Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 Vol. 21:9 September 2021

Blended Course Development for EFL Learners' Oral Expression Ability Improvement

Han Cui, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, School of Foreign Languages
Shenyang University of Chemical Technology, Liaoning, China;
Department of English, Graduate School of Human Sciences,
Assumption University, Bangkok, Thailand
cuihan@syuct.edu.cn

Yu Wang, Ph.D.
Lecturer, School of Foreign Languages
Anhui Polytechnic University, Anhui, China;
Department of English, Graduate School of Human Sciences,
Assumption University, Bangkok, Thailand
1771732624@qq.com

Abstract

The study is aimed at developing a blended course *English Oral Expression and Communication,* under the guidance of interaction hypothesis*,* to enhance EFL college students' oral expression ability. Five steps of the blended course development have been elaborated, including 1) define course goals and set principles, 2) prepare teaching materials and design learning activities, 3) choose blended tools, 4) plan course schedule and structure, and 5) design outcome assessment methods, which could provide references for blended course development.

Keywords: blended course, course development, oral expression ability, EFL

Introduction

In an evolving and vibrant digital environment, blended learning, which is considered to be a teaching environment that consciously combines the best features of face-to-face and online learning place, has become a promising way to promote engaging, interactive learning experiences. Blended learning approach, which has been studied and believed by many scholars (Aycicek & Yelken, 2018; Challob, Bakar, & Latif, 2016; Lee & Wallace, 2018; Simpson, 2016; Sun & Qiu,2017) to be a promising way to promote second language learning and advocated and promoted vigorously by the Ministry of Education in China.

The input and output of language and its relationship have always been the core issues in the study of second language acquisition. The output hypothesis proposed by Swain (1985, 1993, 2008) makes the comprehensible output an important condition for second language acquisition, which believes that language use helps the learner to test the syntactic structure and vocabulary use of the target language and promote the automation of language use. From a sociocultural theory of second language learning, language is a product of interaction and is based on the social context in which it is used. Therefore spending more time on language production and producing more complex language is a key factor for students to improve their language proficiency.

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to develop a blended course English Oral Expression and Communication, under the guidance of interaction hypothesis, to enhance EFL college students' oral expression ability.

Define Course Goals and Set Principles

Course Goals of EOEC

The delivery of a course using both face-to-face and online activities for the students must be designed with reference to the students taking the course, including their current language proficiency, their learning needs and their expected learning outcome, the amount of experience they have with different types of learning and their access to technology, just as McGee and Reis (2012) suggested "instructional design considers the learner, learning outcomes, the content of what is to be learned, instructional strategies, and results of instructional interventions". Therefore, the course design started by writing student-centred learning outcomes, which can influence the environment of the course content delivery and learning activities and how these are aligned together and assessed both online and face-to-face.

In fact, the Ministry of Education of China has unified guidance and requirements for the teaching goals of College English in China. According to the current conditions of basic education, higher education and social development in China, the Ministry of Education of China has divided the objectives of College English teaching into three levels: basic, improved and developed in the "*Guide to College English Teaching"* published in 2017. In the three-level goal system, the basic objective is to meet the basic needs of most non-English majors in English learning. The improved objective is to meet the needs of students with good English foundation and high English requirements at the time of enrollment. The developed objective is determined according to the special needs of the talent development program in some universities and the diverse needs of some students who have spare time and energy for language learning.

According to the three-level teaching goals, three levels of teaching requirements for oral expression ability.

The teaching objectives of the blended course *EOEC* designed in this research are to prepare the students with better comprehensive English ability (at least they have passed CET-4[1] with a relatively high mark) from a second-level University in China. Therefore, it is more appropriate to select the intermediate-level, i.e. the improved goal, as the guide for teaching goals.

In the improved level, the oral skills that students should achieve in the improved goals are described below: be able to speak fluently on general topics in English; express personal opinions, emotions, etc.; state facts, reasons, and describe events or objects; elaborate, explain, compare, or summarize on familiar viewpoints, concepts, theories, etc.; make good use of oral expression and communication skills. The language organization structure is clear, and the pronunciation and intonation are basically correct.

Bloom's taxonomy has been widely used as a guide to write teaching objectives and has been influential in the field of education for decades. Fink (2013) updated and reorganized Bloom's taxonomy to better reflect the current goals of higher education, adding learning categories that include meta-cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal skills. Roehling (2018) proposed an Integrated Taxonomy of learning domains that merges Bloom's and Fink's taxonomies, including the following aspects: foundation knowledge, higher order thinking, academic and professional skills, affective, human dimension, and learning to learn.The course goals identified in the course is also based on the integrated taxonomy.

Therefore, according to the *Guide to College English Teaching*, combined with the actual situation of college students in the use of the course, the teaching goals of the blended course *EOEC* designed in this research are as follows:

Table 1

Course Goals of EOEC

Learning Domain	**Course Goals**
Upon successful completion of this course, students will be able to:	
Foundational knowledge	1. Accumulate linguistic knowledge including useful words, expressions and sentence patterns.
Academic and	2. Use oral expression and communication skills in a relatively good

[1] College English Test Band 4, a national English language proficiency test in Chinese higher education institutes.

professional skills	way. a. Speak fluently in English on general topics. b. Express personal opinions, feelings, suggestions, etc. c. State facts, reasons and describe events or objects. d. Elaborate, explain, compare, and summarize familiar viewpoints, concepts, theories, etc. 3. Use Oral expression strategies in a relatively good way, including planning, execution, assessment/ compensation.
Higher-order thinking	4. Develop critical thinking, including logical arguments and solutions, supporting evidence, facts, and information, as well as conclusions and implications 5. Develop creative thinking, including conceptualization and abstraction, as well as synthesis and generalization
Affective	6. Learn, understand, and appreciate the culture and civilization of China and the world 7. Increase interest in English learning 8. Develop a Global Perspective
Human dimension	a. The internationalization of human activity b. The similarities and differences in the political, social, economic, business, and technical norms of various cultures 9. Cooperate and collaborate with others
Learning to learn	10. Learn self-direction, self-regulation and time management

Teaching Principles of EOEC

Research on language teaching and learning should be used to guide decisions on course design. There is a great deal of research on the nature of language and language acquisition which can guide the choice of teaching content and sequence (Brown, 1993; Ellis, 2005; Richards, 2001 & Tomlinson, 2003). In order to meet the course goals and encourage learning effectively, the course should be designed based on some principles. Macalister (2010) mentioned twenty principles of language teaching, with each principle supported by research and theory in three fields: second or foreign language learning, first language learning, and general educational research and theory. According to the course goals of *EOEC*, 12 principles were set falling into three categories including content and sequencing, format, and presentation, monitoring and assessment, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Teaching Principles of EOEC (Adapted from Macalister, J. ,2010:38-39)

Content and Sequencing	
Frequency	Provide the best possible coverage of language in use through the inclusion of items that occur frequently in the language, so that learners get the best return for their learning effort.
Strategies and autonomy	Train learners in how to learn a language and how to monitor and be aware of their learning, so that they can become effective and independent language learners.
Keep moving forward	Progressively cover useful language items, skills, and strategies.
Teachability:	The teaching of language items should take account of the most favourable sequencing of these items and should take account of when the learners are most ready to learn them.
Format and Presentation	
Motivation	As much as possible, the learners should be interested and excited about learning the language and they should come to value this learning.
Four strands	A course should include a roughly even balance of meaning-focused input, language-focused learning, meaning-focused output and fluency activities.
Comprehensible input	There should be substantial quantities of interesting comprehensible receptive activity in both listening and reading
Fluency	Provide activities aimed at increasing the fluency with which learners can use the language they already know, both receptively and productively.
Output	The learners should be pushed to produce the language in both speaking and writing over a range of discourse types.
Learning style	There should be opportunity for learners to work with the learning material in ways that most suit their individual learning style.
Monitoring and Assessment	
Ongoing needs analysis	The selection, ordering, presentation, and assessment of the material should be based on a continuing careful consideration of the learners and their needs.
Feedback	Learners should receive helpful feedback which will allow them to improve the quality of their language use.

Prepare Teaching Materials and Design Learning Activities

Online Learning Materials

A MOOC Conversational English Skills produced by Tsinghua University was selected as online learning content. The supporting textbook of this course is published by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press. This course has been operated in two online learning platforms of XuetangX and edX as open courses for many rounds since the year of 2017. However, students only complete language input by online autonomous learning but without the opportunity of putting the acquired knowledge into practice. For oral English learning, the lack of output and interaction practice will greatly compromise the learning effect. The online course is adapted, redesigned, and delivered using a smart phone application called Rain Classroom, which will be introduced in detail in the next section.

It consists of 8 units based on topics of general interest to students in both high schools, colleges as well as those with working experiences. This course aims at improving students' ability to communicate better in English in a wide range of daily situations. Students studying this course are expected to become more fluent and confident in using the language.

Learning Activities

In addition to the learning materials adapted from the course book, learning activities play a vital role in the blended course *EOEC*. It is important that the course provides a range of opportunities for learning consisting of four strands which are each given a roughly equal amount of time (Nation, 2007). These four strands are meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, language-focused learning, and fluency development, which is also one of the principles of this blended course.

Meaning-focused input involves having the opportunity to learn from listening and speaking, which would be called comprehensible input by Krashen (1982). The conditions which are needed for such learning are a low density of unknown items in the language input, a focus on the meaning of the message, and a large quantity of input. In the designed blended courses, the most important way of providing a large amount of comprehensible input is to have a large number of videos for students to watch and listen to. This kind of learning activity, together with a text reading in each unit, served as the main source of input in the course. Moreover, another source of meaning-focused input in the course comes from interacting with others. One student's output served as another student's input. An advantage of this interaction is that students can negotiate the meaning of the input with each other. They can ask the meaning of words or a repetition of poorly heard material, even control the speed of the input by asking the speaker to speak more slowly. Therefore, pair-works and group-works were designed to offer students the chance to discuss, negotiate and interact with each other.

Meaning-focused output involves learning through speaking or writing. Learning by input is not enough, because the knowledge required to understand the input does not include all the knowledge required to produce the output. Meaning-focused speaking happened when the students were involved in conversation or even just monologue. Therefore, regular meaning-focused speaking tasks are designed, involving individual short speech recording, interviews, problem-solving discussions, and role plays.

Language-focused learning means a deliberate focus on language features like pronunciation, spelling, vocabulary, expressions, grammatical constructions and so on. Most of the English courses now in China were blamed to spend too much time on such learning, resulting to less opportunity for learning through the other three strands of the course. But it is also not appropriate to completely remove language-focused learning from the course. Language-focused learning have two major effects. First it can result in deliberate conscious knowledge of language items. This explicit knowledge would be helpful in making students aware of language features which they will meet in input. Second, it can also lead to subconscious implicit knowledge of language items, which is also necessary for normal language use. Therefore, learning activities involving language-focused learning were prepared in this course, including pronunciation practice, vocabulary learning and words quiz, useful expression memorizing and so on.

The fourth strand fluency development involves making the best use of what is already known. It usually does not involve learning new language features but focusing on becoming fluent with features that students have already learned before. To promote speaking fluency of the students, activities that involve repeated speaking on familiar topics, reading familiar material aloud, and speaking about what has already been written were prepared.

Table 12

Learning Activities in EOEC

Principle	Focus	Learning Activities
Meaning-focused input	● A focus on the message ● Low density of unknown items ● A large quantity of input	● Watching and Listening ● Interaction tasks
Meaning-focused output	● A focus on the message ● Only a small amount of unfamiliar language features ● A large quantity of output	● Individual short speech recording ● Interview/Debate ● Problem-solving discussion ● Role play
Language-focused learning	● A deliberate focus on language features	● Pronunciation practice ● Vocabulary learning ● Words quiz

		● Useful expression memorizing
Fluency development	● Focus on the message ● No unfamiliar language features	● Follow Tom to read the text aloud ● Oral report

Choose Blended Tools

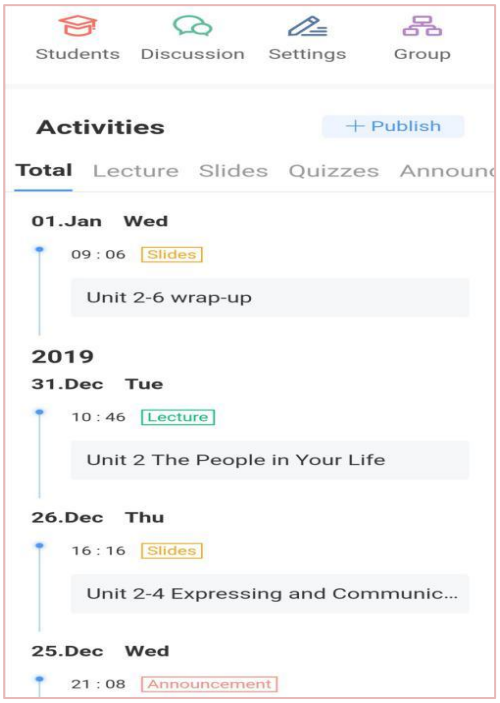
Both the online format and the face-to-face format of the blended course EOEC was delivered using a smart phone APP called Rain Classroom. Rain Classroom is a new smart tool for teaching which launched on April 1, 2016. It was jointly developed by Tsinghua University and XuetangX in Beijing, China and specially designed to be used in a blended learning environments. As a free APP available on WeChat (one of the most popular software apps for mobile in China), Rain Classroom allows students to interact with their teachers in class and out of class using their smart phones.

Rain Classroom is a teaching tool with a wide-range of functions. It can be seen as a big tool kit that includes five categories of tools. The first category includes tools for the flipped classroom. Using these tools, lecturers can conveniently package all materials involving MOOCs, videos, exercises and even their voice into a PowerPoint file and send it to each student's cellphone via WeChat. After receiving the file on WeChat, students just need to click on it and start to complete the preview task before class. In this way, blended teaching can help them better complete the autonomous online learning by using these tools. There is also a web version of Rain Classroom, which is also available for students and teachers to use for free[2].

Figure 2

Homepage of Rain Classroom in Smart Phone

[2] https://www.yuketang.cn/web



The second category includes tools for real-time assessment. With these tools, lecturers can send a question to their students at any time during class. No matter whether it is a single-choice, multiple-choice, objective or subjective question, lecturers can get high-quality feedback during in class. In the end, the results of these real-time tests will be calculated automatically to form a formative assessment.

The third category includes tools for classroom interaction. Whether they're using bullet screens or submissions of notes, lecturers can encourage their students to give their opinions more actively and make the classroom atmosphere more inviting.

The fourth category includes tools for homework and exams. With these tools, students can consolidate their learning and give feedback on their learning after class.

The fifth category is the most important. It includes tools for data reports. After the pre-class, in-class and after-class data being collected, they can be summarized on the cloud analysis platform, which will further provide lecturers with data reports on different links. Lecturers can read the details of these reports using the web version of Rain Classroom on their computers or read them on WeChat with their cellphones conveniently and efficiently. By understanding their teaching process in a quantitative way, lecturers can get a scientific basis for refining and making fine adjustments to their teaching design. Inside the Rain Classroom, over 16,000 short videos of MOOCs from famous universities like Tsinghua University have been inserted and can be used for teaching if needed. Each of these short videos lasts from three to seven minutes and focuses

on only one knowledge point. Lecturers can selectively insert these videos into their courseware to help students develop a good understanding of the lesson before class or complete independent learning in a blended course.

During the whole process of teaching including online format and face-to-face format, teachers can get formative assessments by frequently collecting feedback on students' learning through quizzes or classroom activities. Through formative assessment, students' learning outcome in every teaching link can be known in detail before, during and after class, thus ensuring completely and faithfully authentic recording of the entire teaching cycle. The data collected and relevant analysis are very precious for teachers, students, and institutions, which can be used not only to assess students but also to improve teaching. In the Rain Classroom, teachers can give single-choice, multiple-choice, subjective, and voting questions, or import their test papers in batches. So the Rain Classroom can meet many lecturers' demands for more teaching scenarios. Many functions of Rain Classroom can help to create opportunities for students to interact with peers and teachers, both synchronously and asynchronously, which is very convenient for a blended course to create the "social presence".

Plan Course Schedule and Structure

Course schedule and structure must take account of the environment in which the course will be used, the course goals and learning objectives, as well as principles of teaching and learning. The priority of the blended course EOEC is to use class time for communicative practice to develop students' speaking skills. In the university where the research took place, English classes are usually taken in a size of 50-70 students per class. Actually, most of the English classes in China remain the same situation, which means students rarely have time to speak during class, even if the teacher provide chance for them. So the researcher has devised a 50%–50% blend where students alternate between lessons done in the classroom and those done online after class. Compared to the traditional class of 50 students coming to class together for 4 hours, in the blended course students come to face-to-face class for 2 hours alternatively per week, with 24 and 26 students in each class session.

The blended course EOEC adopted a modular approach, which breaks the course into independent non-linear 8 units. Each unit is complete in itself, focusing on one topic and does not assume knowledge of previous modules. Ellis (2003) proposes a modular approach for task-based language courses. He proposed two unconnected modules, with sole focus on a communicative and meaning-focused module at first, and then on a language-focused module, drawing attention to form in order to destabilize learners' interlanguage and thus avoiding fossilization of language errors. This approach suggests a way to deal with the concerns about a lack of attention to accuracy in some task-based language courses (Towell and Tomlinson, 1999).

Each independent non-linear unit will be completed in 8 class hours in two weeks, with 4 class hours in online format and 4 class hours in face-to-face format.

Table 13
Teaching Procedure of Each Unit in EOEC

Phase	Steps	Content	Format
Pre-Task Phase	1.Warming up	● Overview of the learning objectives ● Warm-up video ● One-minute recording	Online format
	2.Text Learning	● Read the Text by yourself ● Follow Tom to read it aloud ● Complete comprehension questions ● Learn words and phrases ● Complete the quiz	
	3.Watching and Listening	● Watch 3-4 videos ● Complete 3-4 quizzes	
On-Task Phase	4.Classroom Activities	● Review unclear points in the independent learning ● Stimulating and Extending: Task 1 ● Language Tasks: ● Task2: Pair work (e.g. Interview) ● Task3: Discussion and report	F2F format
Post-Task Phase	5.Consolidation	● Assignment 1: Oral report	Online format
Pre-Task Phase	6.Cultural Focus	● Watch 1-2 videos ● Complete 1-2 quizzes ● Individual speaking task	Online format
	7.Expressing and Communicating	● Useful Expressions ● Speaking task in pairs ● Online discussion and interaction	
	8.Critical Thinking	● Group work: problem-solving discussion /role play	
On-Task Phase	9.Classroom Activities	● Review unclear points in the independent learning ● Language Tasks: ● Task1: Pair work (e.g. Debate) ● Task2: Discussion	F2F format

Post-Task Phase	10.Wrap-up	● Task3: Group presentation ● Learning log writing ● Assignment 2: Oral report	Online format

Input, including text reading, words and expressions accumulation and listening practice, were completed in the online learning format in the pre-task phase. Asynchronous interactions between students and teachers can also take place in this phase in several ways. For example, by using the Rain Classroom, students clicked "unclear" while learning the courseware, teacher noticed and prepared to explain in the f2f session; students used "comment" or "report to teacher" to show confusion, satisfaction, favor or dislike of the online lesson, teacher got the information and gave feedback via smart phone timely.

By preparing online and practicing in class what students have learned online, thus maximizing their practice opportunities and interaction frequency, students have become more autonomous and active. Most of the face-to-face time is devoted to practicing language in a meaningful, dynamic, student-centered, and communicative way. Because half of the learning were completed after class independently in the online format, they have to learn effective time management and get used to be in charge of their own learning. In this way, they were trained to learn how to learn, in a self-directed and self-regulated way, which is also one of the course goals.

Design Outcome Assessment Methods

In order to test the students' learning outcomes, outcome assessment methods have been designed. In fact, monitoring and assessment not only can provide a teacher and learners with information about the learners' present knowledge and progress, and it can also be a means of encouraging involvement and participation. In order to improve the students' participation and learning efficiency, a combination of formative evaluation and summative evaluation was adopted. The basic composition of learning achievement assessment is that 30% of the assessment results of online learning, 30% of the assessment results of face-to-face classroom teaching and 40% of the final oral examination. In the end, the final total score is based on the total score of each part.

The two major types of assessment are observation of learning and achievement assessment. Observation of learning last from the beginning of the learning all the way to the end of it, which belongs to formative evaluation of students' learning outcome. It occurs both in online session and face-to-face session. Achievement assessment referred to the final oral test, which is also one of the research instruments in the study to see whether the designed blended

course EOEC has effectively improved students' learning outcome, i.e. improved students' oral expression ability. It belongs to summative evaluation.

In the online session, students answered the objective questions by clicking on answers in the slides and the App would give immediate feedback to them to tell whether their answer is correct or not. Students answer the subjective questions by speaking and recording their voice via the Rain Classroom, and their answer would be assessed by the teacher. The subjective oral works were assessed according to the amount of their oral output, and the relevance, accuracy, fluency and complexity of the oral output. Usually, the objective questions including multiple choice and T or F questions, with 2 points for each. The subjective questions usually involve more efforts and the score of each were 10 points for one student, no matter it was individual work, pair work or group work. All the data of their completion, accuracy rate and performance result assessed by the teacher would be collected, calculated, and documented automatically by Rain Classroom, and can be downloaded in form of Excel by the teacher.

In the face-to-face session, students also answered objective questions and subjective questions via Rain Classroom as they did in independent online learning session. Each of the subjective question scored 20 points. The students who made presentation in public in the class would be given 10 points each as bonus, which needed the teacher to take records because it could not be recorded automatically by the App. Just as the proportion of the online learning assessment, all the assessment result of the learning in face-to-face format will account for 30% in the final mark.

Therefore, at the end of each unit and the end of the semester, there would be a comprehensive, reflective digital learning portfolio of each student, which did not only include their scores but also included the details of learning, from the page number of slides that they have or have not completed reading to the length of time they used to watch a video or complete a task.

Conclusion

Under the guidance of interaction hypothesis, the blended course EOEC has been developed through the five steps mentioned above, which are elaborated in the hope of providing references for blended course development. After the implementation, the effectiveness of the blended course has been investigated and the course has been revised according to the research results.

==========

Acknowledgement

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to Dr. Ngamthip Wimolkasem in Assumption University, Thailand for her valuable suggestions on the writing of the article, as well as for her support and guidance during the research.

==========

==========

References

Aycicek, B., & Yanpar Yelken, T. (2018). The effect of flipped classroom model on students' classroom engagement in teaching English. *International Journal of Instruction*, 11(2), 385-398. http://doi.org/10.12973/iji.2018.11226a

Brown, H. D. (1993). *Requiem for methods*. Journal of Intensive English Studies 7, pp.1-12.

Challob, A.I., Bakar, N.A., & Latif, H. (2016). Collaborative blended learning writing environment: Effects on EFL students' writing apprehension and writing performance. *English Language Teaching*. 9(6), 229-240.

Ellis, R. (2003). Task-Based Language Learning and Teaching. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.

Ellis, R. (2005). *Principles of instructed language learning*. System 33, pp.209-224.

Fink, L. Dee. (2013). *Creating Significant Learning Experiences, Revised and Updated: An Integrated Approach to Designing College Courses*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Krashen, S. D., Scarcella, R. C., & Long, M. H. (1982). Child-adult differences in second language acquisition. *Modern Language Journal, 68*(3), p. 274.

Lee, G., & Wallace, A. (2018). Flipped learning in the English as a foreign language classroom: Outcomes and perceptions. *TESOL Quarterly*, 52(1), 62-84.

Nation, I.S.P. (2007). The four strands. *Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching* 1, 1: pp.1-12.

Macalister, J. (2010). Language Curriculum Design. New York: Routledge pp.38-39;129-134

McGee, P., & Reis, A. (2012). Blended course design: A synthesis of best practices. *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks, 16*(4), pp.7-22.

Richards, J. C. (2001). *Curriculum Development in Language Teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Roehling, P.V. (2018) Flipping the College Classroom: An Evidence-Based Guide. London: Palgrave Pivot.

Simpson, A. J. (2016). The successful incorporation of blended learning into the language curriculum. *Advanced Education*, 5, 96-107. doi:10.20535/2410-8286.68608

Sun, Z. & Qiu, X. (2017). Developing a blended learning model in an EFL class. *International Journal of Continuing Engineering Education and Life-Long Learning*, 27(1-2), 4-21.

Swain, M. (1985). *Communicative competence: some roles of comprehensible input and comprehensible output in its development.* InS. Gass & C. Madden (eds.). Input in Second Language Acquisition. Rowley MA: Newbury House.

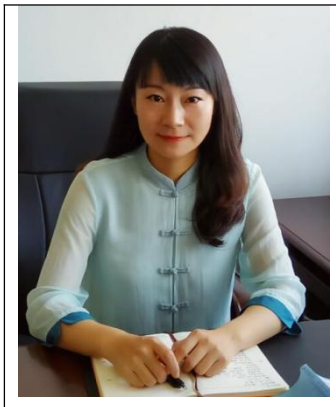
Swain, M. (1993) The output hypothesis: just speaking and writing aren't enough. *Canadian Modern Language Review* 50, 158-164.

Swain, M. (2008). Output hypothesis: its history and its future. *Foreign Language World* 1, 45-50.

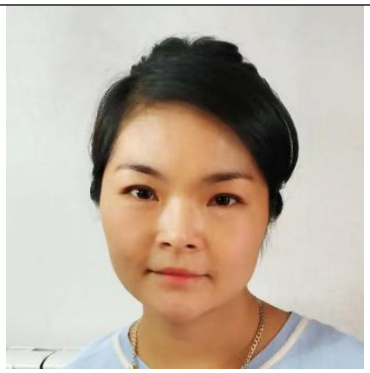
Tomlinson, B. (2003). Developing principled frameworks for materials development. In B. Tomlinson (ed), *Developing Materials for Language Teaching*. London/New York: Continuum.

Towell, R. and Tomlinson, P. (1999). Language curriculum development research at university level. *Language Teaching Research* 3, 1: pp.1-32.

==========



Han Cui, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, School of Foreign Languages, Shenyang University of Chemical Technology, Liaoning, China
cuihan@syuct.edu.cn



Yu Wang, Ph.D.
Lecturer, School of Foreign Languages
Anhui Polytechnic University, Anhui, China
1771732624@qq.com

==========