

The Evaluation of the College English Textbook in China: From the Perspective of Second Language Acquisition

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Abstract: Textbooks play critical roles in promoting learning. Thus, analyzing the content and structure of textbooks can shed light on education. English language education has always been attached with paramount importance in China. This study, therefore, evaluated a widely used college English textbook: Contemporary College English 2 second edition (CCE2) from the perspective of second language acquisition to maximize the learning outcome of students using this textbook. This study started with a description of the textbook. Secondly, the study presented an analysis of the content and structure of the textbook. Thirdly, the author discussed the textbook from the perspective of input and output skills underpinned by theories of second language acquisition. The findings illustrated that CCE2 had pros and cons. It provides authentic input and pedagogical tasks for students, which would benefit students' English proficiency development. However, the difficulty level of each unit is imbalanced, which might hamper students' understanding of the reading texts. Based on these advantages and disadvantages, suggestions for both compilers and teachers about how to utilize CCE2 effectively were elaborated.

Keywords: Textbook analysis; College English; Second language acquisition

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1. Introduction

In a broad sense, textbook refers to all sorts of materials that function as facilitation of learning, such as radios and websites^[1]. On the other hand, the author adopts its narrow sense that is the standard book used in the classroom. The textbook analyzed in this paper is an intensive reading textbook, which is widely used by English majors who are in the second semester of grade one in universities of mainland China, called Contemporary College English 2 second edition (CCE2). Published by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, CCE2 was compiled by Professor Yang Limin from Beijing Foreign Studies University who is of high reputation in Second Language Teaching. This textbook is accompanied by a CD-ROM, and Teacher's Book. The CD-ROM consists of the audio recordings of 28 articles that appeared on the 16-unit Student's Book for students to correct their pronunciation and facilitate their reading. Additionally, Teacher's Book aims to ease the instructor's burden of lesson planning, which outlines the teaching objectives, teaching focuses and difficulties, analysis of the teaching content (article), and suggestions or answers to the additional activities (i.e., reading, speaking, vocabulary, grammar, translation, and writing exercise). As a standardized college English textbook, CCE2 has the following prominent features:

Firstly, it strictly follows the requirements of the "English Teaching Syllabus for English Majors at The Tertiary Level" in mainland China, according to which, freshmen and sophomores should be trained

to grasp the basic language skills (i.e., listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translating). As a compulsory course of undergraduate English majors, intensive reading plays a vital role in facilitating students to develop solid fundamental linguistic knowledge ^[2].

Secondly, the topic of each unit demonstrates students with contemporary hot issues ranging from critical and independent thinking, racial discrimination, nature, and lifestyle. All the texts are selected from foreign textbooks, newspapers, and speeches. Such authentic input equips students with abundant linguistic and cultural knowledge. However, authentic materials are not initially made by native speakers for pedagogical purposes ^[3]. In order to fit the condition of the college English class, editors of CCE2 modified the textbook carefully. For instance, compilers delete the modal particles that have no influence on the meaning.

Thirdly, the additional activities cover a holistic range of skill training, which can consolidate student's fundamental language skills. These exercises are arranged thematically from simple to difficult, so it is easy for students to complete independently.

Considering the above-mentioned characteristics, CCE2 is a typical college English textbook that is suitable to be analyzed. Meanwhile, the question arises that to what extent CCE2 could facilitate English majors' English learning in mainland China. Since English language textbooks of college in China have been adjusted to integrate into the developing syllabus during last four years, it is vital to find out how the content and structure of CCE2 is arranged. Through evaluating, it would be helpful to offer suggestions for teachers, curriculum developers and those who are in charge of English learning in educational system ^[4].

2. Methods and materials

Based on the distinguishing features of CCE2, it was selected as the analyzing material in the present study. Content and structure analysis was conducted. Firstly, the coding scheme utilized for theme analysis was adopted from Byram ^[5]'s checklist. They were: (1) social identity and social group, e.g., racism; (2) social interaction, e.g., interpersonal skills; (3) belief and behavior, e.g., humanity, daily routines; (4) social and political institutions, e.g., community service; (5) socialization and the life cycle, e.g., education; (6) national history, e.g., military, historical events seen as markers of national identity; (7) national geography, e.g., geographical factors seen as being significant by members; (8) stereotypes and national identity, e.g., Western culture ^[5]. The number of codes was added up and then the percentage of each code was calculated. Secondly, the distribution of the basic language skills (i.e., listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translating) in CCE2 was displayed. Finally, the exercises in CCE2 were coded as mechanical, meaningful, and communicative tasks according to Paulston ^[6].

3. Analysis of content and structure

The CCE2 consists of 16 units with each unit divided into 2 parts: Text A and Text B, except Unit 7 and Unit 14 which are the Inter-Lessons to test student's periodic learning outcomes through integrated language skill practices. Specifically, Text A includes: (1) the article for intensive reading whose average word count is 1,500; (2) notes on the text, which provides additional information about the author, background, and Western culture; (3) glossary with words explained in the target language; (4) preview tasks, which intends to develop effective skimming and scanning skills. These activities also show a clear guideline to cultivate autonomous reading habits, that is, listen to the recording to grasp the theme and genre firstly, then read for comprehension and language through doing the sentence paraphrase and explanation, in the end, write down the ideas and questions for sharing in class; (5) speaking tasks require students to work collaboratively such as view exchange and role play; (6) vocabulary tasks testing the knowledge of word's pronunciation, meaning, formation, derivation, synonym and antonym, collocation; (7) grammar tasks in various forms like filling-in-the-blanks, translating, and error correction; (8) writing

task that asks students to write an essay of about 200-250 on a topic closely related to the reading material. Besides the essential part of each unit--Text A, Text B is for students to do extensive reading and deepen their understandings of Text A. The average length of Text B is 1,200 words. In conclusion, the overall structure of CCE2 is self-explanatory, i.e., reading materials (i.e., intensive and extensive texts), vocabulary, annotation, exercise ^[2]. In order to generate a detailed insight into the content of CCE2, the author analyzed the intensive readings from the perspectives of topic and genre based on Byram ^[5]'s coding scheme. Then, the exercises were summarized according to five types of skill (i.e., listening, reading, speaking, writing, and translating) and Paulston's ^[6] practice taxonomy, who divided the practices into three categories (i.e., mechanical, meaningful, and communicative exercises).

Firstly, as shown in **Table 1**, both the topic and genre cover a wide variety. Regarding the theme, belief and behavior contains the largest portion (29%). Then, the topics -- socialization and the life cycle, national geography, national history received even attention (14%) from the textbook editors. The reading materials offer students adequate theme-related vocabulary, expressions, and insightful opinions which can ensure efficient and smooth communication concerning the interrelated topics in real settings outside the classroom. For instance, Text A of Unit 12, A Fundamental Technique in Handling People, introduces constructive and creative tactics to make friends and influence people which are applicable in real life. Moreover, in terms of genre, argumentation is the most frequently appeared genre yielding 21%. Narration and play occur twice, whilst other genres are seen once in Text A of CCE2. These genres cover numerous language styles, ranging from informal to formal, colloquial to written, through which, students are capable of adjusting writing styles according to different themes and genres.

Table 1. Intensive reading analysis with respect to theme and genre

Unit	Theme	Genre
Unit 1	Socialization and the life cycle	Prose
Unit 2	Social identity and social group	Fiction
Unit 3	National geography	Narration
Unit 4	Belief and behavior	News report
Unit 5	Stereotypes and national identity	Argumentation
Unit 6	National geography	Narration
Unit 8	National history	Fiction
Unit 9	Socialization and the life cycle	Argumentation
Unit 10	National history	Description
Unit 11	Belief and behavior	Play
Unit 12	Social interaction	Argumentation
Unit 13	Belief and behavior	Biography
Unit 15	Social and political institutions	Speech
Unit 16	Belief and behavior	Play

Secondly, although CCE2 includes all the five language skills, the distribution is not arranged in harmonious. **Figure 1** illustrates that both reading and listening skills contain a large portion of forms with 33% and 31% respectively, whereas the lowest is shown in listening skills (4%), which may be explained by the target of intensive reading class that is to primarily focus on textual analysis and appreciation rather than isolated linguistic items and listening training. Further, except for the adoption of the synthetic approach in translating practice, all the other four skills are tested based on content ^[7].

Thirdly, **Figure 2** reveals ratios of mechanical, meaningful, and communicative tasks underpinned by

the classification standard of Paulston ^[6]. Almost half of the exercises are mechanical (48%), since this kind of drill has complete control and only one correct answer, which makes it suitable to examine all sorts of language skills. The second highest number of activities is meaningful exercise (33%), which focuses initially on the meaning instead of forms. Thus, meaningful drills are useful in evaluating the basic linguistic abilities (i.e., listening, speaking, reading, and writing). Communicative task exhibits the lowest percentage (19%) which aims to exchange personal opinions rather than merely to utter the speech patterns, so it is always used to evaluate speaking and reading proficiencies ^[8].

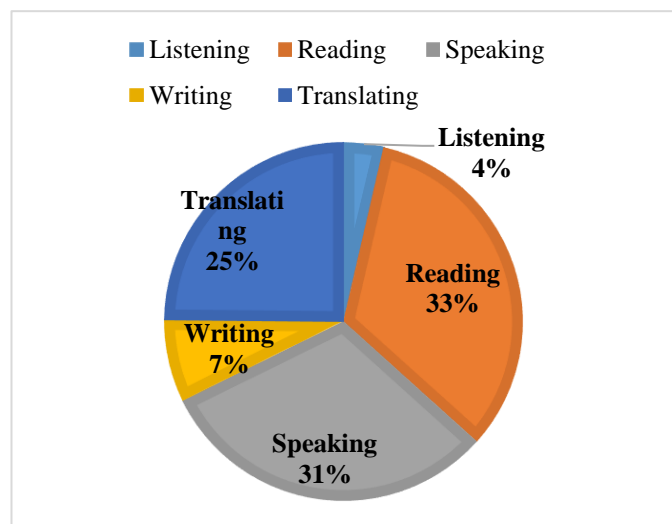


Figure 1. Distribution of the five language skills

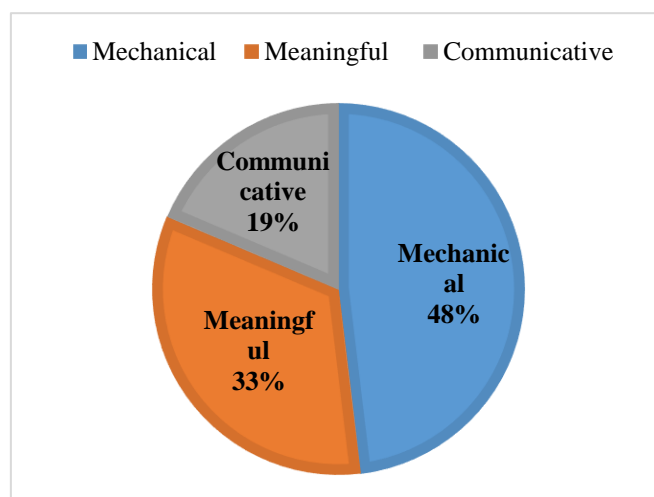


Figure 2. Distribution of mechanical, meaningful, and communicative exercises

4. Theoretical discussion

4.1. Input

Input plays a pivotal role in L2 acquisition ^[9]. Long ^[10] distinguish between two types of input, i.e., positive evidence and negative evidence, which will be analyzed subsequently.

4.1.1. Positive evidence

Positive evidence is made up of permissible linguistic structures and forms such as the authentic reading materials in CCE2 ^[11]. By adopting authentic materials, students know the usage of target-like language in diverse genuine settings shown by CCE2 ^[12].

4.1.2. Negative evidence

In contrast, negative evidence comprises inaccurate language input that may come from communication breakdowns or corrective feedbacks ^[11]. The communicative exercise can be found at the end of each unit where students can receive corrective feedbacks from peers when participating in meaningful interactions.

4.1.3. Comprehensible input

In the input hypothesis, Krashen ^[13] maintains that input is made comprehensible to students when it is slightly more advanced than the student's current language level ($i+1$). However, the input of some units in CCE2 violates the principle of $i+1$, because the difficulty levels of each unit are lopsided. For example, the intensive reading material in unit 8, *The Man in Asbestos*, is much harder than that of unit 11, *Button, Button*, in both the comprehension of themes and the lexical items.

4.2. Output

Output is defined as the language that students produce ^[11]. The practices in CCE2 provides abundant opportunities for students to utter the target language, from which, multidimensional pedagogic theories are revealed.

4.2.1. Traditional approach

The traditional approach is built upon the assumption that language is best learned through accumulating entities, according to which, language forms need to be taught and tested solely ^[14, 15]. Students acquire the segments of target language without context and then synthesize them into a whole unit for communication ^[16]. For example, **Figure 3** asks students to use the form of “verb + noun” when doing translation, which provides limited room for students to apply the linguistic knowledge because the word groups in this question can also be translated in different ways. Moreover, it is content-free with sole attention on the target linguistic items, which is insufficient to ensure success in acquiring an L2.

2 Translate the following *verb+noun* collocations into English.

- | | |
|----------|----------|
| 1. 交叉着双臂 | 6. 发电 |
| 2. 把信折叠好 | 7. 引发兴趣 |
| 3. 获得知识 | 8. 雇用工人 |
| 4. 产生思想 | 9. 利用时间 |
| 5. 创造职业 | 10. 养育子女 |

Figure 3. Translation-based mechanical vocabulary exercise

The translation of the Chinese characters in **Figure 3** is shown as follows: 1. Fold one’s arms; 2. Fold the letter; 3. Acquire knowledge; 4. Generate ideas; 5. Generate jobs; 6. Generate power; 7. Generate interest; 8. Employ workers; 9. Use/employ time; 10. Rear/raise one’s children.

4.2.2. Communicative-based approach

Opposite with the traditional way, the communicative-based approach argues that linguistic knowledge is acquired through natural communication rather than fragmentary linguistic input ^[17, 18]. Likewise, Krashen ^[19] approves the involvement of communication in class in his Monitor Model, particularly the learning-acquisition hypothesis asserting that the ability to utilize language for spontaneous communication is developed through implicit training mechanisms. Therefore, it is necessary to expose students to sufficient communicative conditions for comprehensible input ^[20, 21]. In order to achieve this, CCE2’s preview and speaking exercises assign students to interact with classmates to share views grounded in the intensive reading material (see **Figure 4**), which are predominantly meaning-based. However, this kind of exercise does not imitate the actual world task. It only generates deep understandings of the given reading text.

Apart from the tests concentrating on meaning without a link to real life, there are also task-based practices. According to Ellis ^[22], a pedagogic task has the following four characteristics: (1) it is student-centered and mainly focuses on meaning; (2) there exists an information gap; (3) it resembles how we use language in genuine life; (4) it has a non-linguistic outcome. **Figure 5** is a good example of the task, which is a role play in nature with the purpose of solving communicative problems that students might meet outside the classroom. It trains the speaking skills while offering multi-perspective interpretations of the

reading.

What's more, as indicated by the interaction hypothesis ^[23-25], when students are engaged in meaningful interaction, they will have opportunities to negotiate for meaning when communication breakdown happens because of linguistic difficulties. This negotiation for meaning can draw switch the attention on meaning to problematic linguistic items, thereby facilitate the mechanisms of L2 acquisition ^[11]. Thus, when students are doing exercises like **Figure 4 and Figure 5**, they can acquire meaning explicitly and language forms implicitly. Taken together, it is helpful of CCE2 to include sound communicative tasks, which assist instructors in course design and improving student's comprehensive language skills effectively.

1 Work in pairs and exchange views on the following questions.

1. What do you think of the student? Is he a rare case? Why do you think many students feel this way about education? Whose fault is this?
2. What do you think of the teacher? Is he a good teacher? Would you like to have a teacher like this?
3. What does the teacher think is the fundamental difference between technical schools and universities? Do you agree with him?
4. How does the professor define "education"? What in his opinion is the purpose of education? Do you agree?
5. How does the teacher explain the importance of reading in educating the young? Do you find it convincing?
6. Do literature, art, music, and philosophy have any cash value? If not, why do we have to waste so much time on them?

Figure 4. Communicative-based meaningful speaking exercise

2 Work in groups and play the roles as instructed below.

1. Imagine your brother/sister or best friend comes to you and declares that he or she has no use for a course in liberal arts, such as literature, politics, philosophy or history, and you try to help him/her understand that he/she is wrong.
2. Interview a teacher who is teaching a course in liberal arts and find out why he/she offers this course. Then report back to the whole class.
3. If you should become a professor of literature one day and one of your students came to you and asked why he should spend time reading this stuff when he is planning to be a government official, what would you say? Would you defend this essay?

Figure 5. Task-based meaningful speaking exercise

5. Conclusion

After analyzing CCE2, a typical textbook used by English majors in universities of mainland China, the results showed both the advantages and disadvantages of CCE2. On the one hand, the authentic materials not only reveal the real-world language but also enable students to develop functional proficiency in the language. Further, the pedagogical tasks used in exercises could improve students' problem-solving skills using the target language by engaging them in a communicative environment. On the other hand, several

difficulty gaps between the two units were too wide for students to adapt, which would pose problems in comprehension for them. The findings can contribute to a better understanding of how to utilize the CCE2 effectively to facilitate students' learning and teachers' instruction. Hence, the suggestions for compilers and teachers were elaborated in the following section.

6. Suggestions

Textbooks are designed to enable students to learn and facilitate instructors to teach ^[26]. With the purpose of maximizing the learning outcome of students, it is indispensable to offer suggestions on the content of CCE2 as well as the teaching method adopted by teachers.

6.1. Suggestions for compilers

Firstly, all the units should be put in an easy-to-hard sequence regarding the difficulty levels of intensive reading materials. There are 3 questions to ask when ranking: (1) is the topic of article tough to comprehend; (2) is the length of reading text appropriate; (3) whether the vocabulary in this passage difficult to understand. Secondly, most pictures in this CCE2 are unrelated to the texts, which should be replaced by the text-related ones to make the textbook livelier and more attractive. Thirdly, the cloze-like exercise (see **Figure 6**) is too challenging to complete for grade-one students. As shown in **Figure 6**, no hints are given on the choice of words. Therefore, students are required to have sufficient cultural knowledge and vocabulary to finish it. It would be highly recommendable for compilers to provide more instructions like a word list for students to select the most suitable one for each blank.

3 Fill in each blank with ONE suitable word.

If you are like most people, your intelligence varies from season to season. You are probably a lot sharper in spring than you are at any (1) _____ time of the year.

Spring appears to be the (2) _____ period of the year for thinking. One (3) _____ may be that in spring man's (4) _____ powers are affected by the same factors that bring about great changes in all nature.

Figure 6. Fill in each blank with ONE suitable word

6.2. Suggestions for teachers

At the outset, it is suggested that teachers should provide more cultural background knowledge, which is scanty in CCE2, to enhance student's understanding. Besides, teachers are advised to show students examples of negotiation for meaning and encourage students to use similar expressions to maintain communication, which can give rise to the intake of linguistic forms implicitly ^[27]. The theoretical rationale of this suggestion is shown from the modal of interaction in **Figure 7**, which indicates the process of how negotiation for meaning leads to learning, that is, through paying attention to the forms of corrective feedback within communicative context ^[28].

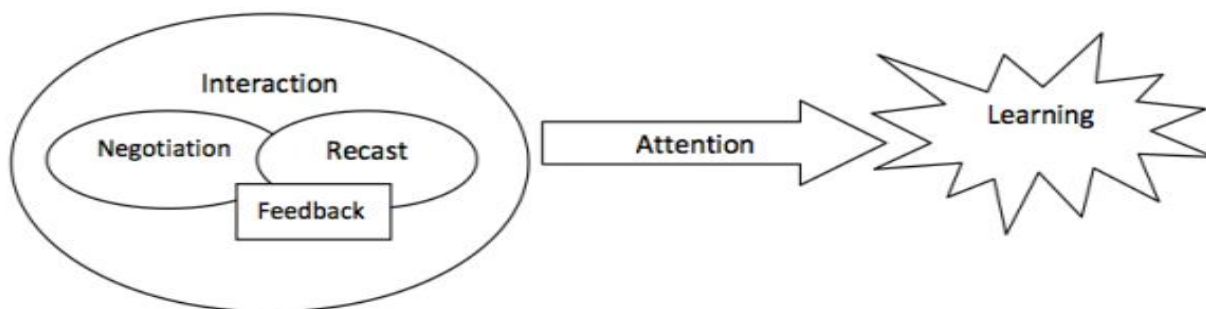


Figure 7. A Model of Interaction ^[28]

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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