

USING COLLABORATIVE TASKS TO HELP CHINESE CHILDREN IMPROVE  
ACQUISITION OF ENGLISH TENSE IN IMMERSION CLASSES

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\_\_\_\_\_ Date: May 1, 2013 \_\_\_\_\_

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A Seminar Paper

Presented to

The Graduate Faculty

University of Wisconsin-Platteville

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In Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirement for the Degree

Master of Science in Education

English Education

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By

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2013

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis is completed with the assistance of many individuals. Without their generous and expert help, insightful comments and continuous encouragement, I would not have been able to complete my research and thesis.

First of all, I would like to express my deepest and warmest thanks to my advisor, Dr. Yuanyuan Hu, for her great help, considerable patience and understanding. She gave me so many constructive suggestions on how to conduct the research. Much of the thinking that went into this thesis grew out of discussion with her.

My warmest and heartfelt thanks go to my father, Fa Huaimin and my mother Wang Huatingi, for the support they have given me throughout my years in my undergraduate and graduate education. Their love, strength and insight have carried me through many difficult times. To them I owe more than words could express.

My close friends, Yipeng Du and Ross Foley, also deserve special thanks for their moral support and many words of encouragement during the time it took to complete my research.

My special thanks are also due to Dr. Richard Gareett, for his many words of encouragement, support and his enthusiasm for my paper throughout the research. His patient reading and revising of drafts of chapters and her comments were most valuable.

At last, I thank my dear friends who have been concerned and supportive. Without the support, assistance and encouragement given me by all these people, this thesis would have not been completed.

Abstract

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Fa Jing (Jinny)

Under the Supervision of Dr. Richard Garrett

This paper explores the use of collaborative tasks for helping Chinese young children learn English tense in immersion classes. This paper reviews definitions of immersion method and Total Physical Response, EITS in China, English tense teaching method review, and collaborative task influences students' learning English tense. In view of the current challenges and problems in English immersion training schools in present-day China, the paper argues that it is possible to use collaborative tasks to help children learn grammar instead of total physical response only. This paper concludes with recommendations from EITS teachers in China.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Over the last ten years, English immersion training schools (EITS) have become very popular choices for young children to learn English in the mainland China. In partial EITS, English is not only the target language to learn, but also the tool of learning the target language (Xiong, 1993). Additionally, English is required as the primary communication language among teachers, students, and staff in the school. The rationale of EITS is based upon the belief that one learns a second language by actually communicating using the language. In EITS, teachers use Total Physical Response (TPR) to introduce new contents and make commands. The integration of language instruction with content instruction helps children pick up a second language naturally and unconsciously (Cloud, & Hamayan, 2000; Genesee, 1994). Therefore, most EITSs in China adopted a so-called “no Chinese speaking” policy. That is, the teacher cannot use Chinese in teaching unless they get permission.

The “no Chinese-speaking” policy and the implementation of TPR method has triggered many concerns about their influences on children’s grammar acquisition, especially learning tense. There is a question of transfer and adaptation of skills. There is no tense or changes on verb in Chinese, so the students would be confused by learning only from teacher’s acting without knowing the rules and system. One cannot be sure that tense learning is “natural”.

The use of collaborative tasks in immersion classrooms is theoretically supported by theories or concepts such as Interaction Hypothesis (Long, 1983), collaborative dialogue, and language-related episodes (Swain, 1998).

This paper is a report on the literature that addresses the acquisition of English tenses. In part the report addresses nature of useful tense learning that may accommodate the “interaction”

approaches.

### **Statement of the Problem**

1. What is the difference between children and adults learning tense.
  - (a).what's the difficulty for Chinese people learning English tense?
  - (b).Can children learning tense in the same way as adults?
  - (c).What's the difference for children learning tense structure and practicing oral English
2. What is the relationship between TPR and immersion method?
  - (a).What is TPR and how it works in Chinese English training schools?
  - (b).What is TPR's advantages for Children?
  - (c).What other teaching method can we use in immersion English lessons?
3. How to improve immersion method when teaching tense structure?
  - (a).What's the weakness of TPR in tense teaching?
  - (b).How to improve immersion method for tense teaching?
  - (c).How does collaborative task influences students' learning English tense in immersion classroom?"

### **Definition of Terms**

Collaborative task. A situation in which two or more people learn or attempt to learn something and finish tasks together.

Immersion method. A method of teaching a second language in which the target language (or

L2) is used as the means of instruction.(Swain, Merrill, Johnson, and Robert ,1997)

English tense. A temporal linguistic quality expressing the time at, during, or over which a state or action denoted by a verb occurs.

TPR. Total physical response.

EITS. English immersion training schools

### **Delimitations of Research**

The research will be conducted in and through the Karmann Library at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville, over ninety (90) days. Primary searches will be conducted via the Internet through EBSCO host with ERIC, Academic Search Elite and Google/Google Scholar as the primary sources. Key search topics included “collaborative task”, “immersion method”, and “English tense”.

### **Method of Approach**

A brief review of literature on the studies of immersion method and total physical response (TPR). A second review of literature relating factors, including interaction Hypothesis, collaborative dialogue and comprehensible input. The findings will be summarized and recommendations made.

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

#### **Immersion method and Total Physical Response**

Immersion method (Immersion) is a new second language teaching created by Canadian French linguist Swain. Language as a communication tool, is not only the target language to learn, but also the tool of learning the target language (Swain, 1995). Immersion bilingual teaching usually begins in kindergartens. In such teaching, children are immersed in the second language environment. Immersion bilingual teaching is characterized by organizing activities in English and creating an English-speaking environment for young children.

While immersion teaching to achieve a self-conscious to learn to change, to enable students to target language in a more authentic learning environment while teaching in the use of immersion process should pay attention to the following two principles: full English teaching principles and interaction principle. (Swain, 1997) People need to learn a specific social environment, human growth in this environment is one of them has proved that teachers involved in student activities (Vygotsky, 1994). Students can more effectively mobilize enthusiasm and participation, more effective than the students themselves organize activities and the teachers only as a spectator or a judge is much better in the interactive process, the teachers and students ask questions alternately to explain the addition to the participation of teachers, it should be noted This process encourages teachers to the role, often encourage students to greatly overcome shyness and student tension, completely changing the teaching mode, create a student-centered autonomous learning environment so students will become the protagonist of the classroom, and teachers The role is to provide students with support and guidance, and learning to build their

own knowledge structure, so that the teaching model in China in the end it does not apply appropriate.

Total Physical Response (TPR) is based on the premise that the human brain has a biological program for acquiring any natural language on earth - including the sign language of the deaf. (James, 1969). The process is visible when we observe how infants internalize their first language. It looks to the way that children learn their native language. This technique is ideal for students at the early stages of learning, when their capabilities for verbal response are as yet undeveloped. TPR provides both intense listening practice and repeated exposure to basic vocabulary items.

### **EITS in China**

With the continuous progress of globalization, a new awareness of the necessity for English-literate citizens and workers is transforming the face of learning English as a foreign language. (Hickery-Hudson, 1999) (Popkewitz & Blco 2001) Through research completed in Singapore and Australia, there are two current issues that are primary steering and shaping the world's next generation of early multilingual and bilingual children in public kindergartens, childcare services, and private institutions. First is the struggle in finding a balance between educational theories and pedagogy with the values and teaching practices of local and international communities. (Street, 1995) With the blending and mixture of theory and practice, new generations of English Language Learners are reactively forming new cultural and social identities; furthermore challenging traditional ways of thinking and limitations placed upon them by both government and family. (Ham, 2004) (Kenner & Kress, 2003) The second is hovering of the never ending debate over the risks and benefits of using English in the actual teaching instruction inside and outside of the classroom; moreover, who should be placed to teach

linguistic and literacy as well as a county's values to our future children? (Gee 1996) (Beck, 2000)

Considering English Language Learners with disadvantaged backgrounds and socio-economic challenges, oral language initiatives and interventions such as Talking Time, are aimed at exposing these individuals to a better quality of learning environment and support. (Mercer, 1999) (Huthson, 2003) Through the usage of three-types of instruction, a research showed the positive reliable and valid success of such a program in inner city public schools. (BAS II, 1997) (Pressley & Harris, 1999) (Gardner, 2006) It was concluded by this study, that EEL need additional exposure to the targeted language as well as assistance from qualified and prepared educators and mentors. (Justice , 2008) In Talking Times, following several presentations concerning EEL psychology development and taking part in workshops of classroom instruction; teachers were prepared to work with small groups of students for 15 minutes usually once or twice a week; in order to examine their ability to understand a story, draw inferences from their own experiences, and describe their opinions and feelings through group discussion. (Pressley & Harris, 1999) (Chapman, 2000) Although there was a measure of failure with student success and achievement; the results still conclude that with a sensitive learning environment and responsive instructors, an EEL can and most likely will improve their working vocabulary and communicative ability. (Huthson, 2003) (Mercer 1999)

With the development of globalization, recently more and more Chinese citizens have a strong interest in learning English as a Foreign Language. Since the 1990s, many bilingual educational programs have appeared; the ultimate goal of all of these experimental programs is to achieve dual language competence and literacy through teaching subject knowledge The Immersion Method, while still being continuously developed, has gradually become popularly

accepted and practiced in many Chinese institutions. Personal training schools differ as they focus on early immersion of English in preschool and kindergarten; however, many of these programs have not been successful in achieving their goals and fall below of local and national expectations and standards. Professors in the field have started to do more research and analyze which are the best methods and ways to solve this problem. Although there is a lot of potential for a promising future for preschool immersion English programs, currently there are too many barriers and challenges. Firstly, the programs lack skilled teachers and staff. The English teachers in China now are not capable for the Immersion Method. Secondly, the material which matches the Immersion Method has not yet fully matured; it is still in the developing process. Finally, the management of the immersion classroom is full of other smaller problems making it difficult to be universally successful and effective: the large quantity of the classroom, the interests of children, the traditional teaching method, and some other elements.

In conclusion, because of globalization many government leaders, parents, and even students themselves wish to promote and support early oral language for English Language Learners. Through various researches and studies, many challenges still currently face ELL programs educators, staff, and participants. The programs must find a balance between educational theory and practice; moreover, train their personal how to respect and value both new cultural identities and traditional thinking. There must be additional time outside of the classroom for students to practice their knowledge and ability to communicate their ideas and opinions. Educators and staff must be properly trained and prepared in the course content, developmental psychology, and the native countries culture and educational system. Lastly, educators must provide an effective and safe learning environment, not only providing language instruction but guidance toward personal development and growth. If these factors can

successful be standardized and closely monitored; then slowly over time the programs will become more effective and ultimately achieve the goal of teaching English as a Foreign Language.

### **English tense teaching method review**

It is absolutely stated that English grammar is the most important and tough part in the acceptance of English school study among Chinese study. Many domestic and foreign scholars believe that Total Physical Response (TPR) in English immersion training schools (EITS) is truly adaptable in introducing new contents and make commands, but this English teaching method may be negative in teaching English grammar, especially in the past tense grammar. One research is revealed that Chinese English learner show low sensitivity in English verb past tense, they didn't have the automatic processing ability in the reading or communication in English (Jiehui, Ttao, Yuanzhang, 2011). Many students have been learning English verb tense grammar from a very early time, but they still make frequent mistakes in English verb changes and they almost don't have a rational and clear understand in English verb past tense grammar (Xuemei, Yingying, 2009). And although some Chinese people who have been migrated in English mother tongue countries and have been immersed in a good English communication circumstances, they still rarely use the verb past tense, marking the "-ed" (Lardiere,1998).

The reason why Chinese English learners can not grasp English very well is that the Chinese grammar system is complexly different from the English system. There is not any tense change in Chinese verb. What's more, many English verbs in the past tense are not very regular, so it is hard for Chinese English learners to remember (Lardiere, 2009). And some rigid school teaching method is also negative for Chinese students to learn and grasp a good understanding in English grammar study, the students always pursue the static grammar style, but ignore the

practice in the specific daily scene.

The English verbs past tense teaching method have been changing recent years. At first, the teaching method was introduced from Russia. Before 1982 College English Teaching (CET) into China which attached importance to textbook-centeredness, teacher-centeredness, and classroom-centeredness. This kind of teaching approach was nicknamed as a “spoon-fed” approach in that students passively listen to lectures and take notes. This kind of teaching method is very bad for English study, and students can’t truly practice English in the daily life. The second popular teaching method called immersion method, this kind of method is based on the belief that the integration of language instruction with content instruction helps children pick up a second language naturally and unconsciously (Cloud, Hamayan, 2000; Genesee, 1994). And in partial English immersion training schools (EITS), English is not only the target language to learn, but also the tool of learning the target language (Xiong, 1993), and in this kind of school, “no Chinese speaking” policy is widely used to train the students to use English more naturally just as their mother tongue. But unfortunately, this kind of teaching method is easily to ignore the English grammar study, because tense learning is not always natural for Chinese students.

Now a new kind of method is developed to trigger the students’ own interest and self-consciousness in learning English without ignoring the English grammar, especially the verb tense change. This is the method called communicative approach which pays more attention to the collaboration between the students and teachers, the teacher must arouse the students’ enthusiasm in inducing and concluding the grammar rules through collaborative dialogue, and language-related episodes (Swain, 1998).

Actually, in recent years, especially since China won the bid to host the 2008 Olympic Games China has seen an explosion in the demand for English (Zhu, 2007), more and more

Chinese people want to master a foreign language especially English, thus they are paying more attention to the English pronunciation, English grammar and oral English practice. The regular verb past tense change such as “be” or the irregular change will be attached more importance in English study. Many foreigners who perceive English as the mother tongue may be confused about the Chinese people’s huge persistence and enthusiasm in English study. In this crazy trend, I believe the tough point ---the English verb tense change will be well solved by a new English grammar teaching.

### **The weakness of TPR in tense teaching**

TPR teaching method regard the process of foreign language learning similar as their mother tongue learning, that can be like children to learn their mother tongue as learning a foreign language, most of the grammatical structures and thousands of words can be taught by teachers using imperative sentences skillfully, the reaction method is a natural method, because the mother tongue and foreign language learning process is the same. (Asher, 1993).

Learning a foreign language in China, it cannot be similar to the process of learning Chinese, because we have the fully environment of Chinese language, it cannot be exactly like the children to learn their mother tongue as learning a foreign language, so the reaction method is not a natural method. There are a number of abstract words, sentences and tense are difficult to use TPR to achieve the purpose of understanding, so most of the grammatical structures and thousands of words can be taught by teachers using imperative sentences skillfully is impossible. (Luo Xiaomei, 2011)

TPR English teaching methods are appropriate to the early stages of language teaching, as the level of application is relatively simple, because it involves activities and speech. TPR English teaching is not suitable for English language learning of deep structure of the language.

As it mentioned above, it must be used in combination with other methods to teach English tense.

### **The theoretical support of Collaborative task**

It is not new using group collaborative work in second language acquisition class. If there are two students in one group, it was often called pair work which means these two students will work through communication, discussion and other methods to fulfill a task together. The most significant theoretical support was Long's (1983) Interaction Hypothesis. The Interaction Hypothesis "has taken as basic the notion that conversation is not only a medium of practice, but also the means by which learning takes place", more specifically when it comes to the negotiation of meaning (Gass p.234). "Especially negotiation work that triggers interactional adjustments by the Native Speaker or more competent interlocutor, facilitates acquisition because it connects input, internal learner capacities, particularly selective attention, and output in productive ways" (Long 1996, pp. 451-2).

The Interaction Hypothesis posits that when an ESOL (ESL, EFL) learner is attempting to negotiate conversation in the target language the gaps in their abilities are revealed to them. These abilities can include but are not limited to pronunciation, syntax, grammar and vocabulary. The Interaction Hypothesis concludes that this self-realization, brought about by authentic interaction, will encourage the second language learner to produce target language output to negotiate meaning and seek out the knowledge they lack. This interaction between the ESOL (ESL, EFL) learner and other students or the learner and the ESOL (ESL, EFL) teacher, results in language acquisition on the part of the learner, meaning they have internalized this chunk of language and will be able to produce it later when needed.

Meanwhile, Based on Krashen's () input hypothesis and Vygotsky's(1986)

Cognitive-Development theory, Swain (1998) investigated the French immersion teaching in Canada, and found that the comprehensible input hypothesis played a big part in the process of second language acquisition but was not enough to develop in an all-around way for second language acquisition learners. He thought only language input could not make fluency and accuracy in second language acquisition. If language learners want to have a fluency and accuracy in using second language, they not only should have a lot of input but also should have much more comprehensible output.

The implementation of collaborative task is based on Interaction Hypothesis. Classroom activities are based on tasks, creating a harmonious interactive learning environment to improve students' communication ability and overall quality. In the classroom, the students using collaborative dialogue and language-related episodes to find the solution to study English tense. This method refers to students themselves to solve the language form problem under the decontextualized text or presentation.

## CHAPTER 3

### CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### **The function of Collaborative work**

Compared collaborative task with personal task method, collaborative task is better to promote the acquisition of the target English tense items. Collaboration helps students identify the problem, pay attention to the form of problem-solving, to build knowledge system.

Collaboration can be designed to allow students to be more effective for English learning. (Liu Yan, 2011)

- The collaborative work has a noticing function

Many times, when attempting to produce the target language, learners may notice that they do not know how to say (or write) precisely the meaning they wish to convey. In other words, the activity of producing the target language in communication may prompt second language learners to notice consciously some of their linguistic problems. This awareness triggers cognitive processes that have been implicated in second language learning—ones in which learners generate linguistic knowledge which is new for them, or which consolidate their current existing knowledge (Swain & Lapkin 1995).

- The output has a hypothesis testing function

The interaction between young learners sometimes could help them to reflect their hypothesis testing when acquiring the linguistic form and structure of the target language. Hearing the feedback from other partners and their own output, learners could test their hypothesis to the target language subconsciously. Through the negotiations of meaning and modifications of

discussion and communication, language learners' expression could be more accuracy. The second language learning is thought as a process of continuous hypothesizes and amendment, therefore, the hypothesis testing could greatly enhance the language learning. The collaborative work offers an opportunity for learners to attempt to use any kinds of methods to express their intention and to test the hypothesis whether accuracy or not. Mackey's (2002) study has an excellent example of hypothesis testing from a learner's perspective. The learner is reacting to an interaction episode in which she, another learner and a teacher are involved. We always could hear the learner ask the other person involved, like "Can I say it that way?" or "I don't know if that's right, is it?" Therefore, the feedback from the opposite side is meaningful for learner because learner could be informed of his words right or be understood. If learners were not testing hypothesizes, then changes in their output would not be expected following feedback.

- The collaborative task has a metalinguistic function

Learners use language to reflect on language produced by others, and mediating second language learning. This idea originates with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of mind. Sociocultural theory is about people operating with mediating tools (Wersch, 1985). Speaking is one such tool. Swain( Swain, 2000) have relabeled "output" as speaking, writing, collaborative dialogue, private speech, verbalizing, and language in order to escape the inhibiting effect of the "conduit metaphor" implied in the use of terms such as input and output (Firth & Wagner, 1997; Kramsch,1995). Many researchers have experimented with tasks which encourage students to engage in collaborative dialogue and found that tasks where students are asked to write something together tends to elicit collaborative dialogue as the students discuss how best to represent their intended meaning. Furthermore, researchers have shown through the use of post-test items based on the students' collaborative dialogues that the collaborative dialogues

were a source of language learning. As Smagorinsky (1998) says, “ the process of rendering thinking into speech is not simply a matter of memory retrieval, but a process through which thinking reaches a new level of articulation.”

### **The implication of collaborative task in immersion class**

The Chinese children's English teaching should be based on China's national conditions. In China, we have larger and larger classes in EITS. Generally speaking, there are 20-40 students in a class, and in some schools in the remote areas, there are probably more than 50 students in a class. It is difficult for the teachers to give every student an opportunity to finish and show their pair work in the class hour. Based on this phenomenon, the problem to be solved is how collaborative work can be used effectively in language teaching and learning.

The first thing we need to do is to fully understand the role of collaborative task in promoting language acquisition for the children, and try to design various interesting collaborative activities to provoke the learners' initiative in using the language to express their ideas.

The second is concerned with the collaborative practice itself. When designing the collaborative activities, the following points have to be considered: first, it is no good neglecting meaning while emphasizing form. Negotiated meaning is the prerequisite to play the role of children's own output. Meaning remains the primary focus of the task. In order for native-speaker competence to be achieved, however, the meaning of “negotiating meaning” needs to be extended beyond the usual sense of simply “getting one's message across”. Simply getting one's message across can and does occur with grammatically deviant forms and sociolinguistically inappropriate language. Negotiating meaning needs to incorporate the notion of being pushed toward the delivery of a message that is not only conveyed, but that is conveyed

precisely, coherently, and appropriately. Therefore, when English teachers design specific collaborative practice for a certain linguistic form, they should take the specific features of the certain linguistic form into consideration in order to examine whether it is suitable for output. The collaborative task needs to adequately control for the learners' focus of attention and encourage them to use as more target linguistic forms as possible. Otherwise it is impossible for the learners to compare their first language production to the target language and notice the gap between what they want to say and what they really can say.

The third thing that English teachers need to do is to provide feedback which informs the learners as to the fault of their group work. Once language learners have been stimulated to produce output, English teachers should further encourage them to practice the linguistic forms repeatedly until they have been internalized and automatized. Automaticity results from repeated attempts at production. The more attempts at production, the more opportunities for retrieval, and the quicker the response is likely to be.

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