

TEACHING METHODS AND CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES TO INVOLVE CHINESE
CHILDREN IN SPEAKING ENGLISH

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TEACHING METHODS AND CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES INVOLVE CHINESE
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Abstract

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Under the Supervision of Regina Pauly, Professor

Since the first priest came to China, English teaching began. For the last decades, English education is only open to middle school and high school students; it also only focuses on grammar and vocabulary teaching. However, as the society develops, more and more parents and educators realize English teaching should be available to young children as well. Now teaching English to children has become a mainstream view in society. However, there was a survey recently which showed that Chinese students are not capable of speaking and listening English. As a result of the survey, people's attention is focused on current English teaching methods and classroom activities. This investigation puts forward the perspective that English teaching methods and classroom activities need to be improved and enriched as well.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Since the Cultural Revolution ended in 1978, foreign language learning has become a significant subject to the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China. As the most worldwide language, English teaching has been prioritized in schools. According to one expert (Boyle, 2008), English was given prominence in schools, on a par with Chinese and Math in 1980s. After browsing the history of English teaching in China, it is clear that the Grammar Translation Method, Directed Method, Communicative Method, and Language Immersion Method have been applied in English teaching classes. Some of the methods have occupied language history in English teaching for a long time. However, as the time changes, the requests of English teaching has been increased. Literal understanding can not satisfy the needs of the societies' development any more. Which method is the best to satisfy the needs of society still confuses teachers and students.

Furthermore, as the inevitable part of teaching, classroom activities have direct effect on teaching, especially in early childhood education. Today, there are more and more children starting to learn English when they are only three or four years old. Consider the cognitive and psychological characteristics of children, what classroom activities can be the most effective in English teaching still confuses the teachers.

The purpose of this paper is to introduce the different teaching methods and classroom activities in Chinese English teaching to Chinese-speaking children.

Statement of the Problem

During decades of English teaching in China, English teaching has been through three periods of teaching methods. The first period is Grammar centered period, the second is Communicative Language Teaching and at present, the most popular one is Language Immersion Method. Every method has its own specialties and requirements in teaching. Of course, the function and focus are different with each other. What are the differences between the three methods in teaching? As the most important part of teaching, what are the differences between the classroom activities for the three teaching methods? How do these classroom activities affect the teaching? Do they have a positive effect on teaching? What kinds of classroom activities are the best for teaching and what teaching method is the perfect couple with the classroom activities?

Definition of Terms

Balanced activity approach A balanced activities approach sees the job of the teacher as that of ensuring that students get a variety of activities which foster acquisition and which foster learning is appropriate (Kravchuk and Kyrychok, 2000).

Classroom activities Classroom activities are the activities provided by the teachers whose students are learning English. It can be classified by subjects or functions (Zhu, 2007).

Method of Approach

The research was conducted through the University of Wisconsin Platteville (Platteville, WI), Karman Library (University of Wisconsin- Platteville) and Library of South Central University for Nationalities over a period of 70 days. Primary searches were conducted electronically through EBSCO Host, WANFANG Data and CNKI. Key search topics included “language teaching methods”, “English teaching activities” and “English teaching in Chinese primary schools”. A review of literature relating to research, studies, and criticisms about English teaching methods and classroom activities in China will be conducted. The findings will be summarized and recommendations will be made.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Introduction of Teaching Methods in China

In 1978, English teaching starts to be treated as one of the significant subjects in national's teaching outline and be taught nationwide. Since then, English teachers have used different methods to instruct students in English learning. In the following paragraphs, there are three most popular methods in China and each of them will be examined more closely.

Grammar Translation Method

Grammar Translation Method (GTM), borrowed from Japan, was the first and oldest English teaching method in China (Nishno, 2008). According to Boyle (2008), the Grammar Translation Method emphasizes are placed on reading and translation practice. This means, there was much grammar and vocabulary learning, with pronunciation learned by imitation and repetition. It was the most popular and traditional method in school. Zuo (1990) asserts that there are about "87% of teachers in China used the traditional method in the late 1980s" (p. 40). Even though, the facts about the students being deaf and dumb in English have proved that the Grammar Translation Method is less effectively in listening and speaking learning (Ng & Tang, 1997). As a result of the method which has been used for the last 30years, students are often not capable of speaking English after almost ten years learning. This has become a huge problem in Chinese English teaching, because there are more and more companies cooperating with foreigners; most of the jobs from these companies need people who could speak English well, at least could understand what foreigners are talking about. This is what the

Grammar teaching method could not provide to the students. Therefore, the GTM could not satisfy the needs of social development.

Based on the students' situation, the teacher who has rich experience in English teaching addresses the question why this method is welcomed by teachers; even most instructors now acknowledge that this method is ineffective by itself (Fu, 2000). In fact, the answer of the question comes out from teachers' own experience, the method could help students to build a solid foundation for further study, and most teachers also learned English in this way. This is the most common way that teachers learned from their teachers, the advantages and disadvantages they have examined by themselves.

Because students spend most of time analyzing sentence structure and receive practice in reading, and memorize the vocabulary; students can read most English materials. And the other reason is that is easier for students to understand when Chinese is used as the media language which is the case in the GTM (Fu, 2000).

Communicative Language Teaching

Due to the grammar translation method's flaws, the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) was brought to China in 1990s. The CLT emphasizes the function of the language. The ultimate goal of the method is to foster the learner's ability to use the language properly, not just understand it. Teachers set up a situation that students are likely to face in real life. In this situation, according to the topics given by teacher, students try to find the meaningful words or sentences to communicate with others. These simulations encourage students to discover and learn from the situations (Mei, 2009). In 1992 the State Education Development Commission (SEDC) introduced a functional syllabus, in which the communicative teaching aim was set and the communicative

functions to be taught were listed (Boyle, 2008).

The biggest advantage of CLT is that it relieves students from a dull and depressing learning environment and provides them an active and interesting class environment to show themselves. This is an effective class interaction which has broken through the traditional views about the relationship between students and teachers. Students are no longer audience; teachers are no longer the only performers on the stage. Students start to join the class activities and becoming a part of teaching. Students' abilities of speaking and listening also are improved greatly when they enjoy the colorful activities. This method encourages students to be more confident and more active in learning and using a foreign language. In some ways, it makes up the disadvantages of Grammar Translation Method. But on the other hand, it weakens the grammar teaching in English class, students become lazier in reading and writing (Fu, 2010). In China teachers use a kind of test-orientated, text-based, teacher-centered evaluation system, the application of CLT improves the relationship between teachers and students, breaks the traditional rules in classes, in that it cannot satisfied the needs of tests (2010).

Language Immersion Method

For many years, the method of teaching English has been a problem which confused the Chinese English teachers who want to balance the functional teaching and the test-oriented teaching until the language immersion method was brought into China in 1997 by Qiang Haiyan (Li, 2007). Language Immersion method provides a new ground about teaching English to Chinese speaking children. Unlike a more traditional language course, where the target language is simply the subject material, language immersion uses the target language as a teaching tool, surrounding or immersing students in the target

language. In-class activities, such as mathematics, science, social studies, history, and those outside of the class, such as meals or everyday tasks, are conducted in the target language. Students are immersed in the target language all the time. In China, English is the target language (Mei, 2009).

According to Keith, Johnson and Swain(1997), immersion method is distinguished between total immersion and partial immersion. Total immersion requires the participants speak the target language (English) in all situations; students totally expose themselves in the second language (English). Partial immersion is the method that students only expose themselves in some subjects, situations or time period. In China, as most schools cannot achieve the requirements of the language environment, the partial immersion is more popular than the total immersion.

Because the immersion method has been brought into China, more and more kindergartens, training centers, and nurseries start to use it in English teaching. In this case, more foreigners who are native English speakers have been hired in these organizations, but Chinese English teachers still play the lead role of teaching. Many scholars and professionals consider it as the best way of English teaching when children are still very young (Gao, 2004). Compared with traditional grammar translation method and communicative teaching, it is easier to distinguish the advantages of immersion method. Gao (2004) did an experiment about the immersion language teaching model and traditional teaching model and made conclusions about the specialties of Language Immersion Method. The first specialty is that immersion children show greater fluency in the immersion language compared with children who have received conventional language teaching. The second specialty is the immersion children are more linguistically

conscious than monolingual children. Last, the children show a positive attitude towards different cultures and languages.

Language immersion has proven to be an efficient method of learning a new language (Paul, 2001). According to Gao's research (2004), language immersion method is better than the other language learning models in early childhood education. But the application of the method seems impossible, because it requires a high proficient language skill and a strong language atmosphere. This could not be set up in a few years and the salary of the foreign teachers is much higher than the local teachers, therefore the immersion method is still in the trial period in China.

Classroom Activities

One may consider that teaching method will be the head which decides the direction and classroom activities will be the hands and feet which make the action. A person cannot achieve anything without any one of them. So does a successful education. As the most important part of teaching, classroom activities take the responsibilities of attracting students into learning and using a language. There are various forms of classroom activities, but Task-guided class activities and game-like class activities approach are the most popular styles of classroom activities in China (Zeng, 2010).

Task-guided Class Activities

“Task” is a concept based on the emergence of communicative language teaching. Task-guided class activities approach refers to activities that are designed for a specific object of language learning. It focuses on the use of authentic language and asking students finishing meaningful tasks by using the language. It avoids too much emphasizing on teaching form, improves students' capability of using language to

communicate and promotes the effectiveness and activeness of class activities (Zeng, 2010).

At least one research partners (Richards and Rodgers, 2008) take the “task” as the activities or goals which have to be implemented by language. According to another researcher (Skehan, 2005), “task” is an activity which emphasizes on meaning and solving social problems. Accomplish the task is prior to everything. At the same time, Skehan distinguishes the differences between task and exercise as well. In his opinion, exercise pays more attention to forms, no social willingness, and lacks real situation, the information is only from one side. On the contrary, tasks take emphasis on meaning and social life, the achievement of the task is crucial, and the information comes from double or multiple sides. One Chinese college researcher (Zeng, 2010) did an experiment to see how students react and response after a class, and the class was taught the same content by both traditional activities of teaching and task-based class activities. She claimed the task-based class activities attract students much more than traditional explanation and exercise. According to this experiment, Zeng also found that students devote themselves more into learning, sharing and speaking than they did (Zeng, 2010).

The Advantages of the task-based class activities are obvious. It is an approach which is student-centered, allows for more meaningful communication and often provides for practical linguistic skill building for students. During the activities, students are freer to use the grammar and vocabulary they want, there are no limits for using their language. This allows students to use all the language they know, rather than just the 'target language' of the lesson (Harmer, 2001). Furthermore, as the tasks are more familiar to the students (e.g. going shopping), students are more likely to be engaged,

which may further motivate them in their language learning.

But the task-guided class activities approach have been criticized. Often that task-based is not appropriate for beginners. In essence, the reason of the critique is that task-based language learning focuses on output, and beginners do not always have enough language skills and knowledge to support it (Gui, 2004).

Games Classroom Activities Approach

Byrne (1995) gave the definition to games as a form of playing governed by rules. They should be enjoyed and fun, they are not just a diversion, a break from routine activities but a way of getting the learners to use the language in the course of the game (Deesri, 2002). Games classroom activities approach is a way that games should be involved in classroom activities as an effective way of helping children to process and understand the message in activities. Since 1940s, Japanese English teachers used some games in primary schools, which were proved to be effective in teaching, the games classroom activities approach starts to be popular in English teaching (He, 2008).

Due to children cognitive and psychological features, the famous Swiss educational psychologist and biologist Piaget thought games were very suitable for children learning a language (2001).

Memory span was the first characteristic of children. He Feiying (2008), a young children cognitive and psychological development researcher, mentioned the children enjoy a quicker but relatively shorter memory span, and children could improve this by memorizing things repeatedly in paper. That means, children could remember a poem or a long story easily, even if they do not know the meaning of it at all.

Another characteristic of children is attention span. As is well known, children

have a short attention span. It is difficult to keep them focusing on something for a long time, especially when the thing is boring, useless, and too difficult. As a matter of fact, quite a lot of games can be organized in diverse forms and by varieties of techniques to attract the children's attention as much as possible.

Brain plasticity which was mentioned by Penfield and Roberts in their work of 1959 is the third characteristic of children. Brain plasticity means the children's brain can shift the function of damaged brain to another healthy brain. It also suggests the children's brain has a cellular receptivity to language acquisition. However, the plasticity is controlled by biological clock. With the growth of children's age, the plasticity changes as well. According to Penfield and Roberts' study, the age period of 4 to 8 is the best time for children learning a language due to the greatest brain plasticity. Games involved in languages knowledge will be the perfect couple of the perspective.

“Learning by Doing” which was advocated by John Dewey (1859-1952), one of the most famous American educators, is the last characteristic about children. In Dewey's view, education and life are interactive, they cannot be separated and education is not preparation of life, education is life itself. He also stressed the importance of learning best by doing for children. He stated that children had potential enormous curiosity and creativity in playing; Playing is children's nature. When children play, they are not only learn social behaviors but also develop small and gross motor skills. Listening and watching, even imitating help children to foster a good sense ability of the world. Besides above mentioned, Dewey's another significant idea of education is that continuity of experience is essential to growth. So create more simulations which are fun and practical is prior to anything else in children's learning. As one of the most effective ways of

learning, game always play the role of entertainment and knowledge in the classroom activities.

Three English Teaching Methods and Classroom Activities

Different teaching methods have different focuses in classroom teaching and classroom activities. And different goals always lead to different strategies and different paths. Here are the comparisons of the three teaching methods in classroom activities.

Objectives in Classroom Activities

Grammar translation method emphasizes the literal using. It focuses on the analysis of grammar rules and translation, the goal of the method is to read its literature. So reading, exercise and explanations are the main teaching activities in the classes. This method is good at building a solid foundation of English knowledge; it satisfied the needs of Chinese English Test (Fu, 2000).

The objectives of communicative language teaching will reflect the needs of the learner. They include both functional skills and linguistic objectives. The classroom activities are various, from the singing to reading, from actor playing to games guessing. The goal of the communicative language teaching is to make the language satisfy the needs of living.

The most important objective of English immersion is to help students involve in an international environment. What they learn include the language, the subjects, the culture and the understanding of the language (Zhu, 2007). Classroom activities should be various. However, this method is not practical due to the limitation of language environment.

Teacher's Role in Classroom Activities

Teacher who uses the Grammar translation method play a role as a center (Stacie G, 2000). Teachers teach the grammar principles and construction of the sentences to students, require students to memorize them. The teachers' responsibilities are teaching and explanations of the grammar rules.

In the communicative language teaching, teachers have to facilitate the search-learning process, make the classroom activities be more colorful and interesting, encourage students to be the major of learning. Because of these, teachers participant the communicative process as an independent person as a student, during the process, teachers also will play as a researcher, learner and manager to observe and analyze the process. Teachers' role is multi-functional. And the requirements of the teacher are much higher than that in grammar translation method.

As Immersion method is so different with the other methods, the teachers include administrators, immersion and non-immersion teachers, community members and parents. All of these people who have a strong connection with the students are teachers of students. They have to be capable of creating an English or international environment for students. This method requires the teacher to be high proficiency in target language and cultural knowledge (Johnson, & Swain, 1997).

Student's Role in Classroom Activities

Students in Grammar translation method are expected to memorize endless vocabulary and grammar rules. They are the supporters in classes, but the leader of the classes. It is easy for students to feel frustrated by the method.

In contrast to the Grammar translation method, students have much more fun

and better relationship with teachers in classroom activities. Students are the leaders all the time, they assume what they want to learn and search it, and then find it in the situations that teachers create. Students control the classroom activities, trying to solve problems through communication and understand the importance of communication.

Language in Classroom Activities

In grammar translation classes, the classes are used by mother tongue, with very little active use of the target language.

Communicative Language teaching requires the target language to be the mediate language in classes. Students learn English through the target language and the context created by teachers. Students have lots of chances to speak English in the classroom activities.

For immersion teaching method, the language depends on the half of immersion or full immersion. During the classroom activities, most of the language is in the target language. In China, the target language is English. And the classroom activities are generally supported by the teachers in different subjects. Normally, teachers focus on teaching knowledge in the target language.

CHAPTER 3

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

According to the nearest (2008) policy of Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China (MOE), a Standard English course is being used to replace the former teaching outline. The new standard adopts the international system which focuses on developing students' ability to use English in their daily life (Lin, 2002). The core of the policy is to improve students' interest and encourage their participation in the English learning. In view of the different requirements of different age's students, this paper is focusing on primary school children's English teaching. Since the new policy has been announced, more and more teachers start to concentrate on enriching the classroom activities. And at the same time, the communicative language teaching is being advocated nationwide as the goal of the communicative language teaching is to meet the needs of use a language.

As far as the theories mentioned in chapter two, the memory span and attention span are the two significant features for children learning English. It is so difficult for children to concentrate on something for a long time. Most of time, they can only focus on something no more than ten minutes on average. This is a serious problem teachers need to face.

It is fortunate that there are so many researchers and educators working in this area and providing the task-guided classroom activities and games classroom activities in teaching. The task-guided classroom activities need learners to have enough English grammar and vocabulary as foundation for the activities. It is more suitable for middle and high level English learners. But the games classroom activities are perfect for young

and low- level learners. Play is children's nature, it helps children develop their cognition and social behavior, and now it is applied in English teaching, it has another function of teaching language.

Besides that, games classroom activities also meet the requirements of Krashen's language acquisition theory. According to Krashen, there are two significant factors to involve in the language learning, one is low- anxiety environment, and another one is to provide an interesting message. The two factors have an inevitable impact on language acquisition. Games provide a pleasant emotional connection with students, students relax themselves in the games; at the same time, games involved in English teaching knowledge possess interesting message which could catch children's attention for longer time.

Different people have different needs in different periods, so do children. Children have their specific needs for their cognitive and psychological developments. If they eat much more when they use a big bowl, we give them big bowl. If they can speak more in activities, we should create more activities. If they can learn a foreign language better when they play in it, we should provide more and more interesting activities in classrooms. Everything has its rules in this world; we cannot just ignore them and ask the children to accept what we want them to accept. Teachers need to follow the nature and abilities of their students which is the best way for children to learn and grow.

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