



Research Paper

## Speech Genres in the Chinese EFL Classroom: A Culture in Transition

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**ABSTRACT:** *The evidence on which this study is based consists of transcripts of recordings of a number of EFL lessons made in various parts of China within the last two years. I adopted a socio-cultural approach to the analysis of these data by regarding the use of language in the classroom as a cultural artifact. I argue that there are a number of recognizable and distinct speech genres that, constitute the vehicle for the transmission of knowledge (Bakhtin 1986). These speech genres, like other cultural artifacts, are co-constructions of the (speech) community of the classroom that have evolved to meet the needs of their users. These needs may be overt (and in conformity with orthodox curriculum policy) or they may be covert (not acknowledged, and possibly in conflict with policy). Like other cultural artifacts, these speech genres are slow to respond to pressure to change.*

**KEYWORDS:** *speech genres, teacher talk.*

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### I. INTRODUCTION

#### Speech genres in the language classroom

Talk in classrooms is the primary vehicle for learning (Mercer, 1995; Lemke, 1990; Wells, 1999). This is especially true of language classrooms (Lantolf, 2000). Talk in classrooms, as in other institutional contexts, can be seen as being constituted of a set of speech genres through which the lesson is enacted (Vygotsky, 1986; Mehan, 1979; Nystrand, 1997). Speech genres are cultural artifacts. They are not the creation of an individual using language creatively, but rather they are co-constructions of the participants (Bakhtin, 1986). Like other cultural artifacts, speech genres are moulded by their users, in response to their needs and the constraints imposed by the environment, and passed on from one generation of users to another. This process may take many generations to accomplish, and may be ongoing.

#### The ELT curriculum in China

The ELT curriculum in China is going through a period of transition (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996a; Adamson & Morris, 1997; Hu, 2002a, 2002b). The English language curriculum in China emphasizes communication and task-based learning (Ministry of Education, 2000a, 2000b). This represents a change from earlier practice, which was a mix of grammar translation and audio-lingual methods. There is pressure on teachers to adapt to the new curriculum. In order to implement the new learning objectives, the classroom culture is changing. The culture of the classroom is a set of expectations, beliefs, and practices that are shared, and jointly constructed, by the teacher and learners (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996b). Under pressure to change, the classroom culture will show signs of strain. Expectations will be disrupted, beliefs will be challenged, and familiar practices will evolve into new practices. These adaptations will be most apparent in the interaction between teacher and learners.

Against this background of change, the following hypotheses were made about the use of talk in Chinese EFL classrooms:

- Familiar routines will be disrupted as participants turn them to new purposes.
- Conventional expectations about appropriate behavior will be challenged.
- New 'ways of accomplishing lessons' will be explored.
- The conventions of interactive discourse may break down.
- Teachers will comment explicitly on what they are doing, so as to reinforce the value or explain the purpose of the activity.
- Teachers will spend more time explaining classroom procedures.

- Language will be used in new and unfamiliar ways.

## II. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a participatory observation method. Six lessons were observed and transcribed as follows in table 1:

Table 1 shows details about the observed lessons.

Teacher	Gender	Age	Type of school	Type of lesson
A	female	28	Junior high	Revision of past tense
B	female	41	Senior high	Intensive reading
C	female	26	Junior high	Vocabulary building
D	female	40	Senior high	Speaking
E	male	35	Junior high	Listening and speaking
F	female	late 20's	University	Intensive reading

Table 1: Teacher and lesson details

Data analysis was carried using a qualitative, interpretive method based on the micro-ethnography technique (Mehan, 1979; Erickson, 1986). The lesson transcripts were examined in detail using a critical incident methodology.

## III. FINDINGS

The data showed that a common speech genre the participating teachers used was mediation of the text read by their students. Examples 6 and 7 show this genre of speech.

T : Now class begins. Hello everyone.  
 Ss : Hello teacher.  
 T : Sit down please. Now, this class, we will go over unit five. Now class open your books turn to page 25. **da jia ba shu fan dao 25 ye.** ((reads aloud from the textbook)) Dialogue. A journalist is interviewing the director of a play. What do you do in the theatre? I am a director, I direct plays. Direct means shi dao yan, shi bu shi a? dao yan, dao yan ju 'direct' ben. Some of us do not know much about the theatre. Can you explain exactly what you do? Explain something to somebody, must pay attention to 'explain something to somebody'. Zhe ge ci do jia yao zhu yi de yi dian jiu shi zhe ge jie ci to jie somebody de shi hou bu guan fang qian fang hou zhe ge to yi ding yao fang shang. Zhu yi zhe ge ci. Let me explain the sentence to you. **Ke yi shuo** explain to you the sentence. **Yi ban na ge jian jie bin yu fang dao hou mian, zhi jie bin yu fang dao quan mian. Zhu yi zhe ge ci de ming ci 'explanation' zhu yi ta de fa yin.** Explanation, e, x, p, l, a, n **zhu yi mei you** I, explanation, pay attention to the pronunciation. Some of us do not know much about the theatre. 'Know about', zhi dao liao jie guan yu mou fang mian de qing kuang. Lei si zhe yang de duan yu, such as 'learn about, talk about'.

[T continues this monologue for 10 minutes]

I choose a play and the actors then for a period of several weeks we practice doing the play. 'Practice doing', practice zhe ge ci hou mian jia gerund dong ming ci zuo bin yu, practice doing something, let us practise speaking English, let us practise speaking English, **wo men lian xi shuo ying yu, ling wai da jia xiang yi xia, neng gou gen dong ming ci zuo bin yu de dong ci lei si de hai you na xie? Gen dong ming ci zuo bin yu de dong ci you na xie?** Practice...

Ss : Enjoy

T : Enjoy do...enjoy doing, **hai you shen mo?**

Ss : Finish.

T : Finish, suggest, **shi bu shi?** Suggest doing, miss, **shi bu shi?** Risk, **mao xian, ke yi ba,** escape, **bi mian, hen duo le, bao kuo,** advise, **bao kuo,** permit,

Ss : Allow.

T : Allow, forbid, **bao kuo** delay, **hen duo de,** appreciate

[T continues working through the text with only two episodes of interaction with the class for 45 minutes]

T : So much for this. Class is over.  
Ss : Goodbye teacher.

[End of lesson]

**Example 6: Teacher B mediating the text**

T : Yes, really it is strange to say our way of life makes us miserable, yes? In the first paragraph, the author writes his argument. He raises his argument. Now who can tell his argument in the first paragraph? Of course, you can find the sentence here. Also, you can tell us in your own words. Who can tell us this? Miss, Miss, Miss xxx. Will you please?

S3 : I found it in the first paragraph.

T : Yes. Can you read it?

S3 : Er, ((reads)) contrary to this view, I believe that our present way of life leads to increasing anxiety, helplessness and, eventually, to the disintegration of our culture.

T : Yes, that is the author's argument. Now we can just simplify it in this way. Maybe we can say modern people are, by no means happy, but by all means anxious, helpless, okay? Now, when, when you see the author's argument, maybe you will ask yourself such a question: why, why the author say, now, our modern people, our modern man, are, are by no means happy, or by all means very anxious? What lead, lead our, lead to our anxiety or help, helplessness? We know life is much better than before. We all agree that, yeah? So, don't worry. In the second paragraph, the author just gives us some further explanations about his argument, yes? So, what is his explanations about his argument in the second paragraph? Or is, T asks for Ss to identify we say, in what way the author try to give us some explanations? You can find the answers in the second paragraph, too. Miss xxx, will you please?

S4 : Er, okay. Erm, the third line is the explanation. Mm, it may be argued that all these pathological phenomena exist because we have not yet reached our aim, that of an affluent society.

T : You mean, you mean, er, this is the reason, was explanations, yes? Any other opinions? Miss xxx.

S5 : Er...

T : Maybe from...yes? From the rates of the alcoholism, suicide and divorce as well as juvenile delinquency...

S5 : All these, er...

T : We understand, at least partly, the author's opinion.

S : ...all these bad things make us, erm, anxious, and, er, make a lot of people, er...had more pressure.

T : Yes, er, all these bad things make us modern people, modern people anxious, helpless. Of course, they know the rates of alcoholism and suicide and divorce and juvenile delinquency is raising all the time, okay, is increasing all the time. And besides, we have to face such very severe problems as the gang rule, you know 'gang rule', **hei shei hui**, gang rule, okay?

**Example 7: Teacher F mediating the text**

T : ...did you watch TV?  
Ss : Yes.  
T : Yes? So, I'd like you to say "Yes, I..."?  
Ss : I did.  
T : I did. That's right. Yes, I did. Well, now I'd like to ask some students this question because some students don't like to keep silent now. (xxxx) Please listen to me because it's English lesson now. Well, let me see, Wang Yinglun, what did you do yesterday morning?

**Example 8: Teacher A shaping appropriate behavior**

T : Well, let me see. Wang Yinglun, what did you do yesterday morning?  
S : I look book yesterday morning.  
T : 'I look book', is it?  
S : I was look book.  
T : Okay, 'I was look book'?  
Ss : No.

- T : No. Do you understand him? I can understand him. Sit down please. Thank you, I can understand it. But maybe we can say the sentence better. He said “I was look books,” “I was look books.. Do you understand the meaning? **Ni ning li jie ta de yi si ma? Qi shi ta shi xiang shuo...**<Do you understand him? In fact, he wants to say...>
- Ss : **wo zai jia kan shu zuo tian** <yesterday I read books at home>
- T : Yes. Is the sentence good?
- Ss : No.
- T : No, I don’t think so. So, can you correct it? Can you correct it? Who, who can do this? John, please.
- S : I read books.
- T : I read books, thank you very much. Sit down please. Why do you use “read” here, but not “look”?
- Ss : ((several students speak at once))
- T : ‘Read books’ **yuedu** <read> **sui ran wo men zhong wen fan yi cheng ‘kan’, kan you ji ge ci dui bu dui?** <though we translate into ‘look’ in Chinese from English, but in English we have several words that can express the meaning of ‘look’> ‘see’, ‘look’, ‘watch’ and ‘read’. So, if we say ‘books’, we say ‘read books’, ‘read books. But here can I say I read /ri:d/ books yesterday?
- Ss : No.
- T : No.
- Ss : Read (/red/).
- T : Yesterday, we say read (/red/). Wang Yinglun, do you remember?
- S : Yes.
- T : Yeah? Can you understand now?
- S : Yes.
- T : Yeah, I read books.

*Example 9: Teacher A conductin interactive shaping of grammar and lexis*

- T : Who can give me some examples of Chinese festivals? Now who knows? Now if you know, please hand up. I think my class are very clever. Do you know?
- Ss : Yes.
- T : Now who knows the festivals in China? Now Xiao Chunping.
- S : Spring Festival **hai you** <and>
- T : Now you must answer my question in English not Chinese, are you clear?
- S : Mother Day
- T : Now Mother Day.
- S : Father Day
- T : No no or Father Day, now sit down please, now neighbor.
- S : Mid-Autumn Day, Children’s Day, Teacher’s Day and National Day, and so on.
- T : Na/æ/tional Day? Na/æ/tional Day? Na/ei/tional Day, now sit down please. So, we all there are some festivals in China, for example, Mother’s Day, Father’s Day, Teachers’ Day, Women’s Day, Children’s Day, and so on. I think you remember Teachers’ Day because it is for us, are you clear?
- Ss : Yes.
- T : When the time of Teachers’ Day, I was very happy, I have some flowers and the gift from you, when I receive your gifts, I am very very happy, I think we are good friends, do you think so?
- Ss : Yes.
- T : Now today we’ll learn some Western festivals, some Western festivals, now do you know some Western festivals?
- Ss : Yes
- T : Now I think some students know, and others don’t know, now today we’ll learn some Western festivals, now what’s, when and where the festivals, I think some of you know and some of you don’t know, now first, open your books, now turn to page 8, now let’s learning warming-up, now warming-up, there are there pictures in warming-up, now the (xxxx), first you look at the pictures in warming-up and guess, do you know ‘guess’?
- Ss : Yes.
- T : Guess the names of the festivals and the countries the festivals come from, and the when the festivals and what are they doing there, now I give you five or eight minutes to prepare for my questions, do you know?

- Ss : Yes.  
 T : Now you can help each other and do it in pairs, do you know?  
 Ss : Yes.  
 T : Now when you think about the festivals (xxxx), you can help each other and read by yourself loudly, do you know?  
 Ss : Yes.  
 T : Now let's begin.
- [Students work on the task]
- T : Now stop here, now you can answer questions freely, don't be nervous, are you ok?  
 Ss : Yes.  
 T : Now first let's look at picture one, now who can tell me the answers for picture one? Now do you know the names of the festival in picture one?  
 Ss : Yes.  
 T : Yes, who knows, now hands up? You can answer my questions freely, don't be nervous.

*Example 10: Teacher D leading pairwork*

- T : Silent, listen to me. You are the judge. 'Judge', you know? You know? **pan quan** <judge>, understand? **you ji ge gui ze da jia ji zhu a** <there are some rules that you have to keep in mind to play this game>. Number one: **ni de zhe ge guo qu shi yi ding yao shu dui le** <you must say the past tense of the verb correctly>. Number two: **qian mian ni chong fu quan mian tong xue de ju zi yi ding yao zheng que** <then you must repeat the previous sentences correctly>. Clear? Number three: **si kao shi jian bu d chao guo wu miao zhong** <you cannot pause more than five seconds>.
- S : (surprised) **lao shi na bian shuo bian si kao ke bu ke yi a?** <teacher, can we repeat the sentences while thinking about them?>
- T : **ting de shi jian bu neng chao guo** <you cannot pause more than> five seconds. **hao, qing chu le ma?** <okay, are you all clear now?> **san ge gui ze** <three rules>. **hao, siz mian de mei ge ge zu de tong xue, ru guo you ti shi, ni men zu jiang hui bei kou diao yi fen** <If the other students help the student from your group, one point will be deducted> **ti shi yi ci kou diao yi fen, ti shi liang ci kou diao liang fen** <If the other students give hints to the student from your group, one point will be deducted> **ying wei wo men zhe ge shi xun huan de, xun huan de,** from Zhou to Kevin and then come back to Zhou again <our game will be played in a cycle>. Clear? Well, are you ready?
- Ss : Yes.
- T : Yes, the other students, you must judge them, clear? **bu xu ke sou a** <do not cough please>. Well...
- S : **lao shi deng hui, ying gai zen mo shuo, shi zuo tian zuo de shi ma?** <Wait a minute teacher, how can I say that? Is it what I did yesterday?>
- T : Yes.
- S : **na ru guo, wo jiu shi shuo, yao shuo ren cheng ne?** <What about the subject of the sentence? Do I have to change it?>
- T : No, no, no, don't say that. You just say "I"; you just say "I", okay?
- S : **lao shi na hou mian yao jia shang yi ge 'yesterday' ma?** <Do I have to put 'yesterday' at the end of the sentence?>
- T : Yes, **zui hou yi ju hua de shi hou ni yao jia shang 'yesterday'** <You have to put 'yesterday' at the very end of your sentence>
- S : **lao shi na lian qi lai zen mo shuo?** <How can I combine the several separated sentences?>
- T : For example, "I read books and did my homework yesterday", "I read books and did my homework and played football yesterday". Like this. Any questions? **Hai you wen ti ma?** <Any other questions?> No?
- S : **lao shi wo na ge shen mo** <I have one more question>
- T : What? (xxxx) Okay, begin.
- S : I played basketball yesterday.

*Example 11: Teacher A explaining the rules of a new game*

- S : I played basketball and...read books and...did my homework and listen to music yesterday.  
 Ss : **mei shuo guo qu shi** <the past tense of the verb is not right>  
 S : Listened  
 T : Listened.  
 S : I played basketball...read books, did, did my home, did my homework, listened to music and draw some pictures yesterday.  
 Ss : What? **mei ting dao** <we did not hear that clearly>  
 T : Again.  
 S : Draw some pictures.  
 T : Draw some pictures. Is it right?

[T elicits the correct past tense 'drew', with focus on spelling and pronunciation]

- T : Drew.  
 S : **lao shi suan ta cuo** <she is not correct>  
 T : So, it's not right. It's not right. I'm sorry, I'm sorry, okay. **Ta de wei zhi jiu mei le, dan shi ta yi kai shi de shi hou shuo de hair shi suan de** <she has to go back to her seat, but she still can get some points because at the beginning of the game, she did it quite well> So we begin.

**Example 12: Class A participating in peer correction**

- S : I played basketball, read books, did my homework, listened to music, played ping pong, watched TV, sang song and went to see the exhibition.  
 Ss : I cannot understand.  
 T : Sorry, 'exhibition' is a new word for the others. It means a place where something is on show. It does not count this time. You have to use a word from our textbook. Please try again.

**Example 13: Drawing boundaries for Class A**

[The class is revising the names of school subjects, preparatory to taking part in a drill in the textbook:

- A: What's your favourite subject?  
 B: My favourite subject is history.  
 A: Why do you like history?  
 B: Because it's interesting.

The teacher works through the examples in the textbook, and then elicits additional examples]

- T : ...and?  
 S : Computer.  
 T : Computer. How to spell 'computer'?  
 Ss : c, o, m, p, u, t, e, r.  
 T : Computer.  
 Ss : Computer.  
 T : And...?  
 S : **si xiang pin de** <politics>  
 T : Then how to say?  
 S : (xxxx)  
 T : I do not think so. **yi ban shuo cheng shi zheng zhi, zheng zhi** <usually we call it politics> How to say?  
 Ss : I do not know.  
 T : I do not know? How to say, do you know?  
 Ss : No.  
 T : No? Now who knows? Who knows? **Shui zhi dao ne?** <who knows?>  
 Ss : (xxxx)  
 T : **mei you ren zhi dao? hao, mei you ren zhi dao, lao shi ye bu zhi dao. da jia hui qiu cha yi xia zheng zhi na ge ke mu zen mo xie, xia yi tan ke** <Nobody knows that? Okay, if you do not know, I do not know either. Please look it up in your dictionary, next time>

**Example 14. Maintaining rigid control over vocabulary in Class C**

The teacher's comment "If you do not know, I do not know either" here is difficult to interpret. Perhaps she really did not know the word 'politics' in English, but that is unlikely. More likely, she did not want to spend

time on a word that was not important, so she used this strategy of “look it up in your dictionary” to bring this exchange to a close and pass on to the next one. It is significant, I think, that the effect of her strategy was to hand over some responsibility for learning to the students. One could see this as evidence of a move towards autonomous learning, but it seemed rather an odd way to do this.

Another possible interpretation is that she was marking the boundary between what counted as a legitimate learning objective and one that fell outside this boundary. A clue to the correct interpretation of this episode came later in this lesson, as shown in Example 15.

[The class are reciting dialogues in pairs, and the teacher has set this up as a competitive drill. Each student gets a point for his/her contribution if he/she doesn't make a mistake.]

- T : Okay, very good. Another chance. One...two...  
Ss : Begin.  
T : I am sorry. One, two, begin.  
Ss : wo, wo, wo <me, me, me>  
T : Lin Zhizhi, please. What is your favourite subject?  
S : My favourite subject is biology.  
T : Is biology. Okay, thank you, sit down please. Now, **ta ke bu ke yi e yi fen?** <can he get one point?>  
Ss : Yes.  
T : **ke yi, you liang chu zhu yi ba, na liang chu a?** <which two points do you have to pay attention to>  
Ss : Biology.  
T : Biology, **bu shi ke ben zhong de, hai you yi ge di fang shi shen mo a?** <biology is not from our textbook, what else?>

**Example 15: Teacher C marking the boundaries of a lesson**

Here again, the teacher was concerned with marking a boundary between what was a legitimate learning objective and what was not. If a word was not in the textbook, then it was not a legitimate learning objective.

[The class have listened to a dialogue in a coffee shop. Li Lei and Lily are waiting for Jim, who is late. Jim arrives half an hour late and apologizes.]

- T : Now, okay, the second one. When do you think this dialogue may happen? When do you think this dialogue may happen? Sui Xin, please.  
S : Ten o'clock.  
T : Ten o'clock. Maybe about ten o'clock, but exactly it is...  
S : Half past ten.  
T : Half past ten. Do you think so? Half past ten?  
S : (silent)  
T : Do you agree with her?  
Ss : No.  
T : Any other answer?  
S : A quarter past ten.  
T : A quarter past ten. Yes?  
Ss : Yes.  
T : Yes, you are right, it happened at about ten fifteen, at a quarter past ten, yes?  
Ss : Yes.

**Example 16: Teacher E shows overreliance on the textbook**

The students were confused because they were looking for the answer in the dialogue in the textbook. Three different times are mentioned, and in fact the dialogue begins at 10:15 and continues (with a gap) when Jim arrives at 10:30. So in fact both 10:15 and 10:30 are correct answers. The over-reliance on the textbook as the source of the answer caused the students some difficulty.

[Later on, in the same episode]

- T : Now next question. Why was Jim late? Why was Jim late?  
S : Because the traffic was bad.

T : Because the traffic was bad. And anything else? Sit down, Dong Chunlei.  
S : Because he was busy reading a novel and the traffic was very bad.  
T : And the traffic was very bad, yeah, okay.  
S : His taxi crashed near the railway station.  
T : Yeah, I don't want you to look at your book. Just listen and answer my question, yeah?  
S : I am sorry.  
T : Yeah, please don't read, understand?  
S : Yeah.

*Example 17: Teacher E shapes appropriate behavior*

T : Okay, very good. Maybe you have had such an experience, have you?  
Ss : Yeah.  
T : Yeah, and what do you do when you are waiting for someone? And they are late. What do you do when you are waiting for someone and they are late? Do you understand me?  
S : I will be very angry with him.  
T : You will be angry. Just be angry with her or him?  
S : Yes.  
T : Yeah, okay. For sometimes maybe you won't get angry, don't be obvious angry, yeah?  
Ss : Yes.  
T : Yeah.  
S : I will ask he or she to give me good reasons.  
T : For good reasons. Why? Why are you late? Yeah?  
S : Yeah.  
T : Yeah, okay. Others? What about the answer? Sui Xin, please.  
S : I will eat and drink and wait.  
T : Oh, you will eat and drink and wait, yes?  
S : Yes.  
T : Yes, maybe. Now, if I am waiting for someone, and he or she is late, maybe I will phone her or phone him, yeah?  
Ss : Yes.

*Example 18: Teacher E uses genuine communication*

[The teacher has been asking comprehension questions about the dialogue and explaining some language points e.g., 'get angry', 'be angry'.]

T : Okay. Now I have some questions. Please find the following sentences in this dialogue. My sentence is Chinese, but you find this English sentence in this dialogue, yes? You find these sentences in English, do you understand?  
Ss : Yes.  
T : Now the first question in Chinese. **wo mang zhe kan yi ben xiao shuo, wang ji kan shi jian le.** What is the English for this sentence? Have you found? Yang Wantong, please.  
S : I was so busy reading a novel that I forgot to look at the time.  
T : Yeah, that's right. I was so busy reading a novel that I forgot to look at the time., yes?  
Ss : Yes.  
T : Yes, that's right. Okay, now in this sentence we have a pattern. It is what?  
Ss : **din yu cong ju** <attributive clause>  
T : Do you think so?  
Ss : So...that...  
T : So busy reading a novel that I forgot to look at the time.  
Ss : So...that...  
T : Yeah, that's right. So...that... Do you understand this pattern?  
Ss : Yes.  
T : Do you understand?  
Ss : Yes.  
T : Yeah, of course you know. Now next sentence. Next. Listen, listen carefully. **wo jiao le yi liang chu zu che yi bian kuai yi xie dao lai.** What's the English for this sentence?  
S : I took a taxi so that I would get here faster.  
T : Yes?  
Ss : Yes.  
T : Right. I took a taxi so that I would get here faster. Do you understand 'so that' and 'so...that'?  
Ss : Yes.  
T : Yes. Now can you give me some more examples? Some more examples. Please be quick, I think it's easy. Now who can? Li Xiaomei please.



S : This box is so heavy that I can't carry it.

**Example 19: Teacher E's use of L1**

**IV. CONCLUSION**

Classroom cultures evolve in response to pressure from outside and through the interaction of teachers and learners. If change is imposed from above without taking account of the classroom culture, it will not succeed. Speech genres are the vehicle for teaching and learning in the classroom, so teachers and learners have to learn new ways of speaking in the classroom. This learning process will not always be easy or comfortable. Teachers in training should be made aware of the role of talk in the classroom, and should be encouraged to research their own talk. There should be cultural evolution rather than cultural revolution.

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