

The Effectiveness of Comprehensible Input: A Case of English Curriculum Design

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Abstract

English competence is considered to be very important in Taiwan, which caused English teaching and learning to be a national movement. This article examines the English curriculum administered in a university in northern part of Taiwan, with specific focus on the comprehensible input (i+1) offered to the prevailing practices in the classroom design. Statistical analyses were employed to the General English Proficiency Test (GEPT) Listening and Reading performance. Results showed that most of the classes achieved satisfactory performance, which indicated the effectiveness of compressible input class design. Implications for future English curriculum are provided.

Key Words: comprehensible input, curriculum objective; language teaching and learning, GEPT test

1. Introduction

English learning as a second language (ESL) or a foreign language (EFL) is worldwide popular, especially in Taiwan. Therefore, English curriculum is mandatory from the level of elementary school to university education. For some schools, the teaching of English is tied to the purpose of preparing students for satisfactory grades in the high-stakes language exams. For others, it might be in line with the preparation for students to be more competitive at workforce in the future. This study examines the effectiveness of comprehensible input class design of the English curriculum in a northern private university in Taiwan by using the General English Proficiency Test (GEPT)-Listening and Reading, at the intermediate level.

2. Literature Review

2.1 English Curriculum Objectives

English is learned very early at one's age if English proficiency is considered to be an essential aspect of one's education (Reagan & Osborn, 2001). Since English competence is regarded as one of the most important skills among one's professional knowledge in Taiwan, the English teaching have been extended downward to the elementary school level. Some parents even send their kids to bilingual kindergarten. In this regard, university level students have studied English for more than ten years in Taiwan.

However, teaching is not a neutral act, which indicates that all decisions carry important latent effects both at its planning and its implementation stages (Tyler, 1949). Before taking a close examination of the English curriculum, it is necessary to understand its objectives. Curriculum objective can be defined as the content, skills and goals used by teachers to create learning activities for particular classes and students (Hlebowitsh, 2007). As a result, the use of a teaching objective reflects the commitments that the school supports and instructional approaches which others can evaluate. According to English curriculum outlined by the school, two objectives need to be achieved. These objectives include the abilities to:

1. Be able to use English to interact with others effectively and internationally.
2. Be able to enhance English integrated skills as productive skills to daily communication.

2.2 English Curriculum Design

Currently, students in the study context are required to take two years of mandatory English curriculum in this northern university as part of their General Education fulfillment.

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3. Be able to use English to interact with others effectively and internationally.
4. Be able to enhance English integrated skills as productive skills to daily communication.

4.2 English Curriculum Design

Currently, students in the study context are required to take two years of mandatory English curriculum in this northern university as part of their General Education fulfillment. For the freshman courses, the class and the textbook selection are divided merely based on different colleges that students enrolled: College of Engineering, College of Liberal Arts, and Night classes. Instructors are responsible for the coverage of the academic content, and for whatever is stated in the syllabus or scripted in the textbook. That is to say, Taiwanese instructors' models are more as a knowledge provider rather than a learning facilitator. With the large number of class size, bottom-up reading strategies are normally used as instructors carefully scrutinize each word and grammatical rules. The main instructional approach is the traditional direct instructional approach, which focuses on the mastery of key facts and ideas. Instructors typically start their lessons with lecture and demonstration, which is then followed by some review (Abbott, 2006).

Additionally, freshman year students are enrolled in the lab courses which focus on their listening and speaking. Under the influence of college entrance exams, which really plays a dramatically important role in the Taiwanese educational system, every subject included in the exam is highly valued (Shive, 2000). As the entrance exam leaves little room for listening and speaking skills, K-12 teachers regularly use reading and writing as assignments and assessments in the case of Taiwanese English curriculum. The latent curriculum has been defined by Eisner (2002) as part of the school experience in which ideas and attitudes are communicated to students implicitly, usually in highly nuanced ways inside or outside the classroom. Therefore, the lab courses emphasize the habitual patterns of thought, and certain prevalent assumptions about human nature and society with the foreigners should be prepared to encounter.

In terms of the sophomore English course, students are assigned to the different class according to their language proficiency. One thing needs to be mentioned is that the sophomore English curriculum is designed with the theory of Comprehensible Input proposed by Krashen (1985). Krashen asserts that one acquires language the only way by exposure to $i+1$, which indicates that the learning content and structures are just beyond learner's current level of language competence. In that case, both comprehension and acquisition will occur. In addition, the reading hypothesis is a special case of comprehensible input, which claims that the comprehensible input in the form of reading also stimulates language acquisition.

Following the $i+1$ theory, three levels are divided for the sophomore English courses and the students are assigned to their suitable level. It is expected that this environment help students reach their best learning outcome.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

Students enrolled in the daytime English courses are required to take the GEPT-intermediate test as part of the curriculum fulfillment. Only those native speakers are eligible to waive the English courses. Normally, freshman students in Taiwan have learned English since they were in elementary school. A total of 4799 freshman and 4435 sophomore students took the GEPT -intermediate listening and reading test.

3.2 Instruments

The GEPT is the first five-level criterion-referenced EFL testing system designed in Taiwan to assess the general English proficiency of EFL learners. The test is specifically designed according to the outline of the Ministry of Education, which should be closely aligned with the Taiwanese local context. The aim of the GEPT is to promote the concept of life-long learning and to encourage the use of the communicative approach in English teaching and learning. Thus, most of the universities implement GEPT test as one of the graduation benchmarks. The intermediate level of listening and reading of GEPT is chosen. The level is suitable for students' current English proficiency. A learner who passes the GEPT-Intermediate can use basic English to communicate about topics in daily life (LTTC, 2016).

3.3 Data Collection Procedure

The first GEPT test was administered at the second semester of the freshman year, 2013. It was used to examine students' English learning outcome for their first year, and also used to assign students to their sophomore level. The second GEPT test was administered in the second semester of sophomore year, 2014. The results from these two tests were compared in order to identify students' learning progress and give directions for future curriculum design.

4. Results

The freshman GEPT test results were presented first, and then followed by the sophomore results. Finally, these two results were compared.

4.1 Freshman performance

The mean score from the first GEPT listening and reading test were 80.1 and 76.2, which was higher than the average score from college level test-takers as 70 and 71, respectively. The results were shown in Table 1.

In order to have a more comprehensive understanding of the results, specific test performance for each department were shown in Table 2. College of Foreign Languages reached the most satisfactory results among all colleges, followed by College of Business, College of Education, College of Liberal Arts, College of Engineering and College of Science.

4.2 Sophomore performance

The means score from the sophomore GEPT listening and reading test is 83 and 79, which was higher than the freshman one. The results were presented in Table 3.

In order to have a more comprehensive understanding of the results, specific test performance for each department were shown in Table 4. Similarly, College of Foreign Language reached the most satisfactory results among all colleges, followed by College of Business, College of Education, College of Liberal Arts, College of Engineering and College of Science.

4.3 Comparison of the two GEPT performances

The statistical results showed that the average sophomore results in reading and listening were both higher than the freshman one. The specific results categorized by different colleges were presented below in Table 5. In terms of the College of Foreign Languages, most of the departments showed progress except for the reading performance in the Department of Japanese and listening performance in the Germany and Russian departments. In terms of the College of Business, most of the departments showed progress except for the reading performance of Departments of Accounting, Statistics, and Industrial Business.

For listening performance, four departments didn't show progress: Business Management, Public Administration, Information Management, and Management Science (Table 6). As for the only undergraduate department in College of Education shown in Table 7, Educational Technology Department showed progress in reading but not in listening test.

College of Liberal Arts showed progress in all the reading tests, and most of the listening tests except for Department of Mass Communication. It is worth noticing that Department of History showed the most progress among the university (Table 8).

In terms of College of Engineering in Table 9, the department of Architecture showed backwards performance in their listening performance. It might be that their freshman score was high enough that it would be difficult to surpass. The department of Water Resources showed unsatisfactory results for both listening and reading tests, which is the only department which didn't show progress. The last college being compared, College of Science showed progress in all departments. It might be that the freshman performance of College of Science was the last from the button, which left more room to improve than other colleges (Table 10).

5. *Conclusions and Suggestions*

The positive results showed the effectiveness of the theory of comprehensible input, even the K-12 English curriculum implicitly tends to create an imbalance in students' language ability in reading and writing. The more progress of the GEPT reading performance lies in the focus on reading and writing in sophomore English class. As most of the Taiwanese students do not study English outside of the class, the GEPT listening progress is only limited (Shive, 2000). The ineffectiveness of the results from certain departments can be attributed to students' low learning motivation, instructors' inexperience in teaching. It is suggested that more longitudinal test could be administered in order to assure more credibility of the results, or other high-stakes language exams are suggested if cost and time convenience.

Table 1: Results of the freshman GEPT

Item	Listening	Reading	Percentage
Participants	4799	4799	
Questions	45	40	----
Total score	120	120	100
Mean	80.69	76.20	65.41
Standard Deviation	23.55	24.01	18.47

Table 2: Individual results for each college

College	Department	Number	Listening	Reading	Per %
Foreign Languages	German	63	102.38	94.14	81.95
	Russian	58	100.64	95.33	81.71
	French	134	99.42	97.19	81.99
	Spanish	131	95.76	92.59	78.53
	Japanese	212	85.95	85.84	71.59
	Total	598	94.27	91.66	77.52
Business	International Bus.	152	100.57	98.33	82.93
	Accounting	129	92.75	92.73	77.31
	Banking	144	89.47	90.40	74.97
	Bus Ad.	144	90.24	86.71	73.77
	Public Ad.	127	87.91	88.02	73.36
	Information Management	193	87.77	82.06	70.81
	Economics	199	88.38	83.94	71.82
	Industrial Eco.	137	82.38	82.62	68.74
	Insurance	127	82.40	77.20	66.50
	Management Sciences	58	86.21	75.93	67.71
	Transportation Management	130	79.71	77.63	65.56
	Total	1721	86.92	84.48	71.45
Education Liberal Arts	Edu. Tech	61	84.61	78.64	68.08
	Mass Com.	59	89.27	85.98	73.03
Arts	Information Com.	52	84.12	81.40	68.96
	Library	119	80.86	76.54	65.62
	Chinese	135	73.86	70.13	60.02
	History	39	64.26	53.18	48.92
	Total	404	78.56	74.15	63.65
Engineering	Architecture	65	95.20	93.60	78.74
	Chemistry	173	78.08	76.91	64.62
	Aerospace	123	79.91	74.80	64.50
	E.E.	158	73.86	70.13	60.02
	C.S.	187	64.26	53.18	48.92
	Mechanics	108	80.12	72.25	63.52
	Civil Eng.	173	76.13	68.53	60.35
	Water Resource	134	72.22	62.84	56.31
	Total	1121	78.92	73.42	63.52
Science	Chemistry	102	73.84	76.06	62.50
	Physics	104	64.10	57.61	50.77
	BA program	49	60.94	58.90	49.88
	Math	97	62.70	54.34	48.87

Table 3: Results of the sophomore GEPT

Item	Listening	Reading	Percentage
Participants		4435	
Questions	45	40	----
Total score	120	120	100
Mean	83	79	67
Standard Deviation	23	24	18

Table 4: Individual results for each college

College	Department	Number	Listening	Reading	Per %
Foreign Language	French	123	103	101	85
	German	65	101	97	82
	Russian	42	100	97	82
	Spanish	116	98	97	81
	Japanese	212	87	86	72
Business	International Business	158	101	99	83
	Accounting	131	91	93	77
	Banking	146	91	91	76
	Bus Ad.	137	89	89	74
	Economics	183	87	88	73
	Public Ad.	132	87	88	73
	Industrial Eco.	115	85	83	70
	Transportation Management	118	85	83	70
	Information Management	191	84	83	70
	Management Science	53	85	82	70
	Insurance	114	82	83	69
	Statistics	161	76	74	63
	Edu Tech	61	84.61	78.64	68.08
	Mass Com.	62	90	89	74
	Information Com.	48	89	85	72
Arts	Library	110	83	79	67
	Chinese	123	76	71	61
	History	26	66	60	53
	Total	369	81	77	66
Engineering	Architecture	48	91	89	66
	C.S.	195	83	80	75
	Aerospace	122	84	78	68
	E.E.	154	82	76	67
	Material	173	79	78	66
	Mechanic	115	81	72	65
	Civil Eng.	181	79	71	64
	Water Resource	107	75	65	63
Total	1095	81	75	58	
Science	Chemistry	108	82	78	67
	Physics	71	69	61	54
	Math	107	66	60	52
Total	286	73	67	58	

Table 5” Comparison of Colleges of Foreign Languages

Department	Year	Number	Listening	Reading	Total	Percentage
French	102	134	99	97	196	82
	103	123	103	101	204	85
German	102	63	102	94	196	82
	103	65	101	97	198	82
Russian	102	58	101	95	196	82
	103	42	100	97	197	82
Spanish	102	131	96	93	189	79
	103	116	98	97	195	81
Japanese	102	212	86	86	172	72
	103	212	87	86	173	72

Table 6: Comparison of Colleges of Business

Department	Year	Number	Listening	Reading	Total	Percentage
Inter. B Bus.	102	152	101	98	199	83
	103	158	101	99	200	83
Accounting	102	129	93	93	186	77
	103	131	91	93	184	77
Banking	102	144	89	90	179	75
	103	146	91	91	182	76
Business Ad.	102	144	90	87	177	74
	103	137	89	89	178	74
Economics	102	199	88	84	172	72
	103	183	87	88	175	73
Public Ad.	102	127	88	88	176	73
	103	132	87	88	175	73
Industrial Business	102	137	82	83	165	69
	103	115	85	83	168	70
Transportation Management	102	130	80	78	158	66
	103	118	85	83	168	70
Information Management	102	193	88	82	170	71
	103	191	84	83	167	70
Management Science	102	58	86	76	162	68
	103	53	85	82	167	70
Insurance	102	127	82	77	159	67
	103	114	82	83	165	69
Statistics	102	181	75	75	150	63
	103	161	76	74	150	63

Table 7: Comparison of Colleges of Education

Department	Year	Number	Listening	Reading	Total	Percentage
Educational	102	61	85	79	164	68
Technology	103	64	84	81	165	68

Table 8: Comparison of Liberal Arts

Department	Year	Number	Listening	Reading	Total	Percentage
Mass Com.	102	59	89	86	175	73
	103	62	90	89	179	74
Information Com.	102	52	84	81	165	69
	103	48	89	85	174	72
Library	102	119	81	77	158	66
	103	110	83	79	162	67
Chinese	102	135	74	70	144	60
	103	123	76	71	147	61
History	102	39	64	53	117	49
	103	26	66	60	126	53

Table 9: Comparison of College of Engineering

Department	Year	Number	Listening	Reading	Total	Percentage
Architecture	102	65	95	94	189	79
	103	48	91	89	180	75
C.S.	102	187	80	75	155	65
	103	195	83	80	163	68
Aerospace	102	123	80	75	155	65
	103	122	84	78	162	67
E.E.	102	158	79	73	152	64
	103	154	82	76	158	66
Material	102	173	78	77	155	65
	103	173	79	78	157	65
Mechanics	102	108	80	72	152	64
	103	115	81	72	153	64
Civil Eng.	102	173	76	69	145	60
	103	181	79	71	150	63
Water Resources	102	134	72	63	135	56
	103	107	75	65	140	58

Table 10: Comparison of College of Science

Department	Year	Number	Listening	Reading	Total	Percentage
Chemistry	102	102	74	76	150	63
	103	108	82	78	160	67
Math	102	97	63	54	117	49
	103	71	69	61	130	54
Physics	102	104	64	58	122	51
	103	107	66	60	126	52

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