

# The Theoretical Foundations and Application of Whole Language

Jiang Ting

Shandong Institute of Commerce and Technology, 250013

**Key words:** Whole language; theoretical foundations; application

**Abstract:** Different language teaching approaches reflect people's different demands and needs about language learning during different periods. This paper is going to focus on Whole Language, which is a relatively new approach to teaching and learning language. Many people are neither much familiar with the theoretical foundations of Whole Language nor the way how it is applied in teaching process. This paper is going to solve the unfamiliarity by delivering a brief discussion on the theoretical foundation and application of Whole Language approach.

## 1. Introduction

Whole Language is an important language teaching theory in English speaking countries since 1980s and American educators have paid more and more attention to it. It has found its way into various language teaching process, setting from preschool to college. It has been also ushered into ESL/EFL classrooms. Whole Language approach effects greatly on the teaching patterns of North American countries, as well as Great Britain, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. In China, it is Hong Kong and Taiwan that have been effected at the very beginning. Although this approach has already attracted attention theoretically, practically it hasn't widespread in China.

## 2. Theoretical Foundations of Whole Language

In order to explain the theoretical foundations of Whole Language, we should first have a clear concept about the definition of Whole Language. According to the *LangMan Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics*, Whole Language is an approach to first language reading and writing instruction that has been extended into middle and secondary school levels and to the teaching of ESL and that views language as a "whole" entity. Whole Language emphasizes learning to reading and writing naturally with a focus on real communication and is opposed to the idea of teaching the separate components of language (e.g. Grammar, vocabulary. word recognition, phonics) in isolation.

### 2.1 The Development of Whole Language

The origination of Whole Language can be traced back to the late 60s of 20th Century since the WL movement was started in 1967. When we mention "Whole Language", we couldn't neglect him—Goodman, K. S, the father of whole language movement. He is a famous linguistic educator in America, his wife and their three daughters are all linguistic educators. His representative work *What's Whole in Whole Language* (1986) is well known. He advocated the entity of language and he regards whole language as a philosophy but not a concrete teaching method.

In the 1980s, the American educators paid more and more attention to the quality of education and the term "Whole Language" was created. At that time, decoding approach and other reading theories were widespread. These approaches focused on teaching the separate components of language, such as phonetics, grammar, vocabulary and word recognition. While Whole Language opposed to these approaches and argues that language should be taught as a whole and "if language isn't kept whole, it isn't language anymore". Whole Language adopts a holistic way to teach and show respect for each student as a member, a culture and as a creator of knowledge and respect for each teacher as a professional.

In the 1990s, it became popular. At first, this approach was used as a motivating and innovative way in the native language teaching in primary school, such as language art, reading and writing.

Later, it was expanded into the middle and secondary level and to the ESL teaching.

Gradually, this approach was introduced into some other countries such as Great Britain, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, etc.

## **2.2 Principles of Whole Language**

There are different ways to explain the principles of Whole Language. According to *LongMan Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics*: first, language is presented as a whole and not as isolated pieces. The approach is thus holistic rather than atomistic, attempts to teach language in real contexts and situations and emphasizes the purposes for which language is used. Second, learning activities move from whole to part, rather than from part to whole. For example, students might read a whole article rather than part of it or an adapted version of it. Third, all four modes of language are used, thus lessons include all four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing, rather than a single skill. Fourth, language is learned through social interaction with others, hence students often work in pairs or groups instead of individually.

## **2.3 Theory of Language and Learning by Whole Language**

By Whole Language approach, theory of language goes, language is always seen as something that is used for meaningful purposes and to carry out authentic functions. Here, authenticity is heavily emphasized. Sociolinguistically, it views language as a vehicle for human communication and in which there is an interactional relationship between readers and writers; Psycho-linguistically, it views language as a vehicle for internal interaction, for egocentric speech, for thinking.

Theory of learning goes, For humanistic school, Whole Language is said to be authentic, personalized, self-directed, collaborative and pluralistic. Then learner's attention and mastery are focused and motivated. For constructivist school, knowledge is socially constructed and learners create meaning, learn by doing and work collaboratively in mixed groups on common projects. Teachers collaborate with the students to create knowledge and understanding in their mutual social context. Learning focuses on the learners' experiences, needs, interests and aspirations.

## **3. The Application of Whole Language**

As a language teaching method, Whole Language approach is not only a movement aims to improve students' language ability, but what is more important, the aim of the application of Whole Language is to enhance students' activity and participation during language study. Thus the real significance of language learning is strengthened through the application of Whole Language, in which authenticity and holism is penetrated.

### **3.1 Five "Wholes" During Whole Language Application**

During Whole Language application, it advocated a harmonious relationship among all the elements. As we have already discussed in section 2.0, the theory of Whole Language is emphasized on the term "whole". To realize this, Whole Language approach focuses on the five "wholes": whole-learner, whole-skill, whole-method, whole-environment and whole-teacher.

"Whole-learner"— Whole Language advocates the essence of human-beings and claims that the dissimilarities between students' characters should be respected. At the same time, all the aspects, such as students' needs, interests, psychological states and features of their physical development, should be fully considered. During Whole Language application, teachers should understand thoroughly about students' purposes and willingness of learning English, the process of learning should be paid careful attention. Thus, the conversion from teacher-centered to learner-centered is realized successfully. About this learner-centered approach, it has a belief that attention to the nature of learners should be central to all aspects of language teaching, including planning teaching and education. Learning is dependent upon the nature and will of the learners. "whole-learner" principle also emphasizes that the teaching process should face to all the students rather than only the top students or some of them. Respect should be shown to each of them. Learner can be the organizer of some activities, be the holder of some discussions; learner can also introduce his or her own study

experience.

“Whole skill”— Many aspects of language learning are traditionally regarded as the learn of skills, such as learn to speak, or read fluently. The syllabus of English teaching in middle school point out that, listening, speaking, reading and writing are integrated as language skills. They closely relate to each other and promote the development of each other. However, most of the English teachers usually teach the four skills separately and strengthen only one of them, thus there always no sound effects. From objective analysis, these four skills are the “language walls” which constitute students’ entire ability of language learning. The integrated ability can be constructed only when these four “walls” are combined organically. Just one “wall” can not be regarded as the final purpose for EFL teaching. Then, comes the requirement for teachers: During the teaching process, these four skills should be used as a whole, in order to realize the conversion from centering on teaching students knowledge or separate skills to centering on cultivating students multiple abilities. To practice “whole skill”, the text books or materials for students should be reformed, that means, information of the text should be an entire one. Students should be taught the whole text first then the separate words or phrases, rather than vice versa.

“Whole method”— Obviously, “method” here is emphasized on the teaching method but not the studying method. For example, there are many different methods of language teaching such as direct method, the audiolingual method, total physical response, etc. For “whole Language” approach, it emphasizes that the selection of certain teaching method should consider first about some objective situations, such as what kinds of classes and learners he or she is teaching and what kinds of contents should be taught. A successful language teacher should master proficiently various methods which are practical and effective. Therefore, these methods can be in their full play under changeable situations and different teaching processes. In the history of ESL teaching, many prior educators has discovered or innovated kinds of teaching theories and methods, among which “Whole Language” guides us that teachers should audaciously apply the advanced and effective methods to teaching process. But “Whole method” doesn’t mean apply all the methods at the same time but means apply the advanced aspects while avoid the disadvantaged ones. That means best selection should be made under different concrete situations.

“Whole Environment”— According to Whole Language theory, the process of habit-forming and developing of language skill is an interaction process between language itself and social environment. Therefore, ESL teachers should on one side focus on the role of school class as the main battlefield, on the other side, teachers ought to try every effort to create a broader and wider study space. Language study activities after class can be organized by various forms with different levels, such as speech competition, English blackboard newspaper, English party, English corner and English broadcasting, etc. With the implement of our China’s “opening policy”, the chance of learning and practicing English is here and there ranging from family life to social activity. Therefore, teachers have to encourage the students have an “Always-ready” consciousness which can help them understand, receive and use various stimulate of English information and can help them learn English at any place at any time. For example, students can make full use of the English TV and movie, English direction or introduction for the electronic production, English journals and magazines and even the English signals on the street— All these can be regarded as authentic materials for study. So teachers ought to encourage the students to be a sensitive person and let them know “pay attention to the details and small things around you as knowledge is existing everywhere”.

“Whole teacher”— Some methods are totally dependent on the teacher as a source of knowledge and direction; others see teacher as catalyst, consultant, guide, and model for learning. According to Whole Language theory, teachers should not only possess high moral quality which can set examples for the students but also possess various kinds of knowledge and capacity. First, in order to master advanced information and skills, teachers have to study continuously, thus their knowledge can go ahead of the students; second, teachers should improve their process. “Whole teacher” doesn’t require an omniscient teacher but require the teachers drop off their authority. Teachers study together with the students and be their friends in daily life while in studying, be their

company and try to give them a thoroughly help. Substantially, “whole teacher” requires the educator be familiar with the features and regular patterns about language teaching. They should be open-minded, have dispersed thought and can manage various effective methods. What is more, they should not look down upon or reject any kind of a method. They should adopt and accept good ideas extensively, improve their teaching method continuously and enrich their teaching art.

### **3.2 Procedure of Whole Language Application in Class**

The procedure of Whole Language is not fixed, it depends. That means, it depends on the teacher’s interpretation and the kinds of classes and learners he or she is teaching. Each language teacher is free to implement the approach according to the needs of particular classes. There are only four features that are a little more common: the use of literature (most distinguishable feature); the use of process writing; encouragement of cooperative learning among students; concern for students’ attitude. However, the author here is going to introduce roughly about the procedure in a middle school class and there are five steps.

The first step is activity before class. This procedure contains activities such as make a “on- duty” reports, sing English songs, tell English stories, etc. Teachers can do the selection then arrange or make up their selection according to different situations.

The second step is dialogue performance. This dialogue performance mainly relates to the content which is going to be studied but the content which has already been studied before can also be inserted. Two or three groups should get prepared before class and the students themselves be the director and actor/actress, teachers should give them positive evaluation and encourage them in time.

The third step is discussion on problems. Discussion on problems refers to firstly, students discover problems or questions during their self-study process (for example, preview process), secondly, through a group discussion over these questions, all might be solved. Teachers should give a praise while students’ views are correct, give a supplement while their views are not complete, but never criticize them while correct their mistakes.

The fourth step is explanation briefly. While explain something during class, teachers should mainly explain the questions which are the most frequent and common ones during the group discussion. Teachers should point out the most difficult point and explain in detail, they should save enough time for students to do practice at class time.

The fifth and the last step is feedback to students’ works. During this procedure, some certain tasks should be given first, and the students are required to finish these tasks within some certain time. Then, teachers do further works according to the results of students’ exercises.

## **4. Conclusion**

Whole Language, as a language teaching approach, it can not only promote students’ language abilities but can also demonstrate the real meaning of language study through an authentic and holistic teaching application. Thus, students’ activity and participation are greatly improved. Nowadays, Our China is carrying out her reformation on teaching approach, and the reform of teaching approach should firstly renew the teaching conception. ESL teaching reformation need Whole Language theory. However, in China, Whole Language approach is a relatively new approach, especially in the inner continent. Therefore, although this paper is not a perfect one it has some usefulness for the educators in China to do further research and experiment on Whole Language.

## **References**

- [1] Brown, H. D. *Teaching by Principles: An Interactive Approach to Language Pedagogy* [M]. BeiJing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 1994.
- [2] Richards, J. C.& T. S. Rodgers. *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching*[M]. BeiJing:

Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2005.

- [3] Richards, J. C. et.al. Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching[Z]. BeiJing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press,2005.
- [4] Stern, H. H. Fundamental Concepts of Language Teaching [M]. ShangHai: Foreign Language Teaching Press, 1997.