



## Process-Centered Teaching and Its Implications in English Teaching in China

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### Abstract

Process-centered teaching, as a contrary to product-centered teaching, is a paradigm which emphasizes the way in which a language, syllabus, or curriculum is taught and learnt from the point of view of the learner, and how the language becomes directly relevant to the lives of the learners. This paper, based on an analysis of process-centeredness, proposes some implications in English teaching in China. It desires to enable English teachers more awakened to the process of teaching instead of just simply paying heeds to learners' performances in examinations.

**Keywords:** Process-centered teaching, Implications, English teaching in China

### 1. Introduction

From the efforts put on language teaching, there exist two types of teaching: product-centered and process-centered. Product-centered teaching focuses on what students produce in terms of their learning, i.e. product. Process-centered teaching, however, focuses on what the teacher accomplishes in terms of the instructional practices and procedures, i.e. process (Spada, 1987:137-161). Since product-centeredness has the learning outcomes as its primary focus, such teaching is intended to make the students obtain higher marks in examinations; Process-centered approach, on the other hand, is intended to make both teachers and students well aware of the process so as to help the students get a balanced outcome (ibid).

China has boosted the largest English learning population in the world. The teaching of English as a foreign language (TEFL) in China has made tremendous achievements in the past decade, and now has developed into "a unique part of China's education system" (Shu, 1998). But the present English education is still far from satisfactory. Generally speaking, TEFL in China is still dominated by a product-centeredness, which sees English learning as a process of quantitative increase of knowledge. Witness the fact that in English teaching programs in China, no matter what level they are or what approach they profess to follow, a definite number of words and a definite list of grammar items are invariably laid down as final objectives (ibid). Every year millions of teachers and students in China, for preparing for various examinations, have exhausted themselves. It seems the higher the students' marks are, the higher reputation a school enjoys, the more merits a teacher has, and therefore the more opportunity the students will have. The product of teaching is highlighted to such a degree that the teaching process is thus belittled with learners' creativity, the problem-solving ability, learning strategies, and learners' differences neglected.

Although many teachers are trying to incorporate some other methods as suggestopedia, the communicative approaches, ect., in the English classroom, product-centeredness still prevails. It is not an exaggeration to say that the product-centeredness has, in some way, "crippled" some of our students. Even if they have got high marks in Band 4 and Band 6 examinations, they are still "mute and deaf" in communication in spite of their ability to memorize thousands of words, to analyze sentence structures and to read moderately difficult articles. Therefore some scholars criticize the present English teaching in China as "a kettle of water that never boils" (Jin, March 10th, 1999, Education Herald).

### 2. Process-centered teaching: a literature review

Chinese ancient Classical Humanism advocated a heuristic method, which is an ethic-centered reflective education, with learning, inquiring, reflecting, discriminating and acting as its procedure, which actually highlights the process of

teaching. It is the essence of ancient Chinese teaching.

Various scholars have done serious researches on process-centered teaching. Xia & Kong (1998: 34-40) in their paper *Theoretical Basis of 'Difficulty-based Teaching Method' and 'Task-based Teaching Method'*, quoting Gray's (1990: 261-269) distinction of subject-focused teaching and process-focused teaching, point out that process syllabus requires a shift of emphasis from what is to be learnt by learners to how it is to be learnt. Here what is to be learnt actually refers to the product-centered teaching and how it is to be learnt is the process-centered teaching.

As the teacher's belief determines his/her way of teaching, process-centeredness can be traced back to the teachers' theoretical foundations. Process-centered teaching can find its base in the process syllabus while product-centered teaching has its source in the content syllabus. The process syllabus proposed by Breen in 1970 (in White, 1991: 99) is influenced by the view that some learners are more efficient than others, and that different learners have different ways to learn. Ronald White (1991: 44-47), in his book *The ELT Curriculum: Design, Innovation and Management*, discusses two teaching syllabi, which he terms as Type A and Type B. Type A, consisting of structural and notional-functional syllabi, is based on the content to be learned, and therefore is called content syllabus. Type B, based on the view of "being either a learner-centered or a learning-centered one" (ibid: 47), is named as process syllabus. White (1991: 44-47) summarizes some salient characteristics of process-centeredness and product-centeredness as shown in the following table (See table 1).

It can be shown from the table that process-centeredness is different from product-centeredness. Firstly, the product-centeredness, as the title indicates, focuses on the end results of the learning process. That is, what the learner is expected to be able to do as a fluent and competent user of the language. Process-centeredness, on the other hand, focuses on the various classroom activities believed to promote the development of skilled language use (Nunan, 1991: 86-87). Secondly, the product-centeredness gives way to the gaining of knowledge, the attainment of goals and the system of learning. It is a knowledge-oriented method guided by the content of knowledge. Process-centeredness stresses the gradual steps and skills of acquisition. It emphasizes not the end, i.e., what learners have learned, but the means, i.e., how language is to be learnt. With the joint decision of teachers and students as its content, with learners themselves finding out their needs, accomplishing them, and making achievement evaluations, process-centeredness is internally triggered learning. It attempts to deal with the question: 'who does what with whom, on what subject-matter, with what resources, when, how and for what learning purposes?' (White, 1991: 44-47). In Gray's opinion (1990: 263), the process-centered teaching includes the following three perspectives:

- a) Linguistic perspective: what linguistic elements should be taught?
- b) Learners perspective: what does the learner want to do with the language?
- c) Learning perspective: what activities will stimulate and promote language acquisition?

### **3. Process-centeredness or product-centeredness: a theoretical foundation**

As far as the purposes of education are concerned, there are three orientations or ideologies: classical humanism, reconstructionism, and progressivism, with each having different proposals for aims, contents and methodologies (Huang, 2000: 8). Classical humanism, represented by the grammar-translation method, emphasizes grammar teaching with translation from and into the target language as its principal practice technique. Reconstructionism, with audio-lingualism as its representative, stresses that language teaching be the promotion of practical skills, i.e., the incremental and mastery learning, in which each step is based on the proceeding. It assumes that "given appropriate learning activities, all students can achieve mastery [of knowledge] if they have enough time" (Crawford-Lange, in White, 1991: 25). So the learning process is viewed as one of habituation and conditioning which involves the memorization of dialogues and imitative repetition (Stern, 1999: 464), which is concerned with 'doing things to' the learner. Progressivism, with process-centered teaching as its representative, by contrast, coincides with what Crawford-Lange characterizes as "problem-posing education", which "extracts a concern for the real-life situation of the learners as well as a perception of the student as decision-maker" (White, 1991: 25). It insists that education is a means of providing students with learning experiences, which enables them to learn from their own efforts. It holds that the learner is a "whole person" whose individual development should be promoted, and learning is a learner-centered one with a focus on the process of learning rather than mastery of discrete learning items, therefore the purpose of education is "to stimulate new ideas, opinions and perceptions rather than simply to exchange them" (ibid).

Process can be referred as the activities or actions used to produce the product. Process is important precisely because it affects the quality of the outcome of a task (Underhill, 1989: 252). As far as product is concerned, Gregg (1990: 35) holds two interpretations. In a broad sense, product is the communicative competence learners have acquired in language learning, or the utilization of linguistic knowledge in communication (Ellis, 1994: 302). In a narrow sense, it is the completed acts, or output data, say, learners' mastery of knowledge, learners' performance in examinations. But to some English teachers in China, when by product, they just exclusively mean the latter. That is, they just confine product within the specific area of mastery of language embodied by learners' performance in tests, i.e., the marks

learners get in exams. The product-centered teaching in China, quite frequently, is nothing more than the exam-driven, spoon-fed teaching. The product-centered teacher, hereby, is one who, ignorant of learning initiative and creativity, regards the grasp of knowledge as the objective of teaching, and who assumes students' high marks as the mere attainment of English teaching.

Language teaching and learning are indispensable of product and process. No education can be done just by the simple way of instructing or producing. It can only be achieved by learners' cognitive and practicing process. From this point of view, process is by far more important than the product itself. However, emphasizing process-centeredness doesn't deny the compatibility of the product-centeredness and process-centeredness. "The teaching product itself is inescapable from the teaching process. There is unlikely to be any product without process; the product is likely to depend strongly on the process engaged in its production" (Harris et. al., 1986: 92). Satisfactory 'fruits' can only derive from down-to-earth process, i.e., the way you teach, the time you spend and the energy you have put into it. Hirst (1975, in White, 1991: 35) argues that process-centered teaching should be the combination of process and product, yet with greater efforts on the former.

#### **4. Process-centeredness: its implication in English teaching in China**

Teaching process is "the basic building blocks for successful language teaching and learning", in which "learners need to be motivated, be exposed to language, and given chances to use it" (Harmer, 2000: 25). So it is advised to teach learners "the art to catch fishes" instead of "fishes" only (Shu, 1999). The traditional product-centeredness is characterized by teachers' absolute authority over the class, inactivity both in teaching and learning and "high cost yet low efficiency", which is disadvantageous to quality education, and to some degree, has resulted in the "mute and dumb" learners.

Neither can we discard the brilliances we have owed in our traditions, nor can we apply everything imported without discrimination. Considering the specific situations in China, this paper, thereby proposes that the process-centered teaching in China be the mixture of both process and product. That is, while paying heed to the product of teaching and learning, we shall never give up the process, yet with emphasis on the latter. But the product here contains more than the scores learners have attained in exams. Other elements, say, learners' communicative competence, problem-solving abilities, their developments in minds and affection, and etc., should also be included.

##### *4.1 Knowledge and skills*

Typical product-centered teaching is teacher-centered and knowledge-oriented, which tends to develop students' linguistic competence (Yang, 1990). The learning process is reduced to a mere command of grammatical terms and rules. One of the major disadvantages is that it inhibits in-depth understanding and synthesis of knowledge. It allows little room for independent and individualistic modes of learning.

The ultimate purpose of English teaching is to provide the students with the ability to communicate. Reading, listening, speaking, and writing, are the commonly used skills in communication. Although the linguistic form of language is important, language skills are indispensable. Without knowledge, skills would be irrational; whereas without skills, knowledge would be kept dead. Skills are the trigger of knowledge while knowledge is the prompter of skills. Language learning is not just to know about language, but the skills to do with it. From 'knowing' to 'doing', from 'knowing about language' to 'doing with language', it is the process that changes knowledge to practice. Knowledge about language itself cannot be automatized into skills. Knowledge can be imparted; practical skills, however, can only be cultivated, which can be done neither by preaching and explaining, nor knowing and understanding.

There are many ways to integrate knowledge about language into the skills of using language, of which the task-based teaching is popular. Task-based teaching makes the language learning process meaningful and purposeful because the 'tasks' provide 'actual meaning' to the leaning (Shu, 1998: 212). It is 'learning by doing' (Wilson, 1986b: 28). By tasks, students can learn to do things with language in practice, or to deal with problems. In order to perform the task, students are supposed to not only use and develop all the four major skills, but also constantly combine and integrate them in use, and therefore to develop not four separate skills, but rather composite skills involving sometimes one, sometimes two or more of the conventional skills. When they are trying to do something successfully, they are learning in practice. Thus, the acquisition of new skills takes place during the performance of learning tasks.

##### *4.2 Input and output*

Product-centeredness is input-oriented with little emphasis given to output. Product-centered teachers usually spend too much time on grammatical and lexical analysis, which leads to teachers' dominance of the classroom, an imbalance between language input and output, and underdevelopment of learners' communicative competence.

It is agreed that input plays a critical role in language acquisition. Input is the language a learner is exposed to (either written or spoken) in the environment. Input is essential in language learning. Without input the learner can learn nothing. But what is the optimal input. Krashen (1985) has argued that the input given to learners has to be

comprehensible and be at one stage above the learner's current level ( $i + 1$ ) in order to be acquired. But Krashen's comprehensible input has been met with some criticism from Swain (1995), Ellis (1997) etc. Ellis (1997: 279) points out that though comprehensible input can facilitate acquisition, it is not a necessary condition of acquisition, and does not guarantee that acquisition will take place. This is especially true when the target language is learnt as a foreign language in a non-supportive environment, i.e., in EFL situation as in China, where, though the source of language input has been expanded greatly with the development of telecommunication, instruction is likely to be the major or even the only source of target language input (Stern, 1997: 340).

Input is essential in language learning, but output, the language a learner produces, is also indispensable. Swain (1995: 245) contended that comprehensible output is a necessary mechanism in language acquisition, because it can provide opportunities for contextualized and meaningful language use, which allows students to "move from semantic analysis of the language to a syntactic analysis of it" (ibid). In the output hypothesis, Swain (1995: 125-126) claims that output can enhance 'fluency' and promote 'noticing', which can trigger learners' cognitive process, generate linguistic knowledge new for them, and consolidate their existing knowledge.

Output is the necessary process of transmitting knowledge into skills. If there is only input without adequate output, it is equal to waste time and energy, even provided with the condition to change the knowledge into skills. Vice versa, while creating conditions for learners' output, it is necessary to input knowledge the learners lack so as to form the combination of input and output. Otherwise however large vocabulary a learner has, however solid grammatical rules he has, and however systematic knowledge he has grasped, he is still handicapped in communication, or an idiot with high marks. Therefore the teacher's role is not only to provide students with appropriate input, but also with sufficient stimulation for their output. Only in this way can the correlation between input and output, thus, be kept.

#### *4.3 Language learning and language communication*

The methodology the product-centered teachers generally used is structure-based with the instruction of linguistic form as its focus by way of questioning, explanation and grammar exercise (Shu, 1998: 202). In such courses, the teacher's purpose is to see that students learn the vocabulary and grammatical rules of the target language. The goal of learners is, therefore, often to pass an examination rather than to use the language for daily communication (Lightbown, 1998: 70). Some students may be good at using linguistic rules skillfully, productively and sometimes communicatively, but a large number of them fall puzzled by the authentic language in natural settings and can't express their ideas correctly and appropriately. In other words, they are communicatively inferior to their linguistic competence. This seems to bear out W. Johnson's paradox that "the teachers of English teach English so poorly, largely because they teach grammar so well" (Bao, 1998: 218).

The teaching of linguistic competence can't guarantee communication competence (Widdowson, 1996: 19). To make the class more effective in terms of developing students' communicative competence, we should incorporate some communicative moves into the present framework. As some scholars (e.g., Han, 1999: 8-10; Li, 1999: 11-15) suggest, in initial stage as in primary school, more weight should be attached to linguistic forms. But for high intermediate or advanced students, they are "already familiar with much of the language grammar ...it is a case of re-presentation, rather than initial introduction of grammatical structure" (Johnson & Morrow, 1982: 94). To them it is better to focus on communication.

The key to the success of language teaching lies not in the teaching, but more importantly, in the learning. As the saying goes, you can lead a horse to water, but you cannot make it drink. "The teacher can help, advise and teach; but only the learner can learn." (ibid: 63) Without the process of students' internalization, and without the opportunity to use language to communicate, the students' learning can only be half-baked.

#### *4.4 Learners' affect and learning strategies*

Product-centered teachers pay special attention to learners' knowledge domain with their affective domain in blank. This kind of teaching seems to have taken place in a much simpler world. Teachers, just following the textbook, provide students with what they need to know. The students' task is to learn the materials. If, at the end of a course instruction, the students can demonstrate that they knew the materials, then they will receive good grades. One of the consequences of this kind of teaching is what Arnold called "emotional illiteracy" (Arnold & Brown, 1999: 3).

The Humanistic Language Teaching Approach sees language learners as "a whole person", whose affect, or emotional needs, and the development of intelligence should be catered to (Rogers, 1983). Krashen (1986:30-32), in his affective filter hypothesis, suggests some affective variables such as motives (or motivation), attitudes, and emotional states (as interest, anxiety, etc.) are crucial to the success of language learning. Depending on the learner's state of mind or disposition, the affective filter limits what is noticed and what is acquired. The filter will be 'up' when the learner is stressed, self-conscious, or unmotivated. It will be 'down' when the learner is relaxed and motivated. To create a low anxiety situation, teachers should allow full scope for their students' spontaneous learning process by emphasizing learners' contributions through independent learning. Teachers should provide more opportunities for learners to judge

and analyze things by themselves. With teachers' behaviors subordinating to the learners' needs for learning, the tension and barriers between teachers and students can be lessened so as to foster learners' positive attitudes towards learning. Therefore teachers, while attending to students' cognition, should also attend to their emotional response and ego-involvement.

Besides learners' affect, teachers should also make learning strategies more implicit to learners. Learning strategies are the special thoughts or behaviors that individuals use to help them comprehend, learn, or retain new information. Learning strategies are especially important for language learning because they are tools for active, self-directed movement, which is essential for developing communicative competence (Oxford, 1990: 1). English teachers should provide a wide range of learning strategies in order to meet the needs and expectations of his students possessing different learning styles, motivations, and strategy preferences. Therefore, it can be stated that one of the other most important teacher roles in foreign language teaching is the provision of a range of tasks to match varied learning styles.

#### 4.5 Formative and summative evaluations

One of the most important reasons for product-centeredness lies in that the summative evaluation, which highlights learners' scores in exams, is widely used in examinations with formative evaluation in a lesser position. Summative evaluation highlights the outcomes, or the products the insiders have achieved while performative evaluation emphasizes the assessment in the process of development.

In a move from teaching to learning, from learners' recipient position to active participation, from teachers' performer position to conductors and facilitators of learning, there is a need for a change from summative evaluation to formative evaluation. To be really formative, learners' position as the main entity in evaluation should be stressed. Acquisition of language cannot take place without the main entity---language learners, whose comprehensive competence should be the main consideration in assessment. Learners should be the positive participants and collaborators of evaluation, whose language needs, affect requirements, and learning strategies can't be neglected.

### 5. Conclusion

Of course, the shift from product-centeredness to process-centeredness is a systematic project, for it involves not only the teaching and learning processes, but also the policy-making, curriculum design, material development, language evaluation and testing. The implementation of process-centered teaching, like many other innovations, may be encountered with some setbacks. For example, in China the marks are still the yardstick to evaluating teaching. Various exams are still great pressures on both teachers and students. Although these exams have a positive backwash effect, the negative effect cannot be ignored.

Although problems do exist, process-centered teaching will prevail in the long run. More and more people, from the central government down to the local authorities, are aware of the limitations of product-centeredness, and are taking great efforts to reform it with concentration on quality education to foster students' creativity and adaptability. The brand-new College English Curriculum Requirements published in 2004 turns on a new leaf to the innovation of College English teaching. The new Requirements, alien to its predecessors in 1985 and 1986, holds that learners' abilities, especially in listening and speaking, to use English should be highly catered, and meanwhile learners' autonomous abilities and cultural qualities are also included so as to meet the needs of China's social development and international exchanges.

Language teaching is an exciting, dynamic field of endeavor; and the dynamism by its nature portends change. No one method can be said to be better than another in any absolute sense. Effective teachers, no matter what their 'method' may be, are those who think of students as the most important ingredient in the teaching-learning process and adapt their approach to students and to circumstances. As Robinett (1983: 171) puts:

The success of second language teachers is ultimately measured by how well their students have learned to communicate in the second language. ....Teachers who possess a sound knowledge of their subject matter and express warmth, sensitivity, and tolerance in imparting their knowledge can best attain success.

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Table 1. The summary of the characteristics of product-centeredness and process-centeredness

Type A: What is to be learnt?	Type B: How is it to be learnt?
Subject emphasis	Process emphasis
External to the learner	Internal to the learner
Other directed	Inner directed or self fulfilling
Determined by authority	Negotiated between learners and teachers
Teacher as decision-maker	Learner and teacher as joint decision-makers
Content= what the subject is to the expert	Content = what the subject is to the learner
Content = a gift to the learner from the teacher or knower	Content = what the learner brings and wants
Objectives defined in advance	Objectives described afterwards
Assessment by achievement or by mastery	Assessment in relationship to learners' criteria of success
Doing things to the learner	Doing things for or with the learner

---From White (1991: pp, 44-47)