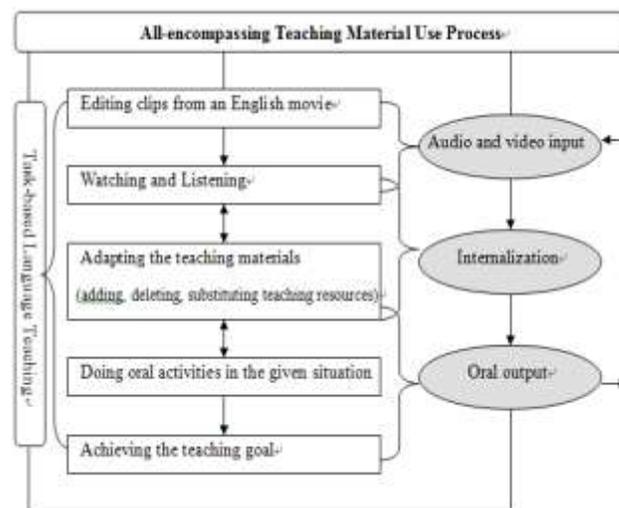


Figure 2. All-encompassing Teaching Material Use Process

All-encompassing Teaching Material Use Effects

The classroom observation data indicated that with information technology, all-encompassing teaching materials promote *College English Speaking* course design to achieve the goal of improving students'

language ability in a diversified way.

Table 2. Classroom Observation Findings

| | |
|----------------------|--|
| Participants | 60 freshmen in a Chinese university, majoring in international business management |
| Teaching Environment | Multimedia and network-based environment (both in and out of classroom) |
| Teaching Materials | The New Era Interactive English (textbook) Original English movie clips (input materials) Network resources (supporting materials) |
| Teaching Goals | To improve students' English speaking ability, focusing on the usefulness of the content of communication to effectively utilize the living language in movies to guide the students to carry out extensive language communicative activities with language knowledge and skills; and To combine classroom teaching with autonomous learning, asking students to make full use of their imagination and creativity in thinking, discussion, idea exchanges and cooperation to complete language tasks. |
| Teaching Principles | Knowledge acquisition and English speaking proficiency improvement; Individualized learning contents and learning methods; and Teacher autonomy and learner autonomy. |
| Core Tasks | Movie appreciation and performance are the core tasks to connect the sub-tasks, like plot design, script writing, group presentation and so forth. |
| Sub-tasks | Movie watching, Authentic reading, Visualization, Storyboard, Presentation, Follow-up activities (knowledge-centered), Extended activities (ability-centered) |
| Teaching Effects | Textbooks with paper as the single medium are moved to a system with paper, electronic and network-based teaching materials. In this sense, students are allowed a free choice on learning resources and autonomous determination on learning methods. Their learning needs are satisfied to the maximum. The inadequate teaching environment within classroom is moved to real and natural language communicating and learning environment. In this sense, students obtain the learning interest and are motivated to practice and improve their English speaking ability. |

After one semester's implementation of the above all-encompassing teaching material use process in this course, the teacher and some students in the experimental class are interviewed on how to conduct the redesign of all-encompassing

teaching materials to construct a multi-dimensional teaching environment to practice spoken English:

“Teaching design of this course successfully creates a multimodal environment of input and output for oral English learning. English movie clips provide students with effective spoken language input and output channels. The network-based learning platform offers students the opportunity with a variety of experiences of real-time online communication, such as auditory, visual, tactile and multi-sensory stimulation, constructing the multi-dimensional learning environment and promoting the multimodal interaction between teachers and teachers, teachers and students, students and students, students and social people. The course enables students to obtain communicative awareness and enhances their ability of oral expression.” (*Professor Guo, the teacher*)

“Oral English learning needs a real social environment to make up the deficiency of the traditional classroom teaching. Through using the all-encompassing teaching materials which the teacher participates in its compiling, this course provides us opportunities to communicate with people from different languages, customs and cultural backgrounds, particularly the native speakers of English. Thus, this course not only makes us obtain oral English learning interest and stimulate the initiative to learn oral English, but also improves our spoken language idiomaticity and fluency.” (*Lin and Hou, two students*)

Discussions

Implications for EFL Teaching Program Designers

The redesign of all-encompassing teaching materials has built a multimedia and multimodal environment for EFL learning. Students' learning style is transformed and the integration between materials and teaching is effectively achieved. First, all-encompassing teaching materials include paper textbooks, audio and video products and network teaching resources, integrating EFL teaching contents, resources and

methods as a multi-channel, multi-form and multi-level system. Second, a series of changes in EFL curriculum design pattern are caused by the application of all-encompassing teaching materials, for example, textbooks with paper as the single medium are moved to a system with paper, electronic and network-based teaching resources as well as the inadequate teaching environment within the classroom is moved to real and natural language communicating and learning environment. Third, all-encompassing teaching materials meet the needs of both teachers and students for independently choosing, adapting and using teaching materials to establish an open platform of language study for encouraging students' abilities of autonomous, cooperative and inquiry learning and innovative thinking so that the goal of EFL curriculum and higher education can be achieved. Specifically, some implications of AETM use for EFL teaching program designers are listed below:

1. The AETM-driven teaching advocates a collaboration and autonomy before class + presentation in classroom teaching model. The students are required to work in a group or independently before class under the guidance of teachers with the help of AETM which can provide multi-dimensional learning resources such as electronic lesson plans, teaching videos, etc.; the teachers examine and evaluate the students' learning effects in class; at the same time, the network resources are taken to create multi-player online interactive situation for students in which the target language is used for communicating in a virtual social scene to imitate a real target language interacting and learning environment. This guides English listening and speaking teaching to be developed in a cooperative, independent, diversified and individualized direction and lays a solid

foundation for the progress of Chinese EFL students' language ability.

2. Students and teachers cooperatively redesign the teaching materials to produce opportunities for the students to complete language learning tasks in the multimedia environment through conceptualization, internalization, participation and practice to understand and experience what a successful language learning process is. Thus, an explicit curriculum teaching platform is built. In the meantime, students are likely to experience real-life interaction if they utilize massive information resources and other media which provide a simulation of the real communicative environment by redesigning AETM. Therefore, a hidden curriculum teaching platform is built as well as the second class is formed to widen English learning space for Chinese EFL students. To stress the interactive activities inside and outside the classroom, an integrated teaching mode is established for *College English Speaking* course instruction with the assistance of a multimedia, multimodal and multi-dimensional environment. Since RAETM is able to make up the deficiency of the traditional teaching environment, an individualized EFL teaching environment can be realized as what has been shown in Figure 3.

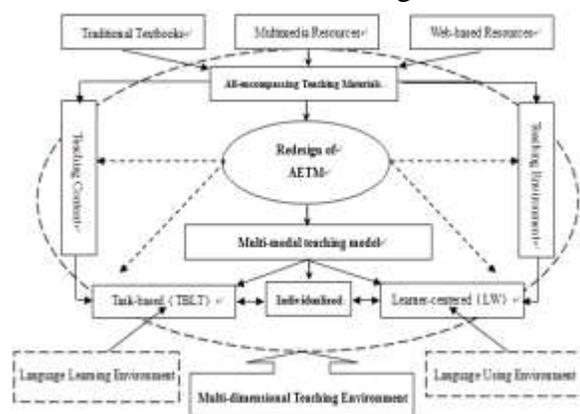


Figure 3. A RAETM-driven Multi-dimensional Teaching Environment Design Model

To sum up, with information technology, AETM can promote *College English Speaking* curriculum design, strengthen students' language ability and increase the diversity of teaching content. It is reflected from the following three aspects that explain why the application of AETM plays an important role in *College English Speaking* curriculum development: first, students choose from a menu of learning resources according to their own needs; second, students learn English in a ubiquitous environment; third, a set of individualized solutions for English learning is found. The content and format of AETM co-work for the improvement of students' language ability in *College English Speaking* teaching, through the combination of curricular and extracurricular learning, online and offline learning, autonomous and reception learning, learning to use and using to learn and inheritance and innovation of learning.

Suggestions for Further Studies

Focusing on the notion of RAETM, the current study mainly discusses on how to construct a multi-dimensional teaching environment and utilize massive information resources to achieve individualized teaching and learning in English education in China. Further studies may be done on the investigation of EFL course design model in the multi-dimensional environment so as to mine the students' potential fully and improve the quality of teaching effectively.

Specifically, the related research topics include: theoretical underpinnings of the multi-dimensional teaching environment construction, advantages of RAETM in EFL teaching environment optimization, learners' language acquisition typicality in the multi-dimensional teaching environment, challenges and countermeasures of constructing the multi-dimensional teaching environment in EFL teaching, and so forth.

Conclusion

This study explores the teaching environment based on the idea of the redesign of all-encompassing English teaching materials. Encouraging the application of the multimodal, multimedia, and multi-environment model in modern foreign language teaching, teachers guide students to individualize their learning through RAETM, which enables the teaching contents much extended and the learning modes more effective. Thus, students' needs for individuality in EFL learning could be satisfied.

In summary, the most suitable use of AETM implies that language teachers need to develop RAETM to build a multi-dimensional teaching environment. It is a commonly-accepted belief that EFL teachers should help learners identify the effectiveness of AETM use and encourage them to try combinations of RAETM and the multi-dimensional teaching environment construction.

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