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A Platform for Oral Proficiency Diagnosis and Targeted Teaching

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Abstract

The paper proposes an integrated platform for Chinese Language targeted teaching based on oral proficiency diagnostic screening test, and the screening test is based on a R&D project of "Chinese Oral Proficiency Diagnostic Tool" and the subsequent targeted teaching experiment. The diagnostic tool mainly comprises a rubric, a set of diagnostic activities and a set of speech samples with evaluation criteria and descriptions. The rubric is designed with reference to the proficiency descriptors used in CEFR, but the descriptors are based on the analysis of the interactive speech data of about 180 students. The rubric measures the proficiency in language forms and interaction. Based on the diagnosis, targeted teaching is conducted, and a teaching toolkit is developed. The teaching toolkit comprises of oral activities that highlight the "learning points" in the rubric. In the targeted teaching, explicit teaching oral activities are designed from the perspective of structured input to enhance both language forms and interactive competence, while a micro functional-notional repertoire is constructed to provide a resource bank of sentence structure and linguistic expressions with different difficulties. This configuration is an attempt to implement the CEFR's "can-do" descriptors (also used in the construction of Chinese language proficiency descriptors in Singapore) as the "can-do" descriptors do not take into consideration of linguistic difficulties. The platform will integrate the current man-machine interaction into the traditional classroom man-man interaction so that a semi-virtual interactive environment may be built for language assessment and teaching. The platform will comprise of three main sectors which are speech data collection activities, oral proficiency diagnosis, and targeted teaching.

The changes taking place in language education in the past four decades or so have led to an argument for a paradigm shift (Jacobs & Farrell, 2001; Richards, 2006; Richards & Rogers, 2014), and communicative language teaching (CLT) has been viewed as the underlying method. This paper does not hope to argue for an emerging paradigm; instead, it tries to relate some of the observable changes with its objective of constructing an integrated platform for oral proficiency diagnosis and targeted teaching. Therefore, this paper summarizes recent changes in language education environment in terms of three major shifts in what, where and how well one learns. The designer of the content of language education is shifting from the instructing body (syllabus designer, material developer, course teacher, language assessor, etc.) to the learning body (language learner, co-user in a language situation, etc.), or the nature of essential language skills is not defined from a prescriptive but a descriptive perspective. The space in which learning happens is shifting from the physical reality to integral reality in the second media age, or the traditional face-to-face language education experience and the corresponding methods are under redefinition. The purposes and objectives of assessment are shifting from the assessment of learning to the assessment for learning, or the "end product" of language learning is not to be "quality controlled" or monitored by external individuals or organizations but by language users themselves in the process of using the language. These shifts both undermine and complement the existing paradigm in that the context for language education is being reconfigured with resultant demands for corresponding pedagogical changes.
A fuller description of the changes and their ramifications is beyond the scope of a paper like this, therefore, what is described in this paper will serve an example of how language teaching practice may attempt to respond to the current fundamental changes in language education. The integrated platform for oral proficiency diagnosis and targeted teaching as proposed in this paper tries to respond the changes in the three aspects of current language education, namely, the teaching and learning environment, teaching methodology, and assessment.

With the proliferation of ICT in education, the environment for language teaching and learning has fundamentally changed in the sense that the interaction between the learner and the instructor is increasingly machine-mediated. The traditional face-face interaction mode is gradually becoming a face-machine-face interaction mode, and there can be seen a tendency that the face-machine-face

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mode will evolve into face-machine mode as it is technologically possible for a virtual instructor to replace the actual instructor at the other end of face-machine-face interaction. This change, when put in the perspective of current language teaching principles that “respect learner syllabus developmental process” and “individual instruction” (Long & Doughty, 2009, 386-8), means that language education should not be real-time at the same pace, but instead it requires a language syllabus to provide customized learning program upon request while allowing for the learners to self-monitor their learning at any time in any place. In order for the learners to self-monitor their learning, there should be a framework of proficiency descriptors such as the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) so that the learners may chart where they are going. In terms of methodology, while communicative language teaching as an approach is still fundamental in the current paradigm, the challenge of the “fluency over accuracy” principle has resulted in more explicitly form-focused methods such as the concepts of task-based language learning, differentiated instruction, structured input (input enhancement), and targeted teaching. As for the assessment, there has appeared alternative assessment that can be more oriented to language users with specific purposes, such as the diagnostic assessment as a format of formative assessment for the purpose of targeted teaching and learning.

With the view of the above considerations, an integrated platform comprising language teaching, learning and assessment is configured. The platform has foreground process and background process. The three phases of the platform’s foreground process are 1) diagnosis, 2) analysis, and 3) targeted teaching and learning. Diagnosis phase uses the language laboratory model to assign diagnostic interactive activities to pairs or groups of students. In the analysis phase, teachers assess the students’ output, analyse their errors and assign targeted teaching activities to different students. In the targeted teaching phase, the students follow their track of targeted teaching activities to learn. The three phases in the foreground correspond to the three components for the background process that comprise 1) online oral proficiency diagnostic interactive activities, 2) teacher-assessor’s off-line assessment, and 3) online activities targeted at learner’s needs.

The background process of the platform is based on a R&D project of “Chinese Oral Proficiency Diagnostic Tool” commissioned by Singapore Ministry of Education and the subsequent targeted teaching intervention program. The diagnostic tool mainly comprises a rubric, a set of diagnostic activities and a set of speech samples with evaluation criteria and descriptions. The rubric is designed with reference to the proficiency descriptors used in CEFR, but the descriptors for our rubric are based on analysis of the interactive speech data of about 180 Primary 1 students. The speech data have been qualitatively and quantitatively analysed in terms of the vocabulary, grammar, structure, pronunciation and intonation, and interactional competence, and for each aspect a norm was established. The rubric is composed from two categories of language competence, namely, linguistic competence focused on language forms and communicative competence focused on language interaction. Vocabulary, grammar, structure, and pronunciation and intonation come under language forms, while interactional competence is defined as communicative competence in the rubric. Vocabulary measures the scope and appropriateness of words used in specific topic. Grammar measures the allocation, word order and other grammatical elements such as agreement. Structure measures the variety of sentence structure, ellipsis, etc. and pronunciation and intonation measure the acceptability of the speech sound and the appropriateness of intonation in terms of stress, tone and sentence types. Interactional competence is divided into four aspects, namely, the quality of responsive turn, the smoothness of turning-taking, the quality of initiative turn, and coherency of extended utterance. For the purpose of diagnosis, diagnostic interactive activities are designed to promote the spontaneous output and ensure maximum variety of linguistic forms and communicative functions, while each diagnostic activity has specific focused forms and functions to ensure the precision of diagnosis.

The students interact through the mediation of the computer that provides visual aids and basic linguistic prompts, and the interaction is recorded and saved. The teacher-assessor will assess the students’ speech data through the rubric which allows them to measure the students’ performance and record their errors. The teacher then assigns different activities targeted at students with similar performance and errors. The need-based activities are developed according to the "learning points" in the rubric. In the targeted teaching, explicit teaching oral activities are designed from the perspective of structured input to enhance both language forms and interactive competence, while a micro functional-notional repertoire is constructed to provide a resource bank of sentence structure and linguistic expressions with different difficulties. Since CEFR’s "can-do" descriptors do not take into consideration of linguistic difficulties, the repertoire of sentence structure with functions and notions is constructed to implement the CEFR's descriptors, as CEFR’s descriptors have been fundamental in the construction of Chinese language proficiency descriptors in Singapore. The differences between

conventional classroom activities and targeted teaching activities are shown in the following table (Table 1).

(Table 1: Differences between Conventional Classroom Activities and Targeted Teaching Activities)

	Conventional Classroom Activities	Targeted Teaching Activities
Purpose	* In line with progress prescribed in syllabus; * For all students regardless of individual differences; * The same standard and requirement; * The same methods and expected results.	* Adjust the prescribed textbooks and content; * Tailored for the students' need after diagnosis; * Targeted for the specific strengths and weaknesses; * Individualized instructions for different students.
Rationale	* Holistic approach for all the aspects of proficiency; * Unit by unit with theme-based content.	* Respond to individual weakness, prevent and correct errors; * Enhance input to improve output in specific skills.
Characteristics	* Activities with uniform general use; * Assumed uniform students' level and progress; * Comprehensive abilities; * Closely related to text-content; * Contents in different theme-based units not necessarily in lineal progression.	* Respond to specific students' learning needs; * Differentiated instructions; * Activities with specific linguistic and communicative functions; * Creative use of teaching materials; * Progressive abilities with separate emphasis on error prevention and correction.

With increasing valence of technological development, the platform should be designed to enable self-directed learning. When the students' speech data are recorded and saved, they are analyzed in terms of fluency and accuracy against the norms and speech database. This is possible especially when explict teaching is concerned. The notional-functional grammar, for example, has proven that there are limited number of functions in ordinary daily language communication, while the CEFR descriptors are also formulated for limited topics or situations for language use, especially when the students concerned are in somewhat lower level of proficiency or are learning with a syllabus. When the computer lists the typical characteristics of the prficiency levels and the common errors from the perspective of interlanguage development, the computer can suggest appropriate activities with objectives for specific skills, or the learners can identify what they need.

When one cycle comprising diagnosis, analysis and targeted teaching is completed, the students may carry out another cycle, starting with diagnostic activities that monitor whether they have improved their performance. If the errors are mostly corrected and the designated skills mastered, the learners may proceed to the activities designed for the next level of proficiency.

In summary, the integrated platform for oral proficiency diagnosis and targeted teaching is designed to respond to the changed learning environment and makes it possible for language teaching, learning and assessment to take place at a one-for-all platform. It uses the commonly accepted framework of proficiency descriptors as the guideline for language learners and uses a rubric that comes with described levels of language proficiency exemplified with linguistic forms of different degrees of difficulty. Language functions and notions are blended into the description of proficiency levels and activities are put into different tracks to target at learners' needs.

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