

Understanding Effective Teaching in Advanced English Conversation Classes through Thematic Analysis

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This paper presents an approach for gaining insights on effective teaching in English conversation classes. We apply standard thematic analysis to the notes written by teaching assistants who observed the advanced English conversation classes. Through iterative coding, 6 themes emerged from the analysis: good points of the classes, teaching methods, personality of teachers, reaction of students, progress of students, and suggested improvement for the classes. The findings reveal valuable lessons that we could learn from the English conversation classes in the past and offer rich implications for the future design of effective teaching in English education.

Key words: effective teaching, English education, thematic analysis, qualitative analysis

1. Introduction

The Special English Lesson (SEL, <http://sel-ut.com/>) program of the University of Tokyo was started in 2005 to promote the globalization of the university. The objective of the SEL program is to improve students' English speaking and conversational skills as well as helping students prepare for TOEFL tests. Seven language schools were invited to give classes on campus. The English conversation classes were given by Berlitz Japan, Nichibeï Kaiwa Kakuin, Athenee Francais, Berkeley House, and Simul Academy (5 schools), and the TOEFL classes were given by Agos Japan and TOEFL Seminar (2 schools). Conversation classes were classified into different levels, ranging from intermediate to upper advanced. The criteria for each level were different and were up to the policies of each language school. Every semester around 200 students enrolled in SEL.

TABLE I. LANGUAGE SCHOOLS AND COURSES OFFERED IN 2014 WINTER SEMESTER

Language Schools	Courses	Teachers
Berlitz Japan	Intermediate A2a	Mike
	Upper Advanced A2c	Martin
Nichibeï Kaiwa Gakuin	Intermediate	Nichole
	Upper Intermediate	Kane, Charles
	Advanced	Peter
Athenee Francais	Intermediate	Daniel, Fabrizio
	Advanced	Nathan, Sean
	Upper Advanced	Karl, Adam
Berkeley House	Advanced	Morgan

To facilitate the management of the program, 5 teaching assistants were hired every semester. The responsibilities of the TA include setting up the classrooms, observing the classes and organizing special events at the end of the semester. On each week day a TA will be in charge of all the responsibilities. Since they had to watch over multiple classes going on at the same time, they usually only spent 10-20 minutes in each class for observation. The TAs were required to write down their observations in a notebook and report to the program coordinators. A photo of the TA notes is shown in Figure 1. Using this approach, we have collected 10-year TA notes but haven't analyzed them. Believing that the notes will help us understand effective teaching and learning in English conversation classes, we started a research project to analyze the

TA notes. At the initial stage, we used thematic analysis to manually analyze the TA notes in the winter semester of 2014. The classes offered are summarized in Table I. In this paper, we present the analysis results of the TA notes of five advanced conversation classes.

2. Methods

2.1 Data Collection

The data that we analysed is the notes written by our teaching assistants during the winter semester of 2014. One teaching assistant worked on one week day between 18:45 – 21:00. They usually spent 10-20 minutes in each class. We focus on five advanced classes: Berlitz Japan Upper Advanced A2c (Martin), Nichibeï Kaiwa Gakuin Advanced (Peter), Athenee Francais Upper Advanced (Karl, Adam) and Berkeley House Advanced (Morgan). We use pseudonym for teachers to protect their privacy.

2.2 Data Analysis

We conducted a qualitative data analysis to gain insights from the TA notes on the advanced-level English conversation classes. The analysis followed the process of a thematic analysis described by Braun and Clarke [6]. Firstly, a technical staff typed all the paragraphs in the TA notebook into an Excel Sheet with grammar mistakes corrected. Secondly, the first author imported all data to a web-based qualitative analysis tool named Saturate (<http://www.saturateapp.com>) and familiarized herself with the contents. Two screenshots of Saturate are shown in Figure 2. All the paragraphs were labelled with date, class ID, teacher's name, number of students and some thoughts for later on analysis. Excerpts with rich data were read and discussed with the remaining authors to discuss preliminary ideas based on which initial codes were generated. Thirdly, we analyzed the data through iterative coding. We did not define a coding schema beforehand but identified codes from actual data by repeatedly going through the paragraphs. After several iterations, we identified 44 codes. Finally, we grouped these codes into 6 themes: good points of the classes, teaching methods, personality of teachers, reaction of students, progress of students, and suggested improvement for the classes. This was done through an affinity analysis where all authors grouped the codes through post-it notes on a whiteboard and discussed suitable themes and names for each theme. Each theme is described in detail in the next section. All data in the findings section has been anonymized through numerical identifiers.

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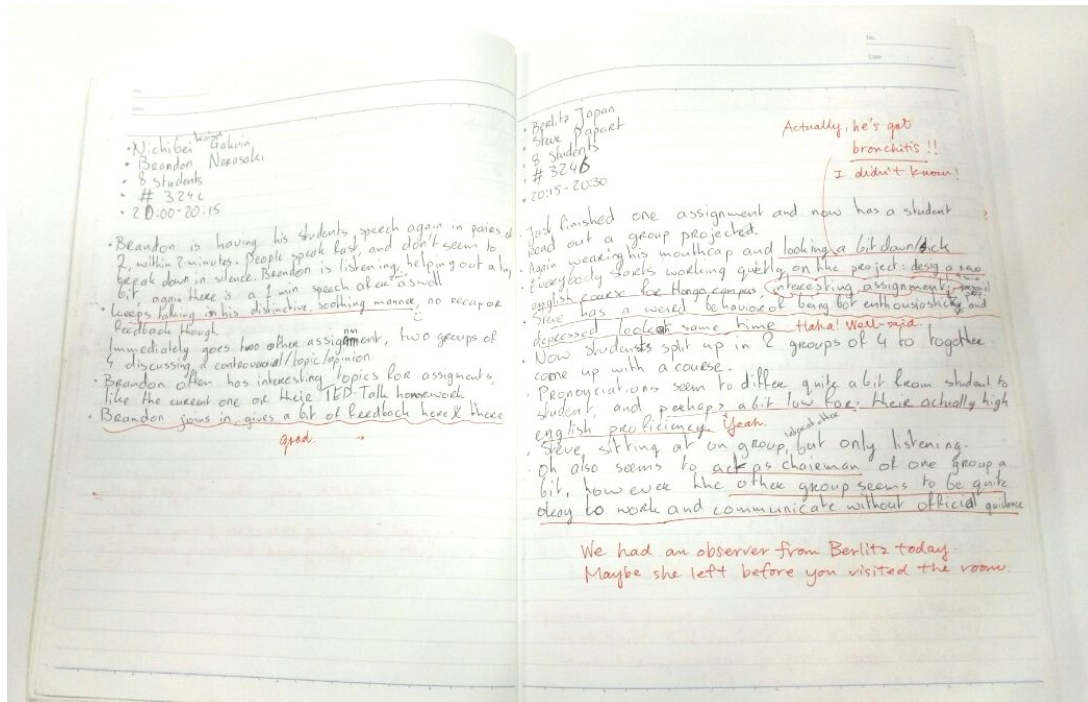


Fig.1. A photo of the TA notes.

3. Findings

In total 6 themes emerged from the thematic analysis. These themes covered the performance of the teachers (i.e. good points of the classes, teaching methods, and the personality of teachers), the performance of the students (i.e. the reaction of the students in class, and the progress that the students made throughout the semester) and the suggested improvement by the TAs. Through the following findings we attempt to show the insights that we gained from analysing the TA notes

3.1 Performance of Teachers

In most of the English conversation classes, the teachers were in complete charge of what the students do and say. Therefore the performance of the teachers directly impact on the effectiveness of the class and the performance of the students. For the performance of the teachers, our TA wrote about their observations on the teaching methods, and how the teaching methods as well as the personality of the teachers may impact the performance of the students

3.1.1 Good Points of Class

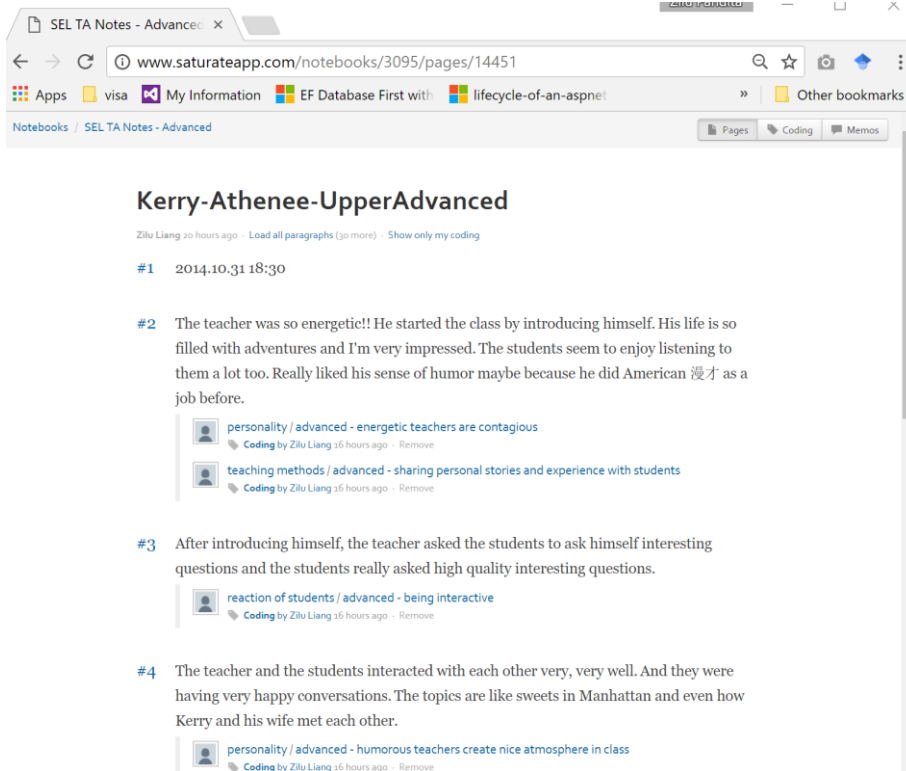
Three main good points were identified from the TA notes. Firstly, the atmosphere of the classes was comfortable and friendly. "Morgan was telling the meaning of words which the students find difficult. He created a very comfortable and friendly environment. Listening, reading and writing: they were doing at the same time." (Morgan). Second, the TAs thought that the discussions in classes were more fruitful and beneficial if the size of the class was small. "I feel the benefit of having fewer students was very high. There was always one to one interaction between the teacher and the students." (Martin). Third, the students in advanced classes were very interactive, and their discussions were so interesting and heated that even the TAs wanted to participate. "Very interesting topic like why many Japanese don't

want to get married now. I really wanted to participate in the discussion!" (Adam)

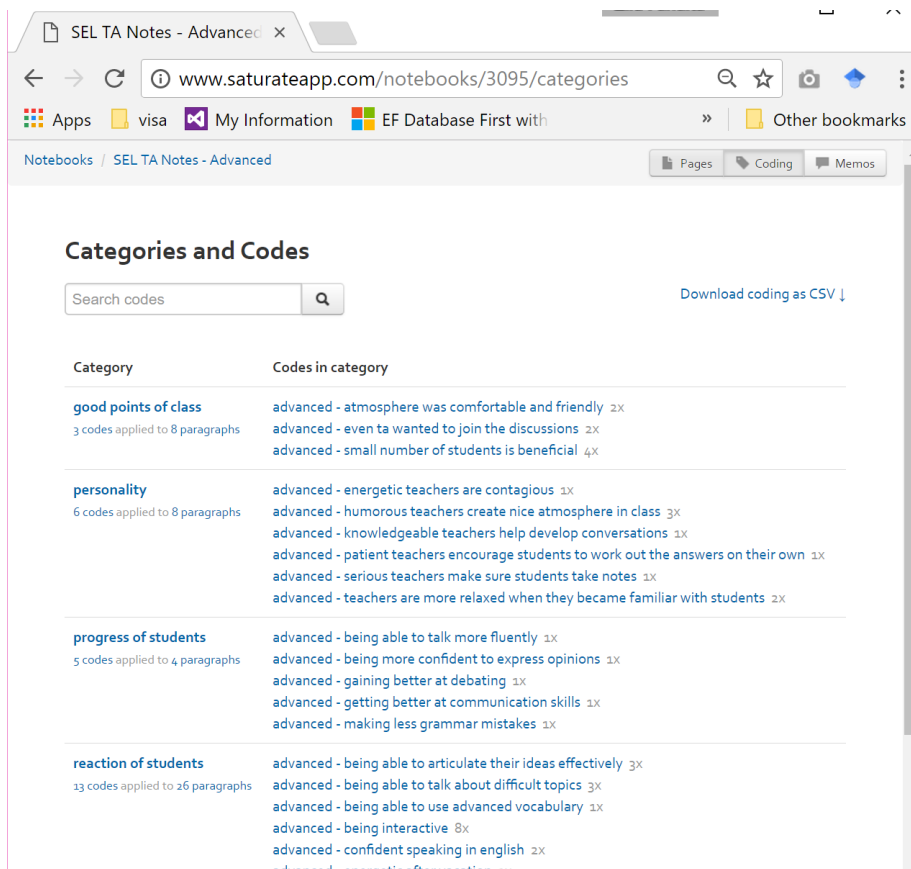
3.1.2 Teaching Methods

The teachers of the advanced conversation classes adopted a wide spectrum of strategies and tactics in their teaching. In what follows we present in detail the teaching methods identified from the TA notes.

Giving speaking tasks. As the main purpose of the conversation classes was to improve the speaking level of the students, all teachers gave a variety of speaking tasks in the classes ranging from free talk and role play to presentation and debate. The most widely used strategy was to let the students talk over a given topic. "The class started with small talks in pairs. Alex prepared cards with different topics written on them, such as Disney, discrimination, intelligence." (Adam). Role play, though not regularly used, can help students to develop conversations within a specific context and to learn the expressions that are useful for certain scenarios. "A student was assigned as the chairperson and she assigned the other 3 students as 1st, 2nd, 3rd speaker." (Karl). All teachers gave presentation tasks in their classes. Sometimes the students were asked to present their homework, other times they were asked to present a summary of their group discussions. "They were asked to introduce the articles they read last week to everybody. It sounds interesting both for the people who were presenting and those who were listening." (Adam). "Initially they discussed ideas within their group and then they exchanged their ideas with other groups." (Peter). While presentation helps students develop the skills to deliver their ideas, debate improves their critical thinking ability. "Students were divided into groups to debate against each other. They had to defend the side they were assigned to even if they actually didn't agree with it." (Karl).



(a)



(b)

Fig.2. Screenshots of the web-based qualitative analysis Saturate. (a) coding on a page; (b) all categories and codes for a notebook.

When students were speaking, some teachers interact with students to help them develop their discussions, while other teachers prefer not to interrupt the students. *“The teacher supported them a lot during the discussion.”* (Morgan). *“Martin didn't say anything during their discussion. He let them discuss freely. He kept on taking notes.”* (Martin). The TAs also mentioned that giving feedback to students was very important, may it be correction on grammar mistakes or presentation skills. *“It was very nice of Kerry to correct the students' wrong expressions or wrong grammar. Students can learn more accurate English.”* (Karl). *“The summary was not very good. Hence Martin gave some ideas about how to sum up the presentation interestingly and how to transfer to another person smoothly.”* (Martin)

Focusing on listening and reading comprehension. Another main focus on the classes was listening and reading comprehension. Three out of the five teachers, Martin, Adam and Morgan, practiced listening in their classes. In Morgan's classes, students usually watched videos three times, with the first time catching the overview, the second time answering questions, and the third time reviewing the answers. *“They were again and again listening to the video to be confirmed about words which have soft sounds.”* (Morgan).

The other two teachers, Peter and Karl, practiced reading comprehension instead. *“They read an article about Tokyo Metropolitan Government building offering place for lucky 600 people to see the first sun rise. Below the article there were 4 questions. Each student was asked to answer one of them for 1 minute without pause.”* (Karl). In addition to focusing on the three basic language skills (speaking, listening, and reading), the teachers also made great efforts to help students develop higher language skills such as communication skills, critical thinking and logical thinking.

Focusing on Communication Skills. Two teachers gave lots of tips on how to start a conversation, how to agree and disagree and how to deliver ideas through a presentation. *“They were discussing rhetorical technique for giving presentations. For example, speaking hyperbole, using humour, and repeating important words and sounds.”* (Martin). Usually the teacher would introduce some techniques first with examples, and then asked the students to practice those techniques in imagined scenarios. *“The teacher introduced techniques to start a conversation with people they first met. After that, students were asked to do small talks with each other using those techniques in pairs.”* (Adam).

Focusing on Developing Logical Thinking. Logical thinking is the ability of reaching to a conclusion or logical consequence given a precondition or premise. Logical thinking helps student discern the truth, solve problems, make good decisions, and is extremely important for their study and research. Peter focused exclusively on developing logical thinking ability in his classes. There were many practices on using block and arrow diagrams to project and develop ideas. *“They discussed the cause of increase in popularity of Halloween in Japan. Using block and arrow diagram, students projected their ideas vigorously.”* *“Students were asked to offer ideas about increasing interest in Tourism in Japan. The methodology employed was cause and effect. Students were asked to draw block diagrams. Students were very thorough with ideas.”* (Peter).

Focusing on Developing Critical Thinking. Related but not equivalent to Logical thinking, critical thinking is the objective analysis of facts to form a judgement [1]. In Karl's classes, *“students were asked to raise topics which can raise strong agreements or strong disagreements (like big controversies).”* He

sometimes intentionally used extreme statements to students. *“Karl came up with an idea: people over 50 should be killed because they're not productive enough. Not what he really thought but a topic that could trigger discussions/fights. The students spoke up very much and really fought. Good for their English practice!”* Adam also encouraged critical thinking through debating, but on more neutral topics. *“They were debating about whether English education should be introduced to elementary school.”*

At the tactic level, the teachers employed a variety of teaching methods, including encouraging students to help/teach each other, giving homework, sharing personal stories and experience, and using information communication technologies.

3.1.3 Personality of Teachers

Great teaching is not only a matter of teaching methods, but more important a matter of teachers' personality. An effect teacher must have great personality which leads to better communication, understanding, and ultimately good learning outcomes [2-4]. Energetic teachers are contagious. *“The teacher was so energetic!! The teacher and the students interacted with each other very, very well. And they were having very happy conversations.”* (Karl). Humorous teachers create a nice atmosphere in class, which helps students relax and enjoying the class. *“I can't believe they are taking the class for 4 hours a day each week! But I feel they're enjoying it because Morgan is such a nice and funny teacher!”* (Morgan). Patient teachers do not rush to the answers; instead, they encourage students to come up with answers on their own. *“When students don't understand, the teacher gave hints one after another to help students come to answer.”* (Martin).

3.2 Performance of Students

Students in advanced conversation class generally have high level of English language ability. They were able to articulate their ideas effectively using advanced vocabulary, and they could have discussions on difficult topics. *“Advanced class is really ADVANCED. I mean students are proficient in everyday conversations and also quite capable of arguing about their perspectives. They can defend their ideas and can easily project them. The level of vocabulary used in the class was very technical.”* (Peter). *“Everybody was asked to look up news and present one topic and they talked about that in groups. Their points of view were very interesting and many of them were points that I couldn't think of. They can even relate the topics to their own research topics. Amazing!”* (Adam).

3.2.1 Reaction of Students

Students at the advanced level are very confident to speak in English. They were relaxed and they enjoyed the classes. *“Although level of the class was very high, students were very relaxed and enthusiastic about learning.”* (Peter). *“The atmosphere was so much fun! They were discussing and I heard laughter. This helps them to feel so relaxed and they talked a lot.”* (Morgan).

Because students were relaxed, they were very interactive with the teacher and their peers in the class. *“Every student has good English pronunciation and they were so willing to talk! I'm very sure that they are enjoying the class a lot.”* (Adam). *“Students all answered to the teacher's questions spontaneously.”* (Karl). *“This is a very flexible class. Students feel free to speak anything with Michael, because the teacher is also very frank.”* (Morgan). Even during the break, the students had chat with each other in English. *“They were actually talking in English even*

though the teacher wasn't there during the break.” (Karl).

However, we also found that **not all students were equally active in the classes**. “One student was good at speaking and the other was good at taking notes and listening. They are working quite well as a team.” (Martin). “Girls were always very active, but boys were always kind of quiet.” (Karl). “It also seems very nice only to have boys in a class. Felt the differences between them and classes with girls in. Don't know how to express the differences though... They were so active!?” (Morgan).

3.2.2 Progress of Students

The students made steadily progress throughout the semester. The main progress was manifested in the following four aspects: making less grammar mistakes, being able to talk more fluently, getting better at communication skills and debating, and being more confident to express opinions. “The students are talking to each other. One student is speaking very fluently. Good improvement.” (Martin). “The students are getting better at reacting to other people's opinion, like ‘Uh-huh’ or something.” (Karl). “Sometimes even if people have different ideas they hesitate to express their ideas but this practice will help them to be able to develop skill to express more openly.” (Peter).

3.3 Suggested Improvement by Teaching Assistants

The TAs were generally satisfied with the quality of the advanced conversation classes in SEL programs and they were impressed by the level of students. However, the TAs still made the following two suggestions. First, they believed that the students should do more practice even at home. “They are again and again listening to the video to be confirmed about word which has soft sound. I think they need to listen to many English speakers at home too.” (Morgan). Second, they felt that the students tended to hide their feelings or opinions probably due to cultural reasons, but they hoped that the students could be more confident in expressing their ideas and opinions. “Sometimes I feel like Japanese students really like to say ‘I agree with you’. Maybe they should speak up and explain what they think more.” (Karl).

4. Discussions

The findings above have shown the insights that we gained by analyzing the TA notes for Advanced English conversation classes. We will now discuss these findings within the context of English education and highlight opportunities for future research.

4.1 Effective Teaching in English Conversation Classes

Our findings suggested that the teachers in advanced English conversation classes adopted a wide spectrum of teaching strategies and employed a variety of teaching methods. All teachers focused on strengthening the basic English language skills including speaking, listening and reading and they ensured that the students had sufficient practice in class. Different from intermediate classes [5], however, the teachers also focused on developing higher level language skills such as communication skills, logical thinking, and critical thinking in the advanced classes, while paying less attention on vocabulary building and error correction. At the tactic level, the teachers employed many methods such as encouraging students to help each other, giving feedback, assigning homework, giving examples, sharing personal experience, and using information communication technologies. These methods were also used in intermediate-level conversation classes [5], indicating that they may be suitable for all levels of English language learners.

Although the students at the advanced level are generally self-motivated and confident in English learning, teachers with good personality can further inspire them. Our findings showed that the TAs believed that energetic and humorous teachers created positive atmosphere in the classes, which boost the morale and motivation of the students. Patient teachers help students develop confidence. However, it is not clear to what extent the teachers' personality play a role in effective teaching in English conversation classes. Is teacher's personality equivalently important for intermediate and advanced students? Further studies are required to answer these questions.

4.2 Effective Learning in English Conversation Classes

Shifting the focus to the students, our findings suggested that students in the advanced classes had high-level of English language ability and they were very confident of their English level. In comparison to intermediate level students [5], they were more relaxed and they were enjoying the classes. These students were highly self-motivated and they actively interacted with the teachers and their peers in class. They could articulate their ideas effectively and have deep discussion on difficult topics. However, not all students were homogeneously active in class. As is mentioned in the findings, gender seems to be a factor. In some classes, girls were more active than boys. One TA mentioned that when there was no girl in the class, the boys were more active than usual. Since the level of the students were already very high, the progress that the students made was not as significant as intermediate-level students. It is hard to understand if the students were satisfied with the teaching and their progress solely from the TA notes.

4.3 Limitations of This Study

We have presented useful findings to benefit future studies on effective teaching and learning in English conversation classes. However, the current study has its limitations in several aspects. First, we only analysed the TA notes of one semester. The findings thus mainly reflected the opinions of the five TAs who worked in the winter semester of 2014. It would be interesting to conduct a longitude analysis on the TA notes over the span of 10 years. Second, we only focused on classes at the intermediate and upper intermediate level. Therefore, it remains unknown whether the obstacles identified in the findings were specific to English learners at the intermediate level or they were universal to English learners at all levels. If the answer is the former, the follow-up questions could be (1) how do the obstacles encountered by the advanced-level students differ from those encountered by the intermediate-level students? and (2) is such difference a matter of language level, or is it related to other factors such as learning style and motivation? Third, the TA notes were the only data source for this analysis. We may uncover interesting trends if more data are integrated to the analysis such as questionnaire results and teachers' evaluation. We will focus on addressing these limitations in our future work.

5. Conclusions

In this study we analysed the teaching assistant notes of six English conversation classes using thematic analysis. All the classes were between intermediate and upper intermediate level. We found that the teachers used a variety of teaching methods in their classes. However, none of the methods was effective in all situations. The personality of teachers could affect the teaching outcomes. As for the students, the extrovert students were generally more talkative and interactive in classes than the

introvert students. Even for the same individual student, his/her performance could vary from class to class depending on various external factors. After one-semester of continuous practice and training, many students made concrete progress in their overall English level and conversation skills. However, we also found that three main problems persist: (1) having difficulties in articulating their thoughts; (2) having difficulties in understanding native speakers; (3) not being able to think in English. This study offered rich implications to further studies on effective teaching and learning in English education.

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