

Outcome-Based Approach to Teaching Students Comprehensive English in China: From “Golden Course” to “Golden Lessons”

Zhengping Zeng¹

¹ School of Foreign Languages, Leshan Normal University, Leshan, China

Correspondence: Zhengping Zeng, School of Foreign Languages, Leshan Normal University, Leshan, Sichuan, China.

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Abstract

“Golden course”, which is against frivolous course, has become a hot topic in Chinese higher education as new requirements are imposed on classroom teaching efficiency. Under this background, this paper takes the course “Comprehensive English 3” as an example to discuss how to design “golden course” and “golden lessons”. To achieve this purpose, the author first constructs an outcome-based model of course design based on outcome-based education and briefly analyzes POA which is taken as a tool to implement beliefs of “golden lessons”. Guided by this model, development goals, students’ needs and course goals in the course are discussed. For the relationship, “golden course” is the basis of “golden lessons”, and a series of “golden lessons” is the realization of “golden course”. To realize “golden course”, the author designs one unit and discusses how to implement the beliefs by using one specific example. Either “golden course” or “golden lessons” is a new belief to all university teachers, the realization needs more research and this paper just provides implications for the teachers who would design “golden course” and implement its beliefs.

Keywords: “golden course”, “golden lessons”, outcome-based approach, comprehensive English, course design, unit design

1. Introduction

At the National Conference on Undergraduate Education in the New Era this year, the minister of Education proposed the topic of “golden course” and aroused a heated discussion. Then, the Ministry of Education issued relevant documents and explicitly pointed out: “All universities should sort out teaching content in every course, eliminate low-efficiency courses and create “golden courses”, reasonably increase the challenge level of school work, increase the difficulty level and extend the course in depth so as to improve teaching efficiency practically.” Responding to the above proposal, the author in this paper tries to discuss how to design “golden course” and “golden lessons” based on the theory of outcome-based education so as to cultivate innovative talents who will not only be able to build up correct values and views on life, but also gain necessary language knowledge and competence and meet social needs after graduation.

2. Theoretical Foundations for Course Design and Lesson Plan

2.1 A Brief Introduction of Outcome-Based Education

Outcome-based education (OBE) is an educational theory which was proposed by scholars in 1981 (Spady, 1994; Rassow, 1998). OBE approaches the curriculum design based on the competencies students should demonstrate at the end of their educational experience, thus the outcomes or competencies dictate the curriculum content and organization, the teaching methods and strategies (Harden, 1986; Brady, 1996). In other words, OBE means starting with a picture of what students will be able to do is essential for designing a course. Spady (2003), the leading exponent of OBE, developed four essential principles of OBE: (1) Clarity of focus, it means everything teachers do must be clearly focused on what they want learners to ultimately be able to do successfully; (2) Designing back, it refers to the fact that the starting point for all curriculum design must be a clear definition of the learning outcomes that students are to achieve by the end of their formal education; (3) High expectations, teachers must establish high, challenging standards of performance; (4) Expanded opportunities, it means students are provided with expanded opportunities to achieve high performances. Obviously, the above principles are consistent with the beliefs proposed by our minister.

2.2 Outcome-Based Model of Course Design

Based on the OBE principles, six elements of course design are incorporated them into a model (See Figure 1). Specifically, this model is guided by development goals and students' needs. And the two elements will bring desired learning outcomes. To achieve the learning outcomes, learning content, learning tasks and assessment are involved. In this way, the students will improve continuously during the course.

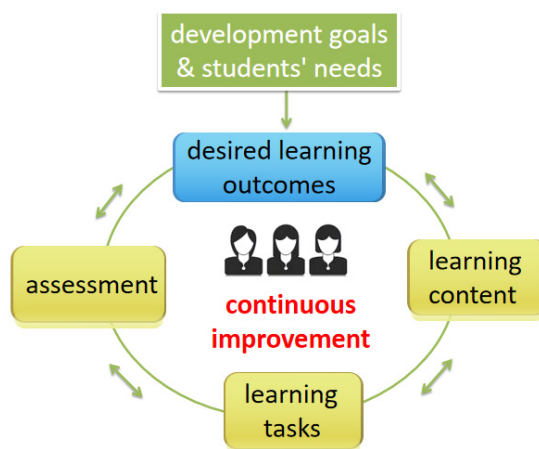


Figure 1. Outcome-based model of course design

Different scholars propose different elements of course design, but the key elements might be learner, objective, method and assessment (Richard & Theodore, 2001). Based on OBE, extra elements are involved, such as development goals and continuous improvement. The starting point of course design is development goal, and it will make us know the destination that we will take the students to.

2.3 A Tool to Implement Beliefs of “Gold Lessons”: POA

High-order, creativity and challenge-level are the beliefs of “gold lessons” (Wu, 2018). For high-order, it means integration of knowledge and ability, comprehensive strategies and high-order thinking used to solve complicated problems. For creativity, it involves teaching content, teaching process and learning outcomes. Specifically, teaching content should reflect the leading edge of this new era, teaching process should be interactive and advanced, learning outcomes should be personalized and exploring. The last belief of “gold lessons” is challenge-level, which indicates that teachers should have high expectations and students must make efforts to achieve the learning outcomes.

To implement the above beliefs, we should have the aid of certain teaching approaches. In this paper, the author takes production-oriented approach (POA) as the tool to realize “gold lessons”. For the teaching procedure of POA, it consists of three teaching phases: (1) motivating, (2) enabling, and (3) assessing. All three phases are mediated by teachers, whose mediating roles include guiding, designing, and scaffolding in addition to being a facilitator and a consultant (Wen, 2018; Chang, 2017). At motivating phase, students are expected to try out the designated productive tasks and realize what they are going to achieve at the end of the lesson. At enabling phase, teachers provide a series of enabling tasks for students to study the language such as sentence structures, functions, vocabulary and so on. At the third phase, formative assessment is mainly used, and it can be grouped into two categories (Qiu, 2017). One takes place in the enabling phase, the other is to assess students’ language products at the end of a lesson.

It is obvious that beliefs of POA are similar to those of OBE and “golden lessons”. Thus, POA can be an effective tool for teachers to implement beliefs of “gold lessons”. In fact, both learning outcomes and tasks in “golden lessons” are always exploring and challenging. To help students accomplish all the learning tasks, teachers needs to provide kinds of scaffolding.

3. “Golden Course” Design: Comprehensive English 3

Based on the above model of course design, the author designed the course, Comprehensive English 3. Specifically, it includes the following three parts.

3.1 Development Goals

The mission of English major at our university is to nurture outstanding English teachers who are expected to acquire a high level of language proficiency, solid English pedagogic content knowledge (PCK), and adequate practical teaching experience, so that they can quickly adapt to basic foreign education in the 21st century in western China.

3.2 Students' Needs

Most of the students have graduated from rural high schools in China. They have a relatively low level of language proficiency, low critical thinking skills and insufficient cross-cultural competence. Besides, during their English learning process they have constructed teaching beliefs, many of which are based on outdated teaching practices.

3.3 Course Goals

To update students' teaching beliefs and prepare them for learning systematic PCK, we embed teaching skills training in comprehensive English course.

The idea of embedding teaching skills training in comprehensive English are evolved from the author's real teaching experience in English method courses. During the teaching, the author found that the students had constructed a lot of outdated teaching beliefs unconsciously during their English learning process in high school, which is not useful for them to construct new teaching beliefs. It is obvious that students will be greatly helped if student are exposed to sufficient good examples of actual teaching. As we know, these examples will show them certain teaching rules to draw upon, then their new schemata of language teaching will be constructed.

Why is PCK embedded into this course rather than other courses? First, there are six periods per week, two years, Comprehensive English 1-4. Second, students will have an overall understanding of what language teaching is. Comprehensive English is both skill-mixing and knowledge-mixing, it involves different language skills and knowledge. In two years, students are exposed to different lesson types and they can put them together to build up a whole.

Why aren't all teaching points involved in one semester? On one hand, if one point is focused at a regular period of time, students will have a better understanding of what it is. For example, there are eight different reading texts in Comprehensive English 3, specifically, two stories, one speech, one autobiographical essay, and four pieces of argumentation. Each time the topic of how to teach reading is discussed, students will be exposed to different genres and get much more familiar with the models for teaching reading and kinds of reading activities. On the other hand, learning how to teach in this course is the by-product of language competence development. The main task of this course is not to train teaching skills but to develop students' language competence. So, the course goals include language competence, along with pedagogic content knowledge (PCK).

For language knowledge, students will acquire new words, idioms, and expressions, as well as an understanding of phonetic and phonological rules, lexical rules and their use, and the recognition of grammatical structures and syntax patterns (See Table 1).

Table 1. Goals of language knowledge

| Words, idioms and expressions | Phonetic and phonological rules | Lexical rules and their use | Grammatical structures & sentence patterns |
|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------|-----------------------------|--|
| Acquire about 1000 words | structure | express viewpoints | while clause |
| Acquire about 100-200 idioms | figure of speech | translate | if only, if not |
| Acquire about 100-200 expressions | logic | write essays | ... |

For language skills, reading comprehension, text appreciation and language application are mainly involved (See Table 2). However, why aren't listening and speaking involved? This is an intensive English course. The core task is still the improvement of reading ability. So reading comprehension and text appreciation are mainly involved. However, language application is emphasized, and it is obvious that students' other language skills will be improved through reading.

Table 2. Goals of language skills

| Comprehension | Appreciation | Application |
|----------------------------|------------------|-------------------------------|
| sort out information | structure | express viewpoints & emotions |
| make inferences | figure of speech | translate |
| identify coherence | logic | write essays |
| recognize cohesive devices | theme | |
| analyze writing purpose | | |

For cross-cultural competence, the students will acquire a general knowledge of the main English-speaking countries, have a comprehensive understanding of some foreign cultures, and appreciate Chinese cultures.

For the development of PCK, we will mainly focus on reading in Comprehensive English 3 (See Table 3). Specifically, the students are to summarize models accurately for teaching reading and organize kinds of reading activities.

Table 3. PCK goals in comprehensive English 1-4

| Courses | PCK |
|-------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Comprehensive English 1 | pronunciation & vocabulary |
| Comprehensive English 2 | listening & speaking, grammar |
| Comprehensive English 3 | reading |
| Comprehensive English 4 | writing |

4. “Golden Lessons” Plan: Unit 5 Silent Spring

4.1 Teaching Content and Periods

The text is taken from Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (Yang, 2013). Carson started with a fable for tomorrow and then presented the consequences of the over-use of chemicals. This text is persuasive argumentation. In the text, Carson used the fable and persuasive devices to alarm readers to protect the environment. This unit is divided into twelve periods, eight for text learning, and four for exercises.

4.2 Analysis of Students

For the target students, they lack sufficient knowledge about the topic “chemicals”, and the genre “persuasive argumentation”, so it will be difficult for them to find out the discourse structure. Moreover, they have no practical experience of teaching persuasive argumentation.

4.3 Teaching Objectives

Based on the above analysis, the teaching objectives are set. For language competence, the students will be able to understand the fable and its moral lesson, analyze Carson’s position and two arguments, identify persuasive devices and interpret the values Carson appeals to, do a stage reading show and write a speech draft on the overuse of chemicals.

For PCK, after studying the whole article, the students are asked to summarize how to teach persuasive argumentation with the guidance of the teacher.

The genre-based learning tasks are the difficult teaching points in this unit. To deal with the difficult points, before doing a clear thinking analysis of the text, students will be provided the following scaffolding: identifying the genre of the article, reviewing the general knowledge of a persuasive piece of writing. On one hand, persuasive style tries to convince the reader about the idea of the author and it has a more personal tone. On the other hand, argumentative writing tries to prove a point of view, it appears to be cold and based upon facts.

4.4 An Example of the Lesson Design

To realize these teaching objectives and implement beliefs of “gold lessons”, blended online and offline teaching and POA will be adopted. In this part, the author will only focus on one example to show how the teaching beliefs are implemented.

First, two productive tasks have been designed at the motivating phase (See Figure 2). One is TV Show “READERS with Jane Goodall”, the other is “Campus English Broadcasting: Over-use of Chemicals.” For task one, the students will do a stage show. For task two, they will submit a speech draft on the overuse of chemicals in China.

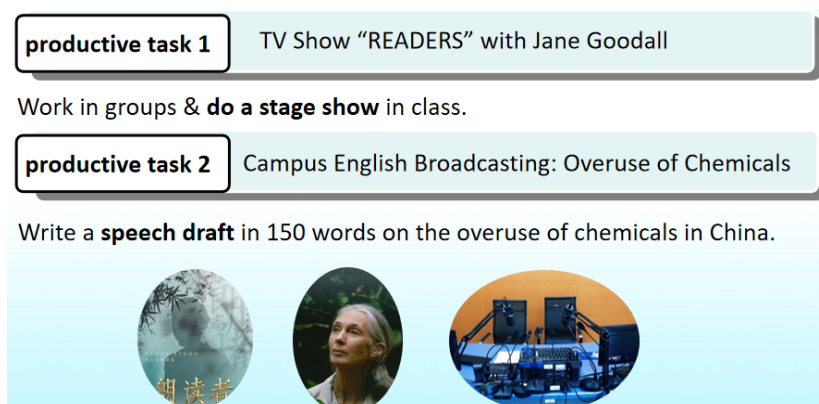


Figure 2. Productive tasks in unit 5

After each task, students are expected to do corresponding enabling tasks and assessments. Take the first task for example, after doing this task, students will notice what they lack in performing the task and then they have the motivation to learn through the enabling tasks, such as locating striking contrasts, identifying emotive language and discussing the moral lesson of the fable.

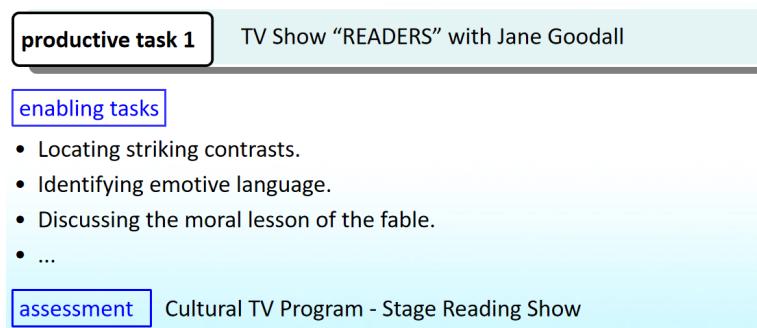


Figure 3. Productive task 1, enabling tasks and assessment

At the assessment phase, students’ performance will be assessed through formative assessment. In this unit, four tools will be mainly used to assess students’ performance in the classroom: (1) Asking questions. It is used to check students’ understanding of the article, how much they know about the overuse of chemicals, or how Carson organizes this article. (2) Peer-assessment. It is used to assess one other student’s written composition and stage reading show based on corresponding criteria. (3) Portfolios. Students will put their learning products in their portfolios. The products will be written compositions and videos of the stage reading show, students can review their own learning progress and the teacher can use this portfolio for grading (Seldin, 2004). (4) Quiz; After learning the whole unit, students will take a quiz which covers multiple-choices, paraphrase, summarizing, and translation (expressions+sentences). (5) Performance assessment. It is to measure students’ ability to use previously acquired knowledge in solving problems or completing specific tasks. Performance assessment is not norm-referenced but criterion-referenced.

In addition, to achieve the objective of PCK in this unit, the teacher will first be intended to select a relatively independent part of the text for a group of students and instruct them to prepare the lesson. Then, the teacher will embed the students’ lesson into his or her own lesson as a whole. Later, the students will present their team teaching in front of the class during my lesson and do peer assessment and self-assessment after the presentation. Specifically, the following questions will be asked by the teacher to help students assess how much PCK they

have learned: What do you teach? How do you teach? Why do you teach in this way? After students' assessment, the teacher will make some comments.

4.5 Reflection

Generally, the above tasks embody the beliefs of "golden lessons": high-order, creativity, and challenge-level. Specifically, they relate to the hot issues of this new era, they require language knowledge and skills, comprehensive strategies and high-order thinking. And to complete the challenging tasks, students need to cooperate so as to find out personalized solutions.

5. Conclusion

OBE provides us a lot enlightenment. "Golden course" and "golden lessons" highlight learning outcomes. The focus on outcomes creates a clear expectation of what needs to be accomplished by the end of the course. Students will understand what are expected of them and teachers will know what they need to teach during the course. According to OBE, teachers should design all our courses based on their development goals, and every course should help students achieve specific learning outcomes (Tuyen, 2018). In this way, students will definitely meet the graduate requirements by the end of the educational experience. OBE is meant to be a student-centered learning model, one important role of teachers is a facilitator.

For realizing a "golden course" or "golden lessons", we are still on the way, it takes us the time to have a further and better understanding of "golden course" or "golden lessons". On May 1st, it's the first time that we heard the two terms. We have tried our best to understand what a "golden course" might be, but we still need the time to have a further understanding of them through more research.

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