

THEME-BASED INSTRUCTION IN COLLEGE ENGLISH TEACHING IN CHINA

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Yangqu Wang

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Abstract

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Yangqu Wang

Under the Supervision of Yuanyuan Hu, Ph.D.

This study was conducted at a teaching university during the fall 2016 semester in Wuhan, China to find out whether Theme-Based Instruction (TBI) can be effective in improving non-English majors' English proficiency. Two parallel College English classes were selected, one as a control group and the other as an experimental group. The control group was taught in the traditional way whereas the experimental group was taught with TBI. The National Matriculation English Test 2016 was chosen as the pretest; the fall 2016 final exam of College English was used as the posttest. Data analysis shows that the experimental group made significant progress in their overall English proficiency and listening comprehension after 12 weeks of TBI. The study indicates that TBI is feasible in College English teaching in China. It can be effective in improving non-English majors' English proficiency if it is applied consistently and longitudinally with well-designed activities and tasks.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
APPROVAL PAGE	i
TITLE PAGE	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iii
ABSTRACT	iv
TABLE OF CONTENTS	v
LIST OF TABLES	vi
CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION	1
Statement of the Problem	
Definitions of Terms	
Purpose of the Study	
Significance of the Study	
II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE	4
Content-Based Instruction	
Theme-Based Instruction	
III. METHODOLOGY	12
Research Questions	
Data Collection	
Data Analysis	
IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION	19
Results	
Discussion	
V. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS	27
Summary and Conclusions	
Limitations of the Study	
Recommendation for Future Research	
Recommendation for the Implementation of TBI in College English Teaching	
REFERENCES	31

LIST OF TABLES

TABLES	
Table 1 The Five Units Selected for Fall 2016 First-Year College English	14
Table 2 The Participants' Performance on the Pretest (NMET)	19
Table 3 The Participants' Performance on the Posttest	21
Table 4 Independent Sample Test of the Participants' Performance on the Posttest	21

Chapter I Introduction

College English, a compulsory course for Non-English majors in their first two years in mainland China, aims at preparing them in their English proficiency for their future jobs or academic fields. However, the outcomes of this course have not been satisfactory, especially in teaching universities. Today, in the global context, the increasingly frequent interactions across countries set even higher standards for the talents in their English proficiency. As a result, the gap between the undergraduates' English proficiency and their future careers' requirements has even grown.

Since 1980s, Chinese educators have been exploring the way of reforming College English teaching to narrow this gap. To facilitate and guide the reform, the Ministry of Education of China has revised the syllabus for College English several times and launched *College English Curriculum Requirements (2007)*, which requires that English should be taught as a tool for communication rather than as isolated knowledge. Under such a backdrop, numerous advanced English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching approaches of well-known scholars all over the world have been introduced to mainland China and a large number of college English teachers have made attempts to apply these approaches to their classroom to improve their teaching effectiveness.

Among them, Content-Based Instruction (CBI), which integrates content learning with language learning and thus involves students in a real language environment, aligns highly with the requirements as stated in the *College English Curriculum Requirements (2007)* for non-English majors. Theme-Based Instruction (TBI), one of the models of CBI, has drawn increasing attention of educators and EFL teachers in China since it was introduced and applied to English teaching in China in 1980s.

The basic principle of TBI is to organize language teaching by themes or topics and attaches great importance to content so that students' language acquisition occurs as the "side products" of their comprehension of the content (Genesee 1987; Yuan, 2008). The meaningful content can arouse students' interest and curiosity in the outside world beyond a target language. Consequently, their language proficiency can be improved, and their cognitive development can be enhanced.

Statement of the Problem

The traditional way of English teaching, which focuses on vocabulary, grammar and language points, has been dominant in China due to the exam-orientated English teaching in China. Unfortunately, its effectiveness has been questioned on account of the increasing concern about students' dumb English and high scores with poor English proficiency. Great efforts and attempts have been made to search for more effective ways for English teaching at all school levels. In this study, the researcher attempts to examine the effectiveness of theme-based instruction in improving the English language proficiency of non-English majors in China.

Definition of Terms

Brinton et al. (1989) define CBI as "the concurrent study of language and subject matter, with the form and sequence of language presentation dictated by content material" (p. 7). The most accepted models are theme-based instruction, sheltered content instruction, and adjunct language instruction (Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

Theme-based instruction is a CBI model usually applied in foreign language contexts. It refers to a language course in which the syllabus is structured around themes or topics, which form the backbone of the course (Brinton et al., 1989; Richards & Rodgers, 2001). It attaches equal importance to content and language. As its name suggests, language teaching activities

revolve around specific themes or topics. The students are expected to develop their language skills with their full attention devoted to the content around a theme rather than to linguistic forms. TBI is different from other CBI models which give priority to the subject matter with language as secondary interest. It attaches equal importance to theme and language. Therefore, it can be easily adapted to teach language learners of different language proficiency levels.

Purpose of the Study

This study attempts to explore the feasibility of TBI in college English teaching in China. It also aims to probe into the effects of TBI on improving non-English majors' English proficiency in China by conducting a one-semester empirical project in a teaching university in China.

Significance of the Study

The review of the literature on TBI shows that most of previous studies conducted in China mainly discuss its definition, evolution, characteristics or categorization. However, studies on its application in College English teaching, especially empirical studies, are quite rare. Therefore, this study attempts to fill in this gap by exploring the effectiveness of TBI in improving the proficiency of non-English majors in a teaching university in China, with the hope of constructing a TBI college English teaching model for non-English majors in China.

Chapter II Review of Literature

Theme-based instruction is one model of content-based instruction in EFL/ESL classroom settings. This chapter begins with a general review of content-based instruction, followed by a detailed review of TBI, including its definition, theoretical foundations and implementation in the classroom.

Content-Based Instruction

Definition and evolution. CBI, a contemporary teaching concept, can find its roots back to as early as 389 A.D. since Augustine emphasized the importance of meaningful content in language teaching (Kelly, 1969). According to Brinton, Snow & Wesche (1989), CBI developed from two movements between 1960s and 1980s: a) immersion program, and b) language across the curriculum movement. In 1965, the Canadian French immersion program started in Quebec, where both English and French were spoken. In this immersion program, teachers taught young learners math, science or history classes in French, and French learning was expected to occur naturally as a result of content or subject learning. The teaching approach resulted in the young learners' mastery of both French and subject. With the great success of the immersion program, this teaching approach prevailed soon in the elementary education in the United States and Britain. In 1975, British schools launched the Language Across the Curriculum (LAC) movement to help learners who lacked academic language for content areas (Mohan, 1986). It was found that learners' shortage of background knowledge accounted for their limited writing abilities or their difficulty in understanding reading materials. The LAC movement advocated that language should be taught across the curriculum.

Since native speakers may also have difficulty with academic subjects, Mohan (1986) concluded that EFL or ESL learners can have greater difficulty in using the target language

because of their limited understanding of both language and content. Inspired by the two ideas, Brinton et al. (1989) defined CBI as “the concurrent teaching of academic subject matter and second language skills” (p. 2). In other words, with CBI the target language is taught concurrently with a specific subject rather than taught as an isolated subject. It represents a focus shift from form to content in language teaching. Moreover, higher-level skills such as analyzing, synthesizing and evaluating material from various perspectives are emphasized in CBI. Brinton et al. (1989) also proposed that the content learned in a CBI class should be tested, which further confirms that a CBI class is more than a pure language class. After a few years’ practice and development, Stryker & Leaver (1997) concluded that CBI is more of a philosophy rather than a specific methodology in language learning and instruction.

Three models of Content-Based Instruction. Since CBI was applied in different language classroom settings, a few models have been created to cater to specific needs of learning and teaching contexts.

Theme-based instruction model. The TBI model refers to a language course in which the syllabus is structured around themes or topics, which serve as the backbone of the course (Brinton et al. 1989; Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Its flexibility to meet language learners’ needs, ranging from elementary level to university level, makes it one of the most popular CBI models.

Sheltered-content instruction model. In the sheltered-content instruction model, a course is taught in a second language by content specialists to a group of students who have been “sheltered” or separated from native speakers (Brinton et al., 1989). High-quality content instructors are needed in this model (Gaffield-Vile, 1996).

Adjunct language instruction model. The adjunct language instruction model is more sophisticated compared to the models discussed above. In this model, a language course and an

academic course are conducted under the close collaboration of the content instructor and the language instructor. The main goal of this approach is to help learners comprehend the content course with the assistance of the language course (Iancu, 1993).

The three models above share certain features, but each model has its primary focus, and no CBI template is good for all (Stryker & Leaver, 1997). The sheltered-content instruction model assists learners in mastering a subject with the help from a specialist instructor. The adjunct language instruction model allows learners to have two linked courses to develop both language and academic proficiency. The Theme-Based Instruction is more of a language course, in which learners are expected to develop their language competence through content learning.

Theme-Based Instruction

Definition. According to Brinton et al. (1989), TBI “refers to a language class in which the syllabus is structured around themes or topics, with the linguistic items in the syllabus subordinated to the ‘umbrella’ organizing function of the theme which has been selected” (p. 26). Brinton et al. (1989) added that a few unrelated themes or a certain theme covering a few specialized topics are also feasible for TBI. Snow (1997) pointed out that a TBI course is designed around themes, which fit learners’ interests and needs well. Its instructor is a language teacher rather than a specialist in a particular subject. As for students, importance is given to their command of language skills through the integration of content and form.

Theoretical foundations of TBI. Kasper (2000) asserted that both linguistic theories and cognitive theories can account for TBI. In addition, it draws upon research in the field of second language acquisition and education.

Comprehensible input hypothesis. Krashen (1985) pointed out the important role of comprehensible input in L2 learning in his Comprehensible Input Hypothesis. He argued that it

is necessary to offer L2 learners comprehensible input, which should not be far below or beyond the learners' language proficiency, but a bit challenging for them, so that the learners can naturally acquire the language through processing and negotiating the meaning of the input. Researchers (e.g., Cummins, 1994; Grabe & Stoller, 1979) stated that Krashen's Comprehensible Input Hypothesis offers support to CBI. Scarcella & Oxford (1992) agreed that it is congruent with TBI in that "if students are actively engaged in meaningful, related theme-based tasks, they gain repeated exposure to language that help them to process the language" (p. 6).

Pushed output hypothesis. Swain (1985) argued that meaningful and comprehensible input does not necessarily lead to successful language acquisition. She proposed Pushed Output Hypothesis, which suggests that L2 learners should be offered sufficient opportunities to use the target language meaningfully. Comprehension involving the receptive skills, listening and reading, allows the learners to process the information to get the gist, while the actual use of language compels the learners to give adequate attention to the forms of the language. As Swain (1995) pointed out, the three functions of output in language acquisition are the noticing function, the hypothesis-testing function and the reflective function.

Cognitive academic language proficiency. Another relevant theory from second language acquisition research is Cummins' (1979) distinction between two types of language proficiency – cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) and basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS). Cummins (1979) argued that it takes much longer for L2 learners to develop CALP than BICS. It may take the learners 1-2 years to develop BICS, while it may be 5-7 years to develop CLAP. Grade & Stoller (1979) suggested that content instruction should be offered to L2 students to help them acquire CALP rather than postponed until after the students acquire academic language. They also argued that a TBI course will be the most effective way for the

students to develop their CALP. Song (2006) conducted a six-year study with two groups of college students and found out that the group enrolled in the TBI ESL course outperformed the other group both in the English course and following academic courses.

Cognitive learning theory. Cognitive Learning Theory (CLT) illustrates how general skills and knowledge are acquired. Anderson (1990) divided the learners' learning process into three stages: (1) cognitive stage, which is the beginning stage for the learners to get and present the information in memory and form basic images; (2) associative stage, which allows the learners to combine their newly acquired knowledge and skills with existing ones and to further restructure and organize them; and (3) autonomous stage, which enables the learners to polish their knowledge and skills and finally perform autonomously.

The second language learning process can be interpreted in light of CLT. Coherent and meaningful information on a certain theme can help learners make associations between new and old information. The learners may form a clearer image of the new information and make it easier to be memorized. After the new information being restructured in their brain, the learners may be able to use their newly acquired knowledge automatically. Singer (1990) argued that coherently presented information requires less time and effort for long-term memory and leads to effective learning. TBI, providing thematically organized information and more opportunities for learners to participate in closely related tasks, can improve the learners' cognitive engagement and enhance their language acquisition.

Empirical studies on TBI in the classroom. Researchers around the world have examined the effectiveness of TBI by conducting empirical studies on TBI in the ESL/EFL classroom. Osman (2009) conducted a study on his TBI writing course that entailed cooperative writing for 36 ESL learners in a Malaysian tertiary institution. His study lasted one semester. Six learners

were interviewed at the end of the semester. The learners were of three different proficiency levels: weak, average and excellent. The study found that the six learners improved their writing, especially in terms of coherence and cohesiveness. Additionally, the learners' confidence and motivation were greatly enhanced. Arslan & Saka (2010) conducted a study on a college English preparatory science course in Turkey that adopted the TBI teaching model to teach academic English language skills to 97 students. They collected data through a questionnaire and interviews. Their findings indicate that the TBI model met the students' needs, enhanced their motivation and prepared them for their future academic language learning.

Since the introduction of TBI into China in 1980s, increasing Chinese scholars and educators have shown great interest in TBI and carried out numerous studies. Shi (2005) focused on a TBI English course based on English films. She collected data through classroom observations. Her study indicates that students improved both their learning interest and English language proficiency. Meanwhile, she pointed out it was a great challenge for the teacher observed to select appropriate content and design all in-class and after-class activities or assignments. The limitation of her study lies in the fact that the students' English proficiency was identified based on classroom observations only, which is to some degree subjective.

Xie (2010) carried out a nine-month experiment of college English TBI reading course with 85 science students. She adopted questionnaire, interview, pretest and posttest to examine whether TBI has positive impact on the students' motivation and reading ability. The result of her study is that TBI stimulated the students' motivation and contributed to the students' reading ability. The multiple instruments and the length of the experiment endowed the study with validity and reliability. But the study focused on reading only with both the pretest and the posttest consisting of reading tasks only.

Suggestions on the implementation of TBI. Activities in a TBI class should combine different skills with varied forms of materials under a certain theme or topic. Snow & Brinton (1997) argued that people learn a language by using it rather than wait to use it after they have learned it. In a CBI class, students do not practice a particular language skill for the sake of the skill. They are offered a variety of opportunities to use the language in real communication, which involves more than one skill. This is consistent with Brinton et al.'s (1989) claim that a TBI course involves all language skills. For example, a TBI reading course does not merely deal with reading comprehension but involves other skills. It integrates all kinds of materials for different activities. For example, video clips can offer background information for a topic, which can prepare students for the following activities such as discussion and reading on the topic.

As for how to apply TBI in a language class, Stoller & Grabe (1997) proposed the Six-T's Approach for the application of TBI. This approach gives a clear instruction about how to deal with the relationship between language and theme. Six T's stand for themes, topics, texts, threads, tasks, and transitions. Themes are major ideas to organize a language course. They should fit learners' needs, interest, language proficiency, age and cognitive abilities as well as match the instructor's expectations and abilities. Topics are sub-units under one umbrella theme. Texts are the content carrier, including printed materials and other forms such as audio and video materials. Threads link the themes in the curriculum. Tasks are teaching techniques to help fulfill teaching objectives. The tasks offer students opportunities to notice language forms, negotiate meanings with their peers and develop their communicative skills. Transitions link the topics and tasks for coherence. The six T's supplement each other in a TBI course.

Challenges of the implementation of TBI. Ideally, in a TBI course, every class should be well designed with various authentic, relevant and interesting materials organized under a theme.

But in reality, it is usually challenging to choose appropriate and relevant teaching materials. Although Krashen (1985) pointed out that the instructor for a TBI course is a language teacher rather than a content specialist, such a course sets much higher requirements for the instructor than a traditional form-focused language course. For example, the instructor is supposed to know a theme well enough to design different activities around the theme. It can also be challenging to integrate language forms into a TBI course. Although TBI gives priority to meanings rather than language forms, appropriate feedback should be offered to help students' acquisition of the language forms.

Chapter III Methodology

This chapter introduces the research design and data collection and analysis of this quantitative study.

Research Questions

This study was conducted to examine the effectiveness of Theme-Based Instruction in improving the English language proficiency of non-English majors in mainland China. The research questions are as follows:

- 1) Can Theme-Based Instruction be more effective than the traditional teaching model of college English in improving non-English majors' English proficiency?
- 2) In what way does Theme-Based Instruction affect non-English majors' English proficiency?

Data Collection

In order to answer the research questions, the researcher carried out a project in a college in mainland China during the fall 2016 semester.

Site. This research project was conducted in a teaching university in Wuhan, a central city of China. This teaching university aims at cultivating students' practical skills, among which the command of English ranks high. Students are encouraged to spend more time and energy learning English, but they are much lower in English proficiency and motivation for English learning than those in research universities.

Participants. The teaching university placed all non-English major freshmen into three-level English classes – level A, level B and level C (level A being the highest), according to their scores on the National Matriculation English Test (NMET) 2016. Two classes at level B (the intermediate level) were chosen for this research project. One class served as a control group; 37

out of 53 students volunteered to participate in the project. The other class served as an experimental group; 36 out of 47 volunteered to participate in the project. The participants, all from the school of administration, are of similar age (18 to 19) and of similar education background (about 9 to 10 years' English learning experience).

Research procedure. This research project was conducted from October 2016 to January 2017. The researcher taught both the control group and the experimental group with the same textbook *New Horizon College English I* but different teaching models. The researcher taught the control group in the traditional way, giving priority to the English language, including grammar and vocabulary. With regard to the experimental group, the researcher adopted TBI. Two exams were used respectively as the pretest and the posttest. The scores of the two exams were collected and compared to find out if TBI improved the English language proficiency of the participants from the experimental group.

Pretest. Since China's NMET is one of the most important national exams in China with high reliability and validity, it was adopted in this study as the pretest. All the participants' scores in NMET 2016 were collected. As mentioned previously, the English proficiency of the two classes were similar at the beginning of this study according to their scores on NMET 2016.

Teaching design. *College English* is a four-credit course for all non-English majors in their first two academic years in China. The College English class for the participants met twice per week (90 minutes per meeting) for a total of 12 weeks.

Textbook units. The textbook *New Horizon College English (reading and writing) I*, is composed of ten units, each focusing on a specific theme. All first-year College English instructors worked together and selected five units from the textbook (see Table 1).

Table 1

The Five Units Selected for Fall 2016 First-Year College English

No.	Theme	Texts
Unit 1	Learning a Foreign Language	Section A: Learning a Foreign Language Section B: Keys to Successful Online Learning
Unit 2	Generation Gap	Section A: Deep Concern Section B: Is There a Generation Gap?
Unit 3	Human and Love	Section A: A Good Heart to Lean on Section B: The Right Son at the Right Time
Unit 4	First Impression	Section A: How to Make a Good Impression Section B: Body Language
Unit 7	Gun	Section A: Face to Face with Guns Section B: Should I Have a Gun?

Teaching design for the control group. In the control group, the researcher adopted the traditional way of English teaching featured by teacher-centeredness. The course procedures are presented as follows:

During the first phase, the researcher explained all new words and expressions to the students with many examples to show the students how to use them. To help the students consolidate their linguistic knowledge, the researcher asked them to do a lot of vocabulary exercises, such as filling in the blanks and making sentences.

After sweeping away vocabulary obstacles, the researcher explained the text in detail and when necessary, grammatical structures and points to help the students understand the text. The students were provided with abundant examples and supposed to finish exercises by mimicking these examples. Although the students were assigned to complete the exercises during class, the researcher's lecture dominated the whole class.

After class, the students were assigned to finish exercises, which revolved around the new words, expressions and grammatical structures. All the exercises were checked and explained if necessary in the following class to ensure that the students had a good command of the linguistic knowledge.

A sample lesson from the experimental group. In the experimental group, the researcher adopted TBI featured by theme-based activities such as group discussion, pair work, role play and presentations. A variety of listening and reading materials were chosen from newspapers, the internet, magazines, specialized books to supplement the textbook in the hope of providing authentic language environment and stimulating the students' interest.

The lesson on foreign language learning experience from Unit 1 *Learning a Foreign Language* is described below in detail to demonstrate how the researcher designed the TBI class.

Phase 1 Warm-up (10 minutes)

The students were asked to watch a video of a piece of English news with both English and Chinese subtitles from www.CCTV.com about English learning in China. The news gave the students an updated overview of the current situation of English learning in China and provoked the students to think about the reasons behind it. The students were then asked to brainstorm the reasons why English learning was so popular in China. After the students shared their opinions, the instructor wrote all the possible reasons down on the blackboard, which prepared the students

for vocabulary and sentence patterns needed in the following activities about their own foreign language learning experiences.

Phase 2 Interview and Report (20 minutes)

The students were divided into a few groups with 5 or 6 students in each. One student of each group acted as an interviewer and the others as interviewees. The interviewers were supposed to ask interviewees questions about their foreign language learning experiences, take notes and then report what they learned from the interview. They were provided with a handout including a list of questions (see below).

- 1) What foreign languages do you learn and when did you start to learn?
- 2) Could you describe your learning experience with one or two adjectives and why?
- 3) What impressed you most in your foreign language learning?
- 4) Do you have any problems while learning the foreign language and how do you deal with these problems?

After the group interview, the interviewers were invited to report their interviewees' foreign language learning experiences; meanwhile, the researcher took notes from these reports and listed student language problems on the board.

Phase 3 Further Discussion and Listening to a Lecture (10 minutes)

The researcher asked the students to brainstorm their solutions to the identified language problems on the board. All the vocabulary, expressions and their thinking involved in the brainstorming prepared the students for the following English lecture about how to learn English effectively. The lecture, given by a British teacher who taught English in China and targeted at EFL learners, provided students with authentic and meaningful input. While listening, the

students were asked to complete the outline of the lecture by filling in the missing words. This task helped the students follow the lecture and focus on what they were listening to.

Phase 4 Skimming (20 minutes)

The students shared their foreign language learning experiences and identified common and specific problems they had in learning a foreign language. This activity prepared the students for the follow-up reading activity in that it helped the students predict the content of the reading. The students were then given 15 minutes to read the text *Learning a Foreign Language* and match 10 statements with their corresponding paragraphs. Each statement is about the main idea of a corresponding paragraph. The matching activity helped the students get the main idea and draw up the outline of the text.

Phase 5 Scanning and Group Discussion (20 minutes)

The students worked in groups of 5 or 6 members. They were allowed 10 minutes to scan the text. They were supposed to discuss with their group members and share what interested them or to associate the writer's learning experience with their own. Based on the students' discussion and information sharing, the researcher analyzed the writing techniques of the writer as well as explained new words or expressions when necessary.

Phase 6 Review and Assignment (5 minutes)

One student in each group was asked to retell one phase of the writer's learning experience, which reinforced the students' understanding of both the text and the way the paragraphs were developed. The students were assigned to write an essay about their own foreign language learning experiences. They were supposed to apply the words, expressions and the writing techniques covered in this lesson to their essay.

Posttest. The final exam of College English in the 2016 fall semester was taken as the posttest to find out whether there were any differences in the two groups' English proficiency. The final exam happened to have similar components as NMET, including listening comprehension, reading comprehension, cloze, translation and writing. Two English teachers with about 10 years' teaching experience from the English Department of the university were invited to grade the posttest using the same criteria. Each student's paper was graded by both teachers, but neither of them knew if this student was from the control group or the experimental group. The mean of the student's scores by both teachers was calculated for the student's final score.

Data Analysis

Data collection was completed around middle January 2017 after the posttest was held. The raw data from both the pretest and the posttest were recorded with Excel 2007. The researcher then utilized the software IBM SPSS 22.0 to process the data for statistical analysis. To find out whether there are any differences between the experimental group and the control group, the researcher calculated means and standard deviations and conducted t-Tests.

Chapter IV Results and Discussion

This chapter reports results of this study and provides the possible reasons for the differences between the experimental group and the control group.

Results

The pretest results. As mentioned in chapter III, NMET was adopted as the pretest in this study. The pretest (100 points total) included four sections, 20 points for listening comprehension, 45 points for reading comprehension, 25 points for writing and 10 points for translation sections, but the researcher has no access to the score for each section. Therefore, only the participants' total scores were analyzed (see Table 2 for the results of the pretest).

Table 2

The participants' performance on the pretest (NMET)

	Group	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
NMET	Control	36	67.5000	10.87699
	Experimental	37	67.5625	10.48713

As Table 2 shows, the mean score of each group is about 67.5. The standard deviation of the control group is 10.87699, a little bit higher than that of the experimental group (10.48713), which suggests that the distribution of the scores in both groups is similar. Both the mean scores and standard deviations indicate that the two groups were roughly at the same English proficiency level at the beginning of the fall 2016 semester.

The posttest results. The posttest is the final exam of College English for non-English major freshmen, including same sections as the pretest – listening, reading, writing and translation. The total score for the posttest was also 100 points, 30 points for listening comprehension, 40 for reading comprehension, and 15 for writing and translation respectively.

Table 3 shows the comparison between the control group and the experimental group in terms of the total score as well as the score of each section in the posttest. As far as the total score is concerned, it is obvious that the mean score of the experimental group (i.e., 56.9054) exceeds that of the control group (i.e., 50.1667) by about 6.8 points; overall, the experimental group significantly outperformed the control group. There is also a significant difference between the standard deviation of the experimental group (i.e., 8.39133) and that of the control group (i.e., 12.91478). The higher standard deviation of the control group means that the total scores of the control group are more widely distributed than those of the experimental group.

As for listening comprehension, the mean scores of the two groups were greatly different from each other, 13.6515 for the control and 17.2162 for the experimental. With regard to the standard deviation, the value for the experimental group was much smaller than that for the control one, 3.62196 versus 5.6595, which indicates that the scores of the experimental group varied less than those of the control group.

In the case of the other sections, reading comprehension, writing and translation, no significant differences between the two groups were found in terms of the mean. But as the mean score of each section indicates, the experimental group did surpass the control group in each section of the posttest. Specifically, the mean score of reading comprehension in the experimental group is about 1.6 point higher than that in the control group. The same difference was found in the mean score of translation between the two groups. The two groups were quite similar in terms of the mean score of the writing section, with only about 0.5-point difference.

Table 3

The participants' performance on the posttest

	Group	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
Total	Control	36	50.1667	12.91478
	Experimental	37	56.9054	8.39133
Listening Comprehension	Control	36	13.6515	5.6595
	Experimental	37	17.2162	3.62196
Reading Comprehension	Control	36	23.0606	5.88531
	Experimental	37	24.6622	3.39539
Writing	Control	36	7.5909	2.46683
	Experimental	37	8.0811	2.51527
Translation	Control	36	5.8636	3.27221
	Experimental	37	6.9459	2.91496

Table 4

Independent sample test of the participants' performance on the posttest

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		T-test for Equality of Means	
		F	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
			t	p
Total			-2.616	.011
Listening Comprehension			-3.414	.001
Reading Comprehension			-1.413	.162
Writing			-.821	.414
Translation			-1.464	.148

p* < .05.

In order to test whether these differences are significant, Independent *t*-test was conducted, and results are shown in Table 4. Table 4 indicates that significant differences between the experimental group and the control group can be found in both total scores ($t = 2.616, p < .05$) and listening comprehension scores ($t=3.414, p < .05$). The *p* value for all the other sections is not lower than 0.05, which suggests that there are no significant differences between the two groups in reading comprehension, writing or translation.

Discussion

As shown above, remarkable differences between the two groups were found in both total score and listening comprehension score, which proved the effectiveness of TBI in improving the students' overall English proficiency and listening comprehension. Nevertheless, no differences were identified in reading comprehension, writing or translation.

Overall English proficiency. This section discusses the factors that may account for the experimental group's overall English proficiency.

Motivation. The improved students' motivation may have contributed to the experimental group's overall English proficiency. Krashen (1982) stated that language acquisition is greatly influenced by learners' affective conditions and motivation. Motivation, to some degree, can determine the learners' success in language learning. No test of the students' motivation was carried out in this study. But based on the researcher's observation, the students in the TBI class were more active and fully involved in classroom activities. More students in the TBI class volunteered to answer questions, and they acted more positively when faced with difficult or multiple tasks. On the contrary, more silence and negative affection were observed in the control group. The students in the control group were more likely to be distracted and bored during the class. The different focuses of the two teaching methods may account for the students' opposite

attitudes towards English learning. In the TBI class, language learning was contextualized, meaningful, and motivating to the students. In other words, the meaningful content aroused the students' interest more than dull grammatical points. For instance, the authentic texts were much more informative, revealing what was happening out of the classroom, which broadened the students' horizons and satisfied their curiosity about the outside world. In addition, involving the students in the authentic language environment and offering them more opportunities to use the language in real interactions may have greatly motivated them. With their improved motivation, they were willing to invest more time and effort in their language learning.

Comprehensible input. Abundant comprehensible input offered in the TBI class may account for the significant difference in the two groups' overall performance on the posttest. Krashen & Biber (1988) regarded the comprehensible input in the target language as an essential element in the learners' second language acquisition. In this study, the students in the experimental group were more exposed to English from various sources than those in the control group. Besides the textbook, abundant theme-related materials were provided in the classroom. With plentiful videos, audios and articles from real-life settings in English-speaking countries, the researcher attempted to immerse the students in an authentic language environment. A lot of classroom activities and the researcher's lectures assisted the students in understanding course materials. The authentic and comprehensible materials enabled the students to acquire and use language for real purposes rather than memorize linguistic forms.

Pushed output. Well-designed tasks and assignments may have helped the experimental group make greater progress. Swain (1985) argued that output is an indispensable element in language learning and that output allows learners to receive feedback and develop linguistic awareness. If learners are not pushed to produce output, their immersion in a target language

may not necessarily lead to a successful language acquisition. In the TBI class, both input and output are of equal importance. Provided with sufficient comprehensible input, the students were supposed to produce output. As Swain (1985) stated, “one learns to read by reading and to write by writing” (p. 189). Equipped with the information they gained in the class on a certain theme, the students were expected to form their own ideas and express them orally or in a written way. During discussion or other collaborative tasks, the students did negotiate for both meanings and language forms, which aroused the students’ attention to linguistic forms and helped them correct their mistakes.

Learning abilities. The students’ autonomous learning ability and collaborative learning ability may also account for their significant improvement. The two abilities were not evaluated in this study, but they were reflected by the students’ assignments. The two groups were assigned different homework. The control group was usually required to work individually mainly on vocabulary and sentence translation, while the experimental group were required to complete a variety of tasks, including presentation, survey, report, role-play, and drama. Obviously, the homework for the experimental group required more time, creativity, group collaboration and commitment. Therefore, there were more opportunities for the students in the experimental group to develop their autonomous and collaborative learning abilities. The experimental group usually completed their assignments with more efforts and higher quality.

Listening comprehension. Listening comprehension being taught differently to the two groups may account for the difference in their performance on the listening comprehension section in the posttest. Firstly, the students in the experimental group received more oral input from the researcher (the instructor), which may have enhanced their listening comprehension. Classes for the experimental group were mainly taught in English, attaching more importance to

the students' understanding of the content. In contrast, Chinese was often used to help the students in the control group understand vocabulary and grammatical rules.

Secondly, the students in the experimental group were involved in the real and meaningful interactions to practice listening. In the TBI class, listening skill was an integral component of every class, combined with the other language skills, especially speaking skill. Listening practice served as a way to gain information for real communication rather than for listening comprehension questions. In a regular class for the control group, listening comprehension was dealt with as an isolated skill. The students were asked to listen to some listening materials followed by comprehension questions. This traditional way of teaching listening comprehension was not as effective as TBI.

Non-significant differences. No significant difference was found in reading comprehension, writing or translation between the two groups in this study. As one of the receptive skills, reading comprehension was expected to be improved as greatly as listening comprehension. One possible reason for the minimal difference in reading comprehension is that the topics of the reading comprehension section in the posttest were not covered by any course unit. In other words, the experimental group did not have an obvious advantage over the control group in terms of vocabulary and background preparation for the test.

With regard to writing and translation, both groups performed poorly. Writing, a productive skill, is one of the greatest challenges for language learners and cannot be improved tremendously in a short period time. It is not surprising that neither group improved their writing significantly after the first semester College English.

Speaking was not tested in either the pretest or the posttest, so there is no evidence to show whether the students in the experimental group have improved their oral proficiency. However,

based on the researcher's observation, the students in the experimental group were more confident and fluent while speaking English. This might be because the experimental group were offered more opportunities to develop their speaking skill. They were given much more oral tasks for real communication. In other words, they practiced more in a natural way to develop their speaking skill. During communication, they probably negotiated for both meanings and forms and received feedback. Moreover, once they successfully accomplished speaking tasks, they gained a sense of achievement and confidence, which might have motivated them to speak more. If speaking were included in both the pretest and the posttest in this study, it is predictable that the experimental group would outperform the control group in the posttest.

Chapter V Conclusions and Recommendations

In this chapter, this study is summarized and conclusions are made. After the discussion of the limitations of the study, suggestions are made for future research and the implementation of TBI in College English teaching in China.

Summary and Conclusions

This study aims to find out whether TBI is effective in improving non-English majors' English proficiency in mainland China. As the reviewed literature suggests, TBI, with a focus on content, provides an authentic language environment for learners and immerse them to develop their language skills.

In this study, the researcher conducted a one-semester experiment at a teaching university during the fall 2016 semester in Wuhan, China. Two College English classes were selected, one as the control group, and the other as the experimental group. The researcher applied the traditional teaching method in the control group, focusing on linguistic knowledge. While in the experimental group, the researcher adopted TBI, giving priority to content.

The data analysis shows that the experimental group made significant progress in their overall English proficiency and listening comprehension. Unfortunately, no significant improvement was found in the experimental group's reading comprehension or writing proficiency. In addition, since speaking was not tested in either the pretest or the posttest, no evidence was available regarding the effects of TBI on improving the learners' speaking ability.

In conclusion, the results from this study indicate that TBI is feasible in College English teaching. It can be effective in improving non-English majors' English proficiency if it is applied consistently with well-designed activities and tasks. In a TBI class, the emphasis on both content and target language can greatly arouse students' interest and thus motivate them to invest more

time and energy in English study. In addition, abundant meaningful and comprehensible input along with various classroom activities or tasks provides the students with an authentic language environment.

Limitations of the Study

Although the study provided some evidence to show the positive effects of TBI and the researcher made special efforts for the reliability and validity of the study, the study has some limitations. First, the data was collected on a small scale at a teaching university in a central city of China. The findings from this study might not be generalizable to research universities or teaching universities in other areas in China.

Secondly, the length of the experiment was relatively short. The experiment was completed within one semester. Such a short period time might not have been enough for the participants to make great progress in some language skills.

Thirdly, the TBI's effects on improving the participants' speaking proficiency was not measured in this study. Since both the pretest and the posttest involved the testing of the participants' listening, reading, translating, and writing abilities but not their speaking ability, the effects of TBI on the experimental group's speaking proficiency are not verified.

Recommendations for Future Research

In view of the limitations of this study, future researchers can take into consideration the following aspects: (1) data collection on a larger scale from more participants and various types of universities and colleges across the nation; (2) longitudinal studies, for example, a study over four semesters of College English, which is typical for non-English majors in China; (3) more efforts to test the effectiveness of TBI in improving learners' speaking ability.

Recommendations for the Implementation of TBI in College English Teaching

While the researcher carried out TBI in the experimental class during the one-semester empirical study, she encountered some difficulties and made great efforts to work them out. Based on her experience, some suggestions about the implementation of TBI in College English teaching are proposed below.

Seeking support from the university administration. The support from the university administration can enormously facilitate a successful implementation of TBI. If TBI is adopted on a large scale to College English in a university, the current syllabus for College English should be adjusted to a TBI-oriented syllabus to begin with, since a well-designed syllabus sets the tone for the classroom teaching. A TBI-oriented syllabus should be made and approved by the university administration.

Moreover, College English instructors should be allowed more autonomy in selecting textbooks and supplementary teaching materials. Last but not least, College English instructors should be provided with opportunities to receive training in TBI. To some extent, the instructors' competence can determine whether TBI can be effective in the classroom. The teacher training should cover basics of TBI, ranging from curriculum design to theme-based classroom activities. In addition, instructors are supposed to be equipped with the knowledge of related-themes so that they can handle the content smoothly.

Choosing appropriate teaching materials. Attention should also be given to the selection of supplementary teaching materials. Appropriate teaching materials are critical for the success of TBI in the classroom. In a TBI class, students are supposed to develop their language skills as a result of extensive exposure to authentic input from textbooks and other resources. Apparently, updated articles, movies, music, news and other resources from the English-speaking countries

are good choices. Some other factors should also be taken into consideration when authentic materials are chosen. The authentic materials should match students' age, interests, and their language proficiency as well as match tasks or classroom activities to ensure the quality of the tasks or activities.

Designing classroom activities and tasks. Equal importance should be given to designing classroom activities and tasks. A TBI College English course is expected to offer students plenty of opportunities to use the language in an authentic manner. In other words, language skills and other social skills are integrated to help fulfill the tasks and activities. The tasks and activities should contain authentic goals. In addition, while designing activities and tasks, instructors should consider students' English proficiency and their cognitive competency to avoid too challenging or too easy tasks. If they encounter great challenges in understanding or fulfilling the tasks, they may lose the desire to make attempts to join in the activities and tasks. It will lead to the students' high anxiety in the classroom, which may further hinder their participation in the activities or tasks. If the tasks are too easy for the students to perform, they may find it boring and thus lose interest, which may demotivate them.

This study shows the effectiveness of TBI in improving non-English majors' English proficiency, especially listening comprehension. However, implementing TBI is much more challenging since more time and commitment from both instructors and students are needed. Additional support and assistance from the university administration are needed for the successful application of TBI to College English teaching in China.

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