



# Exploring teachers' oral explanations of new English lexical items in a Chinese university: Comparisons with dictionary information

Ernesto Macaro<sup>a</sup>, Lili Tian<sup>b,\*</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Education, University of Oxford, 15 Norham Gardens, Oxford OX2 6PY, UK

<sup>b</sup> School of Foreign Languages, Renmin University of China, 59# Zhongguancun Street, Haidian District, Beijing 100872, PR China

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## ABSTRACT

We investigated three university teachers' oral explanations of unfamiliar lexical items in a Chinese university English as a foreign language (L2) context. Previous research on explanation of lexis has focused on the amount or functions of teachers' first language (L1) use, or in the field of glossing in written texts. In this exploratory research we compared teacher oral explanations to the information provided by dictionaries, examined whether the teachers provided information in L1 or L2 or both, and explored the type of information they provided. We did this comparison not to evaluate the teachers' competence but to gain insights into the challenges teachers face when putting across the meaning of words which may or may not have direct equivalence in both languages. Greater awareness of these challenges might inform teacher education programmes. Our findings suggest both close comparisons between teacher and dictionary information and interesting divergences. Further research resulting from this exploratory study is suggested.

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## 1. Introduction and rationale

In alignment with theoretical assumptions on comprehensible input (Krashen, 1982), interaction for negotiation of meaning (Long, 1985) and modification of teacher input (Chaudron, 1988), aimed at facilitating the acquisition of a second or foreign language, teachers' classroom discourse has consistently been a focus of classroom research (McCarthy, 2002). To facilitate the comprehensibility of the input, and thereby language development, explanations of new lexical items (words, collocations and set phrases) that second language (L2) teachers provide for their students during oral interaction is therefore an important source for learners to benefit from given how often these explanations feature in the majority of L2 formal learning contexts. Particularly in input-poor learning environments of English-as-a-foreign-language it is therefore important to understand the type of information that teachers, often the main source of oral input, decide to provide.

Previous studies investigating teacher lexical explanations have occurred under broad research themes, for example teachers' general input modification (Chaudron, 1988) or teachers' classroom codeswitching behavior (Barnard & McLellan, 2014; Sali, 2014). The few studies specifically on vocabulary explanations (Flowerdew, 1992) have examined the structure of definitions provided by teachers in biology lectures and their signposting functions. The only study, to our knowledge, on ESL

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [ernesto.macaro@education.ox.ac.uk](mailto:ernesto.macaro@education.ox.ac.uk) (E. Macaro), [lili.tian@ruc.edu.cn](mailto:lili.tian@ruc.edu.cn) (L. Tian).

teachers' vocabulary explanation (Markee, 1995) examined how they responded to student requests for help during small-group work on oral definitions, and analyzed the consequences of teachers' indirect response to these requests. We are not aware of any study which focused solely on the accuracy, completeness and potentially facilitative nature of teacher information, with regard to lexical items, during oral interaction centered on a text.

The aim of this article is therefore to begin to address that gap by offering a descriptive analysis of the lexical information given by three teachers of English and comparing it to dictionary information. In many formal language learning contexts the information on lexical items provided by teachers and that provided by dictionaries are the two main sources of information that students draw upon in order to understand unfamiliar or unknown words in a written text. A descriptive comparison will help to raise an awareness of the challenges faced by teachers in trying to convey the meaning of often abstract and polysemous words during oral interaction. In turn this awareness might lead to a greater emphasis of the topic as part of the content of language teacher education programmes (for a discussion of language teacher professional development in China see Li & Edwards, 2014).

We stress that we are not concerned here with various pedagogies on vocabulary teaching and learning. For example we are not dealing here with whether vocabulary should be taught explicitly or can be learned implicitly by extensive reading (Laufer, 2005) or with the different ways teachers can present sets of vocabulary to learners (Erten & Tekin, 2008). We are not concerned with how learners deploy strategies to learn vocabulary effectively (Lotto & De Groot, 1998) or whether the process of looking up words leads to lexical acquisition (Bruton, 2007) or indeed whether it is actually worth teaching vocabulary explicitly after students have read a text (Sonbul & Schmitt, 2010). We are concerned here with how teachers, in the middle of a discussion about the meaning of a text, stop and give an explanation of a lexical item before moving on, and specifically with the nature of that explanation. Only through understanding the nature of teacher lexical explanations by comparing them with dictionary information can we explore further the above issues of promoting vocabulary teaching pedagogies.

The context for our study is Chinese universities and this is of relevance to the aims of the study. In Chinese universities the majority of teachers using English, whether as EFL, ESP or EMI,<sup>1</sup> are of Chinese nationality. Although the Ministry of Education in Beijing informed us that it does not have a figure for the number of teachers of English in Higher Education it confirmed that there were in 2011 some 13,000 foreign teachers and nearly 14 million Chinese teachers. Consequently we can with confidence assert that the majority of English classes are taught by teachers who speak both the L2 and the L1 of their students and are therefore able, in principle, to provide information about new lexical items either in English, in Chinese or in both languages.

In Chinese college/university settings a large quantity of teaching time is dedicated to the comprehension of written texts and a focus on new or unfamiliar lexical items is inevitable in order for students to understand those texts (see Evnitskaya & Morton, 2011; Kharmas & Hajjaj, 1989; Qian, Tian, & Wang, 2009).

The typological differences between English and Mandarin Chinese as a non-alphabetic language pose a number of challenges to the bilingual teacher seeking to provide lexical information whether through English or Chinese. A Chinese word is not conceptualized in the same way as an English word. Space does not allow an in depth description of these differences (for an introduction see Bassetti, 2005) but we hope to illustrate them through the examples in our data.

Thus to summarize the motivation for this study: research on teacher explanations of new lexical items is still limited; explanations of lexis plays an important part in much of L2 pedagogy and particularly in the Chinese context; the typological differences between English and Chinese may pose particular challenges to teachers; the availability of the L1 as part of the information pool on lexis offers bilingual teachers an alternative to English-only explanations but this pedagogical approach, if adopted frequently, is open to criticism, particularly in an input-poor environment.

## 2. Research background

Research into the use of the L1 by teachers in L2 classrooms (sometimes referred to as 'classroom codeswitching' research, Barnard & McLellan, 2014) provides a backdrop to our study. It shows that explanations for new lexical items is the most frequent function to which the L1 is put. Guo's (2007) case studies found that one teacher used 31% of her L1 talk to explain new items and the other nearly 40%. Gao and Dai (2007) analyzed English lessons of five university teachers and reported explanation of lexical items as one of the frequent functions for which switching to L1 occurred. Dong and Zhu (2007) found that 96% of the teachers they investigated employed the L1 to explain lexical items.

Previous research on teacher explanation of lexis, during oral interaction, has focused on the modification of teacher L2 input in general (Chaudron, 1988), on whether students demand an explanation of new items and how subsequently an interactional sequence of explanation might develop (Baker, 1990), as well as the L2/L1 used and distribution cited above. Takac (2008) points out that teachers present information on both meaning and form of a lexical item and then goes on to provide an overview taxonomy of what that information might comprise. Within the same conceptual frame of information provision for lexical items, Macaro, Guo, Chen, and Tian (2009) proposed a model of Teacher as Dictionary and Dictionary Designer, in which bilingual teachers have a range of options for explaining L2 words including: definition, synonym/antonym, paraphrasing, and contextualization and can deploy these options in both languages.

<sup>1</sup> EFL, English as a Foreign Language; ESP, English for Specific Purposes; EMI, English as the Medium of Instruction (where academic subjects are taught in English rather than the first language of the students).

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