A Case Study
The Teaching Strategies Used for Discipline-based Study in English

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Abstract: The rapid growth of economic globalization has resulted in a fastening pace of internationalisation of higher education in Hong Kong. Since the hand-over in 1997, Hong Kong’s universities have been attracting an increasing number of Mainland students to undertake English studies. In spite of a remarkable social change and close connections to the Chinese education system, Hong Kong has still more or less maintained a British-style higher education system which is reflected in the fact that English-medium education and Western-oriented pedagogy are widely accepted. Research has been conducted on both local Hong Kong and Mainland students’ strategies of learning English, but limited research is concerned with lecturers’ pedagogical practices in teaching disciplinary studies of English, although language teaching methods for Special Purposes in Hong Kong have long been discussed. This study attempted to identify teaching strategies used in the English Department at a university in Hong Kong. Both quantitative and qualitative research methods were used. The findings revealed various teaching strategies and elicited responses from the two sub-cultural groups of students. The study focused on the students’ views on higher education in Hong Kong and therefore it should make a potential contribution to the enhancement of teaching and learning at most institutions in Hong Kong. It is also of significance to quality learning and teaching in universities other than those in Hong Kong in the context of internationalization.

Keywords: English Studies, Higher Education, Curriculum and Pedagogy, Cross-cultural Teaching and Learning

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Hong Kong, a blend of Western and Oriental traditions and institutions, has become a Special Administrative Region (SAR) of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) since its handover in 1997. The links between Hong Kong and the Mainland has been remarkably strengthened. In particular, the Higher Education Review (HER) report has set up a broad strategic direction for the development of higher education in Hong Kong. A systematic collaboration with Mainland China including education not only enables the Hong Kong government to establish a steering committee to promote the city as a regional education hub, but it also enhances its internationalism and multiculturalism (Education Bureau of Hong Kong–EDB, 2007).

Due to a fast pace of internationalisation in higher education and rapid economic development, Mainland Chinese students have become the majority of non-local students in Hong Kong higher education (UGC, 2011). In general, Hong Kong has been maintaining an English-medium higher education system granted from the British-style of higher education. Its English education system is internationally competitive (Altbach & Postiglione, 2006). There are currently eleven degree-awarding institutions of higher education. In the academic year of 2010/11, 10,074 non-local students enrolled in the eight publicly-funded universities and accounted for 14% of the total student population. This shows a continuation of increase compared to the consecutive
In this period, 8,713 full-time Mainlanders comprised of the bulk of the recruits and accounted for approximately 90% of the total non-local student population.

Though a huge body of literature has studied cross-cultural learning and teaching of Chinese background students (e.g., Skyme, 2007; Wang & Shan, 2007), limited studies have made a substantial progress on identifying differences in learning between Chinese-background students of different nationalities or ethnicities (Sit & Chen, 2010; Thao & Li, 2006). For instance, Chinese-background students from Mainland China, Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Malaysia and Indonesia were allocated in the homogenous group without considering their specific features of sub-cultures (Snider, 2005). In contrast, Smith (2001) explored differences in learning approaches among Chinese sub-groups from Hong Kong, Singapore and Malaysia. Some studies have also provided evidence that conceptions of learning and knowing are derived from a specific educational and cultural context (Gao & Watkins, 2002). Different approaches to teaching and learning in different learning contexts come from different assumptions and beliefs. In other words, learning conceptions among the sub-groups of Chinese-background students may be consistent across contexts. It will be helpful to explore students’ conceptions of learning and teaching from diverse cultural and educational backgrounds.

Some cross cultural learning and teaching studies in Hong Kong have focused on either Hong Kong Chinese students’ learning approaches and characteristics (Watkins & Biggs, 2001; Dahlin & Watkins, 2000; Kember, 2001) or Mainland Chinese students’ learning experiences and performances in Hong Kong’s universities (Li & Bray, 2007; Zeng, 2006). Only a few have focused on both groups of students’ reciprocal adjusting to study in higher education (Lam, 2006; Sit & Chen, 2010). Researchers continue to show evidence that seeking English-medium education to enhance English proficiency for future career or overseas study is one of the majority Mainland students’ motivations of studying in Hong Kong (Zeng, 2006). Gao (2007b) has examined Mainland students’ shifts in English learning strategy use in the host university of Hong Kong. Wong (2007) has compared English attainment between two groups of students with different social cultural backgrounds, but this study investigated secondary school students. Miller (2007) has looked at lecturers’ behaviour and students’ perception of the teacher in a second language in Hong Kong, but limited research is concerned with lecturers’ pedagogical practices in teaching the disciplinary studies of English although language teaching methods including teaching English for Special Purposes in Hong Kong have long been discussed (Nunan, 1991; Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

Students new to university experience a different teaching culture. Effective teaching methods including teaching strategies can facilitate students’ adaptation to university study. There is substantial literature on this topic within disciplines such as healthcare, science, economics, and teacher education (e.g., Gullason, 2009; Norman, 2009; Vogel et al., 2009; Zhao et al., 2009). Researches in Hong Kong have examined lecturers’ conceptions of good teaching, their approaches to teaching, and relevant educational practice mainly through a mix of academic disciplines from social sciences, engineering, technology, paramedical, business and management departments (Ho et al., 2001; Kember & Kwan, 2000; Murry & Macdonald, 1997). However, there is little investigation of effective teaching strategies in English studies as a discipline.

This paper attempted to add literature to this area through identifying teaching strategies used in the English Department at a university in Hong Kong. It reported an investigation on the two sub-groups of Chinese students’ perspectives to the strategies commonly used in a Western-style university classroom in Hong Kong. Good teaching methods and appropriate strategies should help students become competent in English, and at the same time, enable them to achieve academically.
Research Methods

The framework design for the study was established on the basis of the taxonomy of teaching strategies proposed by Killen (1998) who summarized seven main teaching strategies to facilitate students to learn. They are direct instruction, classroom discussion, group work, co-operative learning, problem solving, student research and performance activities. Literature supports that these strategies are commonly used in Western contexts to enhance students’ learning (Good & Brophy, 1991; Westwood, 2008).

This study was conducted at the English department, the University of Hong Kong. HKU, founded by the British colonial government in 1911, is the oldest higher education institution in Hong Kong and one of the prestigious leading English-Medium universities (Li & Bray, 2007). An increasing number of local and Mainland students have been applying for first-year-first-degree places (EDB, 2007). The majority of them are elite students in both Hong Kong and Mainland China. At the undergraduate level, the English Department offers courses in English Studies, Cross-cultural Studies in English as well as Language and Communication.

There were two stages of investigation in this study. On the one hand, a survey was used as quantitative data collection procedure. Quantitative data collected on a designed instrument to answer research questions can be statistically presented in a clear numeric way (Creswell & Clark, 2007). In this study, the survey aimed at identifying the teaching strategies commonly used in Hong Kong’s universities and examining lecturers’ preferences for strategies when teaching advanced English learners. Eleven academics out of sixteen teaching an undergraduate course in the English Department of HKU were surveyed. All these academics hold international doctorates. In addition, there were teaching fellows or tutors in supporting roles. Although it was limited to a relatively small number of subjects, the statistical evidence should provide a general picture of teachers’ perceptions and preferences for strategy use in their teaching. Furthermore, the survey focused on teaching English studies, there was no need to concern about the subjects’ English language proficiency which may affect the results of survey.

On the other hand, a semi-structured interview with open-ended questions was used to gain an understanding of both Mainland and Hong Kong students’ perspectives on learning and teaching because of its flexibility and potential to encourage participants to articulate a variety of opinions (Flick, 2002). To ensure a more natural flow to the interviewing process, the semi-structured interview had scheduled questions, but the order of the questions was modified according to the interviewer’s perception of what seemed most appropriate. It is possible to probe beyond the answers and thus enter into a dialogue with interviewees (Robson, 2002). Semi-structured interviews fitted with the current study purpose to explore students’ learning experience in Hong Kong’s universities.

Nineteen students including eleven native Hong Kong and eight Mainland undergraduates in the English Department were interviewed individually for approximately 30–50 minutes. Some interviews were conducted in English while some were in Cantonese or Mandarin. They were digitally recorded and verbatim transcribed. The Chinese interviews were translated from Chinese into English. To ensure validity and reliability, the researcher sent the completed transcripts to the participants for clarification. Each participant was coded with a number and an abbreviation “HKU-HK” or “HKU-ML” for confidentiality.

Study Results

The survey data was processed by SPSS software to generate means and standard deviations. The transcribed data was loaded into NVivo8 (N8) software to organize a textural database. Each interview was entered as a separate text file. The approach built into the interpretation was interplay between the two sub-cultural groups of students. This approach helped maximize the chances of highlighting divergent and contradictory data and contributed to the overall
robustness of the process. The major findings through both quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews were presented as below:

**Survey: Reported use of Teaching Strategy**

All the participants responded to the questionnaire that was designed to scrutinize the seven teaching strategies identified by Killen (1998) so that teachers’ preferences for these teaching strategies could be revealed. Table 1 indicates the use of each teaching strategy. This question contained seven items that were answered on a five-point Likert scale from 1 (never) to 5 (very often).

Table 1: Use of Teaching Strategies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teaching Strategies</th>
<th>n=11</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Direct Instruction</td>
<td></td>
<td>3.81</td>
<td>1.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom Discussion</td>
<td></td>
<td>4.63</td>
<td>0.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small Group Work</td>
<td></td>
<td>4.18</td>
<td>0.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooperative Learning</td>
<td></td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem Solving</td>
<td></td>
<td>3.54</td>
<td>1.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Research</td>
<td></td>
<td>3.18</td>
<td>0.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance Activities</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.63</td>
<td>1.36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

According to the statistics displayed in the Table, the rates of using classroom discussion (4.63) and small group work (4.18) were high among the seven. The use of cooperative learning (4.00) and direct instruction (3.81) ranked also positively. The rate of using performance activities (2.63) was the lowest. The results showed that there was a greater frequency for the majority of participants in using the first four strategies.

Some participants also made additional comments in the open-ended item “Others: please specify and provide an example” on students’ general responses to their teaching strategies. One described most Mainland students were active in answering questions asked by the instructor but appeared not to be as active as their Hong Kong counterparts during group discussions. Three felt that many Hong Kong students were more confident and appeared to be more at ease at various group settings. Another two reflected that their Mainland students would put more efforts into their studies and be more concerned about their assignments.

**Interview: Students’ Perceptions about Teaching Strategies**

The nineteen participants indicated their perceptions of the teaching strategies used by their lecturers and evaluated their effectiveness. Students expressed their attitudes (like, neutral or dislike) and explain the reasons. They all mentioned that they had encountered the seven teaching strategies in the current institutional studies. Table 2 displayed the preferences of the two sub-cultural groups:
Table 2: Response to Teaching Strategies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teaching Strategies</th>
<th>Responses of Mainland Chinese Students (ML)</th>
<th>Responses of Hong Kong Chinese Students (HK)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Direct Instruction</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom Discussion</td>
<td>Like</td>
<td>Like</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small Group Work</td>
<td>Like</td>
<td>Like</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooperative Learning</td>
<td>Dislike</td>
<td>Like</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem Solving</td>
<td>Like</td>
<td>Like</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Research</td>
<td>Like</td>
<td>Like</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance Activities</td>
<td>Dislike</td>
<td>Like</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In general, discussion strategies, problem-based learning strategies, and research-oriented activities were enjoyed by the majority of ML students. However there were some problems with cooperative learning and performance activities. For example, some ML students liked classroom discussion. They had experienced this strategy in tutorials where they were often asked to discuss questions and found this strategy was new to them but good for sharing their views. A typical statement should convey their general feelings:

I feel the tutorial part is quite fresh. We need to think and participate in discussion. I like this strategy because we can express our opinions. Especially when someone shares wonderful ideas, it clears my view and makes me understand something.

However, most ML students thought small group work was more effective than classroom discussion because everyone could have an opportunity to talk in small groups. They could also hear opinions from the others as well as improve their critical thinking ability as one of them expressed:

I like the form because I like talking. It's good to give students some time to voice their own opinions...Once you open the door, all the ideas come to you and you can be enlightened. It's a process to improve your critical thinking ability and make your ideas more sophisticated (English original).

From above expression, it showed that the ML students were ready to accept new teaching strategies which they had never encountered before although they might have different preference to various teaching strategies. For instance, more than half of participants were in favour of problem solving and student research. Problem solving was interesting because it challenged them to seek possible solutions to resolve a given problem. Many students shared the following opinion:

I like problem-based learning. Some teachers would ask each group to discuss different questions, so we brainstorm solutions to solve the problem. The more we participate, the better we can resolve a given problem from different perspectives...

Student research was said to be beneficial because students had learnt how to choose an appropriate research topic, to find a right research method, to make careful quotations, and to build correct bibliographies. Some had already experienced a small research project in the intuitive studies:
I like it because I can research on what I like on a certain topic. It provides me opportunities to know how to design a mini research project, collect useful information needed for my chosen topic and interpret data for discussion...

It was noted that though students who disliked cooperative learning admitted it might teach them cooperative skills for work, they seemed to overemphasize on two negative points: unequal group contribution and difficulties in managing own ideas, as commonly complained below:

‘Cooperative’ sounds like teaching you how to cooperate with colleagues in the future, but I don’t think many ML students including me would adapt to it or even like it, as I can’t do whatever I want and follow up my own ideas. Particularly when there are more capable members, there’ll be free riders who make less effort.

For Performance activities, some students enjoyed the forms of role play and drama, but five students disliked presentation form because of nervousness and pressure:

I don’t like it as I can’t adapt to it. I feel nervous when speaking in front of unfamiliar people. It’s stressful because you’re assessed on presentation...May be the more practice the better performance. I prefer to do research and problem solving myself. I like individual writing after some reading.

To HK students, they mostly enjoyed all teaching strategies except for direct instruction. In general, they liked performance activities the most, the discussion strategies such as classroom discussion, small group work and cooperative learning the better, and then problem solving and student research.

Almost all the HK students preferred performance activities. A typical citation would reflect their preference to presentation used as a form of performance activities. They had prior presentation experience and regarded it as a valuable reference to improve both language and presentation skills:

I have been required to give presentations in class since my secondary education, so I am quite assumed to this way of learning and get benefit from practicing public speaking skills and communication in English.

Most HK students liked discussion strategies and some of them had experienced these teaching strategies before university. Especially, HK students who shared the similar view as ML students also thought that small group discussion was more effective than whole classroom discussion, but they considered Cooperative learning was the most effective among these discussion strategies. It not only encouraged discussion but also enabled them to contribute solutions to sort out a common problem among the peer group, as indicated by the evaluation:

From an interaction point of view, I find cooperative learning is more helpful than class discussion and group work. I’m quite accustomed to it as we also did it in secondary school. We would figure out a way to address an issue together. There should be some sort of delegation.

In addition, problem solving and student research were also favoured by some HK participants. Problem solving, which helps to train students’ higher order thinking skills, was said to be used more in senior courses where teachers would usually combine it with some other activities:
My understanding is that problem solving often comes with research activities, like searching relevant resources to solve a given problem by the lecturer. For example, we would be asked to discuss possible solutions to resolve a problem in group work or discussion.

At the same time they felt student research would inspire them to expose some dimensions of research in the learning process:

I’ve been working as a part-time research assistant…research is interesting. I can learn more than just reading the books or course materials and learn how to critically resolve a problem. Though it’s exhausting I enjoy it. We also need to do some research when writing a paper.

Overall, HK students tended to prefer student-centred approach. The above citations were overt evidence to show this tendency. They liked classroom interaction better than one-way communication. Furthermore, most students also showed a neutral attitude to direct instruction:

…it depends. I feel more secure to learn foundation knowledge first and have been accustomed to the strategy for years. It just involves less communication…if the teacher is good, although giving some direct instructions, she or he can make it more interesting that you can at least feel it better to have a happy room, you know, everyone is happier and you will remember the staff better (English original).

Discussion

Based on both the quantitative and qualitative investigations, at least three points could be concluded for a further discussion. First, all the teachers surveyed were keen to use these seven strategies. This finding supported the assumption that these teaching strategies could be applied across various disciplines including English. The majority had greater preferences for student-centred teaching strategies including classroom discussion, small group work, cooperative learning, problem solving, and student research. This tendency might derive from their educational backgrounds and qualifications. As mentioned earlier in the literature review, most teachers in this current study were academics trained internationally and received their PhD degrees in Western countries where student-centred teaching practices are widely used. They might expect students to construct knowledge by themselves rather than merely rely on teachers’ transmissive knowledge and therefore students’ acquisition of independent study skills was more valued. Westwood (2008) claims that student-centred teaching strategies are necessary to empower students with great autonomy and to encourage students to establish collaborative work with others. The statistics showed that whether or not the participants in this study were English native speakers, they had been strongly influenced by the rationales of student-centred approaches. Teachers tended to expect students to learn through their firsthand experience. This was also consistent with Hong Kong’s Western style higher education sector that emphasizes on autonomous learning and independent thinking. As such, the preferences of using student-centred strategies were relatively higher than direct instruction which is more teacher-centred.

Second, teachers expanded that the two groups of students had varied responses to teaching strategies (e.g., group discussion or presentation) and learning attitudes (e.g., hardworking Vs self-confidence). These points also found further confirmation through the analysis of qualitative data. Despite the fact that Confucian heritage culture is shared by Chinese background students from mainland China and Hong Kong, there are sub-cultural derivatives known as Mainland Chinese culture and Hong Kong Chinese culture (Li & Thao, 2006). With a long history of British colonization, Hong Kong has been a place where the East meets the West. Each of the two communities has its own distinctive form of local culture and differs in aspects such as sociological settings, traditions of educational systems, behavioural approach to learning,
and styles of thinking. Research demonstrates that different social and educational practices lead to different learner attitudes and approaches to learning (Guibemau & Goldblatt, 2000; Sternberg & Grigorenko, 1997). The two alike but unique Chinese-background discourses could improve our understanding of the differences between ML and HK students.

The fact that most ML students had been trained to work individually and the highly competitive learning environment in their previous schools might make them feel hard to fulfil a learning task together with peers. Not frequently having experienced strategies in various grouping settings before might be another reason why some ML students felt the teaching activities such as problem solving and student research were effective for individual work. This finding also supported the study that found ML learners preferred to work alone compared to HK students (Sit & Chen, 2010). Regardless of fatigue and heavy work load, the ML students were more inclined to do individual work. Apparently, their preference to work individually rather than cooperatively was greatly dependent on how they could overcome the limitation of their learning habits formed through the learning process in their previous education.

In comparison, most HK students in this study expressed more positive views on these strategies that promote group discussion and cooperation than their Mainland counterparts did. As illustrated, they had already encountered these strategies during their secondary education. The strong influence of British colonization has an impact on Hong Kong’s social institution. For instance, the existing education system including secondary education in Hong Kong has been promoting task-based teaching and learning that is concerned with process-oriented studying (Curriculum Development Council, 1999). Guided by constructivist beliefs, task-based teaching and learning encourages students to engage in a more independent, constructive and communicative way of learning. Hence, the group of HK participants showed a strong preference to engage in collaborative work. This point supported the finding that HK students preferred to rely on great network to establish social and intellectual support for study and tended to perform more actively in groups (Chan & Watkins, 1994; Smith, 2001). It is important to understand students’ different assumptions and attitudes towards knowledge and approaches to learning as they value their home cultures and their individual experiences within different educational context.

The teachers felt HK students appeared to be more confident in general. In other words, they seemed to have a higher sense of self-esteem. Self-esteem, reflected by performance gap, is imbued to most children from a Western culture (Horin, 2007). Chan and Chan (2004), who conducted a comparative study on self-esteem between newly arrived ML children and HK local Chinese Children, found that HK children generally had higher self-esteem. This could be explained by the different linguistic and sociological background of Hong Kong. Unlike students from the Mainland where English is taught from primary or secondary schools, HK students have learnt English since kindergarten education. After primary education, top students are largely allocated to secondary schools that follow an English schooling system. To enter the higher education sector where English-medium education is adopted, they are also selected by gate-keeper examinations in either Science stream or Arts stream. As the current educational system in Hong Kong has been following Western-style education, self-confidence of HK students and their social lives may be affected by the uprooted social and educational environment. Due to educational disparities between students from Mainland China and Hong Kong, newly arrived ML learners might have experienced uncertainty in a different historical and socio-cultural background of the host society. To survive in such a highly competitive learning context, they may spend much time studying hard to achieve what they want. As Lam (2007) states, self-esteem for Asian students including Chinese is largely earned through achievements. Humility rather than self-congratulation is encouraged as a virtue in the East (Horin, 2007).

Another discussion point emerged from interview results indicated that students’ English language competence influenced their pedagogical preference more or less. Linguistic competence had impact on student’s pedagogical preference. Despite the fact that the majority of ML students
were top students with highly competitive scores in the National Higher Education Entrance Examination held in the Mainland, some still felt reluctant to express themselves through classroom discussion and performance activities including class presentation because of a lack of oral English practices before. On the contrary, most of their HK counterparts who had been immersed in an English-medium education found presentation a good way of enhancing language skills. As indicated earlier, HK students were fully aware of the importance of oral presentation skills in their future work. No matter they would be language teachers or engage in other professions, presentation skills are indispensable for a successful career. Both ML and HK students who have higher linguistic competence in English were more confident in classroom discussion and presentation, which rely on good oral communication skills. Thus, linguistic competence is closely related with pedagogical preference. This study had no intention to compare the two groups of students’ linguistic competency to identify discrepancies and evaluate which group’s English proficiency was better. Rather, it intended to check if their linguistic competence would affect students’ attitudes to teaching strategies. Future specific investigations need to be conducted at a later stage.

Conclusion

This case study at a university in Hong Kong has addressed a common issue in most institutions in Hong Kong: how to make pedagogical innovation to incorporate diversity and cultural inclusivity into their academic programs. The research findings should shed new light on enhancing quality learning and teaching in the current climate of growing number of non-local students (mainly are from Mainland China) seeking higher education in Hong Kong. The taxonomy of seven teaching strategies (Killen, 1998), widely used in any subjects across various institutional settings including higher education in Western countries, was proved to be applied to English Studies as a subject in the higher education sector in Hong Kong. It gained a general picture in which how teachers taught culturally mixed students in English studies.

Besides, this study also provided an in-depth understanding of both groups of Chinese-background students’ approaches to teaching and learning perspectives in contrast with those of their prior educational experiences through investigating their perceptions of effective teaching strategies. Teachers should be aware of the importance of incorporating culture into teaching and adjusting strategy use to maximum its validity and efficacy in the process of teaching and learning. Based on students’ different cultural and educational backgrounds, the identified major learning characteristics in coping with the teaching strategies in the study had implications for the modification towards methodological balance.

Furthermore, the study has limitations. Due to time and space limitations, the scope of this study was restricted to a higher educational institution in Hong Kong. Future research can include more universities and participants to generate more results. Despite the limitation, the study has magnified a clear picture to gauge general ideas on the use of specific teaching strategies for English major students as advanced language learners. And it is also of significance to quality learning and teaching in universities other than those in Hong Kong in the context of internationalization.
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University Grants Committee (UGC). (2011). Figures: Non-local Student Enrolment (Headcount) of UGC-funded programmes by institution, level of study, place of origin and mode of study.


**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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