

A CASE OF MALAYSIA AND CHINA COMPARING THE 21ST CENTURY CLASSROOM INSTRUCTIONAL AND ASSESSMENT STRATEGIES FROM TWO HIGHER LEARNING INSTITUTIONS

Tara Ooi I – Chen*

Eric Balan**

Mohammad Saeed***

PURPOSE
THE approach to teaching varies by location but are united by instructions. This research paper looked at the classroom instructional and assessment strategies in two higher learning institution: one in Malaysia and the other in China.

Design/Methodology/Approach: *Using an interview and observation approach, this paper had managed to understand the dynamics of teaching when it comes to the usage of technology. Teaching tools are in abundance yet sometimes confusing. The approach towards 21st century classroom is where the facilitator's instructional and assessment strategies are skewed towards developing the 4C's.*

Findings: *In this paper it showed the manner and approach of how Business English were taught by two teachers in two different higher learning institutions and how they adopted and adapted the use of technology as part of their classroom delivery and strategies. The outcome of the comparison study was indeed phenomenal to witness.*

Research Limitations: *The research was only carried out and assessed for one semester according to the academic calendar of the universities. Replicating the research approach for subsequent semesters would result to better conclusion.*

Managerial Implications: *Class must be balanced with teacher-centered and student-centered.*

Learning must happen before, during and after class with the technology as a tool. Cohesiveness of strategies and understanding the culture is important. As teachers are geared toward a 21st century classroom and trying different strategies to develop the 4C's, student's readiness and course outcome plays a role in determining the teaching and assessment strategies.

Originality/Value: *The research presented and highlighted the use of the 4C's in 21st century classroom teaching.*

Key Words: *Classroom, Malaysia, China, Instructional Assessments, Teaching Strategies.*

Introduction

Do you still remember your classroom when you were a child? Mine was organized in a way that our only source of information was the teacher. Even the setting of the classroom was centered around a

* Lecturer, Universiti Tun Abdul Razak, Malaysia.

** Lecturer, Universiti Tun Abdul Razak, Malaysia.

*** Formerly Professor, Minot State University, USA.

teacher. Many years later, I encountered the same scenario in university albeit some lecturers did inject technology and less direct instruction. As a teacher today, I have realized that there are so many issues, consideration and factors to look into when preparing a lesson and its assessment, etc. Issues such as different learning styles and needs, considerations like objectives and outcomes of a subject, and factors like gender, age and social status. Balancing these makes me not just a teacher, I am a facilitator of learning. Besides, balancing teaching in the digital world can be overwhelming. Tools are in abundance and sometimes it can be confusing, and this can be time consuming which is a luxury most teachers do not have. I have also encountered many senior teachers who felt like they're not ready to use technology as they were not given enough support but whatever the case, technology in the classroom will stay. Some would say that a teacher has many roles, that it is a multifaceted profession (Cox, 2018) surrogate parent, counsellor, role model, friend and many others. This transformation from the single role of educator has according to Lanier (1997), "prompted massive revolutions in knowledge, information technology, and public demand for better learning". Teachers now are forced to rethink the way they use tools in the classroom i.e. to be more tech savvy, their responsibilities to the student, parents and employer, the kind of assessment they set. In this study, I hope to understand the makings of a 21st century classroom by comparing two teachers from different universities teaching similar subjects. The case study will focus on instructional and assessment strategies and the means to create a productive learning environment in the 21st century classroom.

The 21st Century Classroom

What makes a 21st century classroom? Is it a tech-savvy teacher, unique arrangement of tables, usage of laptop just to name a few? One perspective is to look at the skills needed for the 21st century workplace and therefore ensuring students are developed to meet that demand. Referring to The Partnership for 21st Century Skills (P21), which was suggested by an American national not-for-profit organization, it identified a set of four essential skills called the 4 C's: critical thinking, creativity, collaboration and communication (Frameworks & Resources, 2019). Tover (2019) states that incorporating these skills in her music class "help create individuals who can articulate their thoughts clearly" while able and willing to lead and follow a group with set goals. Other academics refer to these skills as competencies for ways of thinking, ways of working, tools for working, and skills for living (Care, Kim, & Vista, 2015). Accordingly, a 21st century classroom is where the facilitator's instructional and assessment strategies are skewed towards developing the 4C's. One topic that can't be separated from 21st century classroom is technology. It is changing the roles of teachers and students today. The amount of information available at a click of a button is a wash to the point that students crave more information quicker at a more efficient pace. A ten minutes video on YouTube versus an hour's lecture would be more favorable to today's students. Many Malaysian teachers are aware of the "critical role of education as the driving force of its transformation process into becoming a knowledge-based society" (Garba, Byabazaire, & Busthami, 2015) but technology alone is not the definition of today's classroom.

Literature Review

In the ever-changing landscape of education, Malaysia must adapt its education system to create leaders of tomorrow, where our students must be educated and equipped with the skill of critical thinking, creativity, collaboration and communication. To do this, policy-makers are considering the importance of full integration of information technology in the education system at all levels (Garba, Byabazaire, & Busthami, 2015). Allocation of resources are earmarked towards this by providing infrastructure and facilities to match the 21st century learning environment. Even our neighboring country, Singapore spoke about "holistic and balanced assessment" in their 2008 Primary Education Review and Implementation (PERI), led by Grace Fu, incumbent Minister of State for Education (Tan & Leong, 2014) where changes must be made to use practices that support academic achievement and at the same time widening learning opportunities such as twenty-first-century competencies and skills. Another description of 'new landscapes for learning' (Keppell, Au, Ma, & Chan, 2006) in Hong Kong, where blended learning-oriented assessment, peer learning and online were supported by school enhanced

with technology. These tools offer unique opportunities for feedback, collaborative work, group work, and project-based learning approaches in which students use online discussion and forums to enhance their learning experience. Tools are simply tools and cannot work unless there is a plan on how to utilize them in which plans such as value-centric framework are implemented (Singapore) with the purpose of incorporating 21st century competencies, “including civic literacy, global awareness, and cross-cultural skills; critical and inventive thinking; communication, collaboration and information skills; as well as social and emotional competencies” and similarly, Costa Rica emphasized on the development and application key 21st century skills and attitudes, such as socioemotional, communication, critical thinking, citizenships, and problem solving (Care, Kim, & Vista, 2015). Thomas Friedman, a three-time Pulitzer Prize winner once said that besides the three R’s (reading, writing and arithmetic), students in the future will need the four C’s: coding, communications, creativity and collaboration because people will need to be lifetime learners, hence the concept of how to learn is not to be taken lightly (Urzillo, 2018). Therefore, teachers or facilitators are tasked with helping students learn to learn, essential for understanding deeper concepts and adapting higher-order skills (4C’s) which ultimately are linked to different instructional and assessment strategies employed (Fadel, 2016). Teachers use different instructional strategies to help students become independent learners, these strategies are techniques either formally learnt or through experience, usually some form of trial and error. Good instructional strategies: “motivate students and help them focus attention. organize information for understanding and remembering and monitor and assess learning” (Education, 2002). Through different instructional strategies the facilitator also makes learning fun and practical because learners gain better understanding of content when they take a more active role in their education. In time, they become independent learners and are able to make meaningful connection between concepts learned in class and real-life situations (Persaud, 2019). In China, English language teachers face many obstacles when teaching in Chinese colleges, but reports are shown that use of creative tasks for warm-up activities, collaborative learning, portfolio assignment and tasked-based approached have proven to be successful (You, 2004). For example, flipped classroom was used in a class of mix American and Chinese students where compared to a non-flipped they had gained better grammar improvement in their posttest as compared to a class that employed direct instruction (Webb & Doman, 2016).

Methodology

There is a grave demand for the 4C’s in the instructional and assessment strategies in the classroom and teachers need to be always learning and working on what best strategies would suit their class subject and students. Information about teaching theories, approaches together with trainings of new technology proved vital for today’s teacher because learning can be self-reflective and make better teachers, hence conducting an extensive and in-depth researches and experiments in teaching modes can help to enrich and develop teaching theories and teaching practices (Wang , 2009). The purpose of this study is to identify and compare what instructional and assessment strategies university teachers have implemented for today’s 21st century classroom, specifically in teaching Business English while understanding their views, experiences and hope as facilitators of learning. The research questions for this study are as follow:

1. How do Business English teachers view instructional and assessment strategies for teaching, learning and assessment in their 21st century classroom?
2. What are their views on 21st century learning and what have they done to address this aspect?
3. How do teachers ensure that their instructional and assessment strategies help provide a positive learning environment in their 21st century classrooms in order to enhance student learning gains?

Research Design, Research Instruments and Population Sample

To identify and compare what instructional and assessment strategies university teachers have implemented for today’s 21st century classroom, a qualitative research design was employed.

Qualitative research is to gain insights into a particular phenomenon of interest (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2012). It is also based on words from a small number of individuals so that the participants' views are obtained because "stories ... provide personal accounts about ...schools, educational issues, work... and their reported stories in qualitative research enrich the lives of both the researcher and the participant" (Creswell, 2008). Data was collected through email interviews with seven (7) questions related to their opinions, reflections and experience, and were told that there are no right or wrong answers. Emails were written in English. Face to face interview was not applied because one of the samples lives abroad and live interview was only possible through WeChat application which did not have a recording function, hence, to be impartial both samples were emailed the interview questions and replied within a reasonable time. The questions were open-ended questions related to experience, explanation and opinions in instructional and assessment strategies. Data was also collected through classroom observation. This was done through WeChat Live for the teacher in China where the researcher observed through a live video feed for 1 lesson (1 hour 30 minutes) while in Malaysia, a classroom observation was also conducted for 1 session (3 hours). This was to corroborate with the information given through the written interviews. The organization of the data collected was firstly by analyzing the interview answers and comparing between the two interviews. Next, themes and concepts were identified that would support the purpose of the study. This was followed by analyzing the observation findings and confirming the supporting themes and concepts. Coding and analysis were then conducted which resulted in identifying the instructional and assessment strategies university teachers have implemented for today's 21st century classroom. Since the purpose of the study is to identify and compare what instructional and assessment strategies university teachers have implemented for today's 21st century classroom, the sample consisted of two university teachers. Nurul, a Malaysian teaching living in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, and Eric also a Malaysian but teaching and living in Yinchuan, China. They each have ten- and nine-years teaching experience respectively. They teach Business English to first year university students among other subjects. The table no. 1 below describes the teachers' background and brief information about their students/classroom.

Table No. 1: Information About Sample

Teacher	Eric	Nurul
Age	39	30
Education background	Ph.D. in Business	M.Ed. (TESL)
Number of years teaching	6	5
Name of Institution where he/she is teaching	North Minzu University, Faculty of Culture and Foreign Language	Universiti Tun Abdul Razak, Centre for Continuing Education
Country	Yinchuan, Ningxia, China	Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
Current semester	Spring 2019	January 2019
Subject teaching	Business English	Business English
Number of students in class	60	18
Level/course	First year/Degree in English	First year/Degree in Business Administration
Number of class per week	2	3
Duration of class	1.5 hours	3 hours

Findings

At the point of the interview sessions for this research, Nurul was already midway through her 14 weeks semester timeline, while Eric was entering the third week of his 16 weeks semester however, this did not stop the research from collecting data and hope that the findings could be useful for the body of knowledge in this area. Even though the samples for this case study live miles apart they shared a few similarities and differences considering their different environment and background. The findings are discussed in accordance with the research questions.

Question 1: How do Business English teachers view instructional and assessment strategies for teaching, learning and assessment in their 21st century classroom?

Class must be a balance of teacher-centered and student-centered

This was a shared view that both samples had about instructional strategies. For the case of Eric, he described teaching as ‘a 2-way learning centric; of students and the teacher’ because direct teaching must happen for the first half to help student understand the content, while in the second half is where students are engaged in class activity in the application of what was taught. Nurul shared the same response “I always start my class with a lecture and later followed by class activities.” In the class observation conducted, both teachers spent the first part of their lessons giving lectures and students did not ask any questions, but some did take notes. Eric stated that the reason for this approach is because most China’s universities are still heavily syllabus oriented hence, completing the entire lesson plan is more important than how you deliver it and through his experience lecture is an efficient way to do so. Nurul on the other hand, used the direct instruction method because she claimed student in her class are not ready to be independent learner, she has through experience found that students cannot do the class activity successfully unless they’ve been guided first. However, both agreed that the direct method is not always favored by students because they are of the generation that must be stimulated and exposed to a variety of content. For instance, in Eric class, he uses comic strips in some of his slides to reiterate a concept while Nurul uses YouTube videos. On the flip side, classes were also student centered and collaborative in nature where in both the class observations students did group work and presentations. Eric commented that “class activities are mostly done in groups of 4 or 5 and students choose their own grouping teams, and because it is a collective society, hence, nobody gets left behind. Groups who are better than the rest will tend to help others” while Nurul state that “group work is a good way to test their understanding. They also improve many important skills, i.e. cooperation, negotiation, leadership.” Eric also uses group work and presentation as a form of assessment because in his university each in-class activity carries 10 marks and it is made compulsory to conduct 5 class works for students to collect “points” to pass the module. This approach helps weak students pass, it helps average students meet the higher criterion grade of the module, and it make good students outstanding. On the other hand, marks are not given for group work in Nurul class, though their participation will be taken into account when the final grading is being put in place.

Question 2: What are their views on 21st century learning and what have they done to address this aspect?

Learning must happen before, during and after class with the technology as a tool

The findings show that learning does not only happen in the classroom and that the teacher must prepare the students ahead of the class where some groundwork learning is established. Eric does this by a quick discussion on the topic in a group chat over a video whereas Nurul uses the university’s online learning platform to send them slides ahead of the class. “I don’t expect them to study the slides beforehand but if they do, it’s an added bonus” – Nurul. While Eric’s approached is more authoritative because “all students must participate in the discussion or loose points”. For the post class follow up,

the Chinese students wrote a write a simple and short reflective paragraph and privately massaged their teacher on WeChat or in a note which is apparently an activity most of the student enjoy. Nurul's on the other hand, took a more traditional approach by giving the Malaysian students homework which they had to complete before the next class. Another interesting find is that both teachers are heavily reliant on mobile application to communicate with the students, WeChat for China and WhatsApp for Malaysian. It is used for dissemination of class announcements, to engage in the pre and post class follow up. Nurul will also frequently share YouTube links and other website links that she finds useful but unfortunately Eric said that sharing of external information is limited there limited due to the blocking of many websites by the government. Most online search results are in Mandarin with limited access to English websites and while the Chinese version of YouTube called Bilibili and Youku are available the content does not fit for the teaching of Business English, he said "I do my best with the strict limitations to deliver teaching content." The class observation also suggested another finding in relation to a student's own learning strategies. In China for most part, students are focused on collecting points to pass their subjects, with class activities, homework, and memorization/reiteration for assessments. However, there were a handful of students who were very keen in improving their speaking skills and they do this by inviting the teacher for lunch. The researcher observed that a group of students reminded their teacher of their lunch appointment and upon investigation found out that the teacher often has lunch with groups of students in campus with the sole purpose of practice speaking English. In contrast, the Malaysian teacher never socialize with her students.

Question 3: How do teachers ensure that their instructional and assessment strategies help provide a positive learning environment in their 21st century classrooms in order to enhance student learning gains

Cohesiveness of strategies and understanding the culture

The findings reveal that a positive learning environment occur when instructional and assessment strategies are cohesive. This theme, Eric stated is where student should be able to understand, comprehend and reflect on what was taught and apply it. The assessments should also be cohesive, for instant, in Eric's class focus is on vocabulary and presentation hence, students are assessed on their presentation/activities in class, online discussion, and during their personal reflective paragraph. They are not given a final written test because the outcome of the course does not state so, and he states, "as a foreign teacher, teaching in a collective society can be frustrating. To ensure that students meet the learning requirements and outcomes, the in-class work will be based on the application of what has been taught and therefore hopefully meeting the outcomes." In comparison, Nurul also agreed that cohesiveness in teaching, learning, and assessment are vital, but she finds it a challenge because her she believes that her students are not fully ready to learn Business English as they're still struggling with general English. Understanding the culture was also identified as a theme in this study where the Malaysian teacher in China had to learn day by day about the way Chinese people act and think which translates a little but into the way they learn. Being in a collective society, people avoid standing out as individual so, activities like group discussion, pair reading, and role-play are very effective. They were also trained to follow rules, so punctuality and promises are important, for instance, if you tell students to discuss and submit a draft they will do so and if you promise to give them feedback, they will definitely ask about it in the next class. A statement from Eric's interview:

"Chinese students are inquisitive to new things, but they are from a society that will not speak up to ask to learn. They will only accept what has been given to them. This is the nature of their education system. I've adapted to only teach what is required ... by following the given teaching guidelines. I used to feel guilty for not pushing their learning potential, but I came to realize and respect their level of limited absorbing ability. In short, I've adapted to their reality."

While in the Malaysian culture, Nurul mentioned that her students expected to be spoon feed, for example, “they are always waiting for me to make the first move in their learning” hence, she feels like it is justified that she gives lectures, homework and tests. She commented,

“my students come from a culture where it is ok to be late and come unprepared to class like an empty slate. Coming from the same education background (Malaysian myself) I have figured out ways to conduct my lessons. I have to give a progress test and final, and warn them that assignments carry marks, if they are not serious, they will fail the course.

Conclusion

The findings show that there were three apparent themes in this study; 1) class must be a balance of teacher-centered and student-centered, 2) Learning must happen before, during and after class with the technology as a tool, and 3) Cohesiveness of strategies and understanding the culture. Even though many teachers are geared toward a 21st century classroom and trying different strategies to develop the 4C's, student's readiness and course outcome plays a role in determining the teaching and assessment strategies. Education systems that rely heavily on teachers is a multi-faceted concept (Garrett, 2008) i.e. organization of environment, rules and routines, building of rapport and relationships. With such considerations, teaching and assessment strategies could be view as a continuum from teacher-centered to student-centered (Garrett, 2008). Hence, if students are used to a teacher centered class since primary and secondary school, flipping the classroom would prove to be chaotic because they are not taught how to learn. Students might not be ready to participate in flipped classroom and adjust to their new learning environment and prefer the traditional way of learning (ROEHL, REDDY, & SHANNON, 2013). The findings show that students still depend on teachers as a source of knowledge. However, technology savvy students also liked and depended on technology as learning tools. A flipped classroom with carefully selected technology can enhanced learning; such as using fun and attractive educational short videos derived from course material which can be engaging if utilized appropriately (Schmidt & Ralph, 2016). Hence, technology is a great tool and cannot be denied. Students can learn to be independent learners if they are taught certain learning strategies and are guided. This create learning opportunities before, during and after class. They will be more interested in completing their tasks when engaged and challenged (Schmidt & Ralph, 2016). And finally, cohesiveness of strategies and understanding the culture is important because a teacher must understand the reality of the student. Such as, how a certain language is taught should not be just focused on the culture by which the students come from rather it 'should be taught in a manner consistent with local cultural expectations' (McKay, 2004). It takes time to change and as teachers are always chasing after a deadline, submitting to these realities is not ideal but we can always creatively adapt the instructional and assessment strategies. This is probably the best way to go about it.

References

- Care, E., Kim, H., & Vista, A. (2015, October 17). *How do we teach 21st century skills in classrooms?* Retrieved from Brookings <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/education-plus-development/2017/10/17/how-do-we-teach-21st-century-skills-in-classrooms/>, Accessed on July 8, 2020.
- Cox, J. (2018, December 24). *What is the Role of a Teacher?* Retrieved from Thought Co. <https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-the-role-of-a-teacher-2081511>, Accessed on July 8, 2020.
- Creswell, J. W. (2008). *Educational Research: Planning, Conducting, and Evaluating Quantitative and Qualitative Research*. Boston: Pearson.
- Education, A. (2002). *Instructional Strategies*. Alberta, Canada.
- Fadel, C. (2016). 21St Century Competencies. *Independent School*, 75(2), 20-26.
- Frameworks & Resources. (2019). Retrieved from *Battelleforkids.org*: <http://www.battelleforkids.org>, Accessed on May 16, 2020.
- Garba, S. A., Byabazaire, Y., & Busthami, A. H. (2015). *Toward the Use of 21st Century Teaching Learning Approaches:*

The Trend of Development. *iJet*, 10(4), 72-79.

Garrett, T. (2008). Student-Centered and Teacher-Centered Classroom Management: A Case Study of Three Elementary Teachers. *Journal of Classroom Interaction*, 34-47.

Gay, L. R., Mills, G. E., & Airasian, P. W. (2012). *Educational Research Competencies for Analysis and Applications*. Boston : Pearson.

Keppell, M., Au, E., Ma, A., & Chan, C. (2006). Peer learning and learning-oriented assessment in technology-enhanced environments. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 31(4), 453-464.

Lanier, J. T. (1997). *Redefining the Role of the Teacher*. Retrieved from Edutopia <https://www.edutopia.org/redefining-role-teacher>; Accessed on March 7, 2020.

McKay, S. L. (2004). Teaching English as an International Language: The Role of Culture in Asian Contexts. *The Journal of Asia TEFL*, 1-22.

Ormrod, J. E. (2014). *Educational Psychology: Developing Learners*. Boston: Pearson.

Persaud, C. (2019). *Agile Classroom. Instructional Strategies: The Ultimate Guide*. Retrieved from Top Hat <https://tophat.com/blog/instructional-strategies/>; Accessed on March 18, 2020.

ROEHL, A., REDDY, S. L., & SHANNON, G. J. (2013). The Flipped Classroom: An Opportunity To Engage Millennial Students Through Active Learning Strategies. *Journal of Family & Consumer Sciences*, 44-49.

Schmidt, S., & Ralph, D. (2016). The Flipped Classroom: A Twist On Teaching. *Contemporary Issues in Education Research*, 1-6.

Schunk, D. (2014). *Learning Theories: An Educational Perspective (6th Ed)*. Essex: Pearson Education Limited.

Snowman, J., & Biehler, R. (2006). *Psychology Applied to Teaching*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.

Tan, K., & Leong, W. S. (2014). What (more) can, and should, assessment do for learning? Observations from ‘successful learning context’ in Singapore. *Curriculum Journal*, 25(4), 593-619.

The Ruhi Institute. (2013). Retrieved from <http://www.ruhi.org>: <http://www.ruhi.org/institute/index.php>, Accessed on August 4, 2020.

Tovar, C. (2010). Skills You Can Use Now and Teach Later. *Illinois Music Educator*, 71(2), 93.

Urzillo, R. (2018). From the three R’s to the four C’s: Students need academics and soft skills to avoid becoming obsolete in future workforce. *District Administration*, 54(1), 80.

Wang , X. (2009). Second Language Theories and Their influences on EFL in China. *English Language Teaching* , 2(4) 149-153.

Webb, M., & Doman, E. (2016). Does the Flipped Classroom Lead to Increased Gains on Learning Outcomes in ESL/EFL Contexts? *The Catesol Journal*, 39-67.

You, X. (2004). New directions in EFL writing: A Report from China. *Journal of Second Language Writing* 13, 253-256.

Appendix

Interview Questions

Dear _____,

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this simple but hopefully beneficial research/ case study. Please answer all the questions using your opinions, reflections and experience a teacher. There are no right or wrong answers. Please type in black. There's no limit to the number of words.

Part 1: Details pertinent for the study. Please complete. :

- First name: _____
- Nationality: _____
- Age: _____
- Highest Education level: _____
- Years of teaching experience: _____
- Institution you're currently teaching (University/faculty): _____
- Subjects currently teaching: _____

Part 2: Please answer the following questions based on your Business English class:

1. What does a 21st century classroom mean to you? Describe it. What should happen in a class before, during and after a lesson?
2. What are your opinions on instructional and assessment strategies for today's classroom and student?
3. What are your opinions on learning and assessment strategies for today's classroom and student?
4. How do you think students today learn? And how have you adapted your class to them?
5. Do you use technology in your class? If yes, please state what and how.
6. How do you ensure students achieve the set learning outcomes for your lessons?
7. How do you create a positive learning environment in your class?