

Implication of Immersion Education for Language Learning in China

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ABSTRACT

The importance of English in the international community results in ways of improving the English level in non-English speaking country. Immersion education has developed for years and achieved great success. However, the current immersion model is not mature and adequate for English teaching in China. Therefore, this paper introduces immersion education from how it fits in the principle of Language learning and in which ways it can improve the situation of English teaching and learning in China. The findings revealed that through using the experience of this teaching model, quality of English education in China can be improved by creating language environment, changing teaching subjects and introducing local textbooks, etc.

Keywords: *Immersion, age, second language acquisition, English teaching, China.*

1. INTRODUCTION

English is compulsory subject but students' English level is just passable. In Chinese primary and junior high school, most children begin to learn at a very young age, some even are exposed to English in the period of kindergarten. However, according to Wang's report [1], more than half of the parents found their children's English scores unsatisfied, data shows that The English proficiency of Chinese students ranks 48th among 52 countries [2]. But parents do not know how to change this situation and arbitrarily think that children need to first make up for English learning interest, and then improve the comprehensive development of listening, speaking, reading and writing. Additionally, the English education in China, to a large extent, is exam-oriented, hence the methods of teaching are worrisome. Under the guidance of long-term exam-oriented education, some teachers' teaching concept of "only focus on scores" has not been changed, and the cramming method is still prevalent in English teaching. To cope with the great pressure of heavy schoolwork, like tedious grammar and abundant words, most students just learn and memorize them mechanically by rote without any comprehension. This method not only takes a lot of time and energy but also leads to boredom and impatience, gradually students will lose their confidence and motivation for English. Thirdly, age is an essential factor in bilingual education. According to the Critical Period Hypothesis, there is a

period in a person's life (birth to age 12) when language can be acquired naturally and effortlessly [3]. It can be inferred that the plasticity of the brain before puberty makes it easier for children and adolescents to acquire a second language.

Therefore, many researchers and practitioners are desired to find out the solutions to ease the learning difficulties. Among the potential solution, immersion education is receiving more attention.

Gu [4] considers situational teaching methods have a unique role in cultivating students' skills. Zhao [5] holds teachers can use game-based teaching strategies to enable students to better learn English knowledge in the process of participating in games. Xue [6] believes that teachers should build an immersive teaching environment, with a coherent, holistic and authentic language situation throughout the class, creating an immersive classroom atmosphere, stimulating students' emotional experience and learning enthusiasm, and enabling students to participate in English learning with great interest. Among the approaches mentioned above, immersion teaching receive increasing attention by stimulating learners' interest in learning [7].

Immersion education refers to the basic teaching mode using the second language as the direct language of instruction, emphasizing the creation of a foreign language learning environment and regards foreign language as a learning tool rather than just a learning

purpose. This language teaching model is different from the traditional second language acquisition model with skill training as its core in the following two aspects. First, target language is no longer an independent subject, but a tool for teaching other subjects. Second, the improvement of language ability and the study of subject content should be carried out simultaneously. Immersion realizes the transformation from isolated and single foreign language teaching to the teaching mode of combining foreign language with different subject knowledge, providing a natural language environment for students to learn and use the new target language.

Though typologies and models of immersion derived from North American and European contexts can be regarded as well-established, they cannot be readily adopted to many other parts of the world. Yet, some researchers expressed concerns about immersion education in China, including lack of willingness on the part of English immersion students to communicate in English outside of the classroom [8], lack of adequate teaching purpose and mode that suits immersion teaching, and lack of appropriate curriculum resources and materials [9]. To improve the integration of immersion education in English learning in China, this paper aims to state how immersion education help young EFL learners master English with high efficiency and naturally, simultaneously comparing the traditional English teaching method, and give suggestions to apply immersion education more practically.

2. LANGUAGE LEARNING

2.1 Principles

Language is an advanced function unique to the human brain. Humans can learn and master other languages according to their own needs while learning and mastering their mother tongue normally [10]. The process of learning any language in the world should be the same, whether it is the mother tongue or the target language. Physically, people can learn any known language in the world, including pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar, and even the way of thinking behind the language. Since mother tongue is the first language to be mastered in one's life and is a reproducible language learning experience, one naturally imitates the learning pattern of mother tongue to learn the target language. In order to process speech information accurately and quickly, the brain needs a lot of stimulation of the speech of the target language. Just like the acquisition of mother tongue, the neural connections for processing the speech of the target language in the brain are constantly strengthened.

2.2 Current Issues

English learning is still concerning for elementary

school students. Wang's [1] research shows that more than half of the parents found their children's English scores unsatisfied, but do not know how to change this situation.

The traditional teaching method ignores the students' dominant position, and pays too much attention to the form of language expression but neglects its function. Under such method, teacher's explanation takes up most of the class time, and students have few practice opportunities, which makes students become passive receivers of language knowledge, relying too much on teachers' explanation, and gradually lose the ability to think, question and innovate, resulting in strong test-taking skills, but low communicative quality. Furthermore, The English education in China, to a large extent, is exam-oriented, hence the methods of teaching are worrisome. Under the guidance of long-term exam-oriented education, some teachers' teaching concept of "only focus on scores" has not been changed, and the cramming method is still prevalent in English teaching. To cope with the great pressure of heavy schoolwork, like tedious grammar and abundant words, most students just learn and memorize them mechanically by rote without any comprehension. This method not only takes a lot of time and energy but also leads to boredom and impatience, gradually students will lose their confidence and motivation for English.

3. THE INFLUENCE OF AGE ON SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING

According to the Critical Period Hypothesis, there is a period in a person's life (birth to age 12) when language can be acquired naturally and effortlessly [11]. It can be inferred that the plasticity of the brain before puberty makes it easier for children and adolescents to acquire a second language. Brain development, cognitive ability and emotional factors are the three main factors affecting second language acquisition [12]. Age factors are closely related to second language acquisition, i.e phonological acquisition, grammar acquisition, lexical and nomenclature acquisition and the learner's conversational proficiency. Further, children's cognitive level is still at the stage of development where they are completely "self-centered" in language acquisition and rarely affected by emotional factors, and sometimes even do not realize that they are learning a language, and this "unconsciousness" is the prerequisite for second language acquisition. Additionally, with the increase of age, people have richer emotions, simultaneously the influence of the emotional factors is greater in the second language acquisition. It has been found that the attitude towards second language acquisition develops negatively with the increase of age [3]. Hence, it is essential to seize this critical period to provide a solid foundation of English learning for children.

4. IMMERSION EDUCATION

4.1 Definition and Features

Immersion teaching method refers to the basic teaching mode using the second language as the direct language of instruction, emphasizing the creation of a foreign language learning environment and regards foreign language as a learning tool rather than just a learning purpose. The most basic theoretical principles of immersion teaching come from the latest theories of language learning and acquisition that emerged in the 1960s, such as Klaassen's theory of language acquisition. The main principle is that the second language to be learned is used as a tool for learning other subjects, and the acquisition of second language is the principle to understand the concomitant product of the information and content of these disciplines, that is, an implicit way of obtaining non-verbal formal direction (non-purposeful). Therefore, the teaching method emphasizes the importance of using implicit cognitive mechanisms to help learners master the target language through a wide range of comprehensible inputs and outputs, and develop a variety of second language learning programs to improve the quality of second language learning individually.

This language teaching model is different from the traditional second language acquisition models in the following two aspects. First, target language is no longer an independent subject, but a tool for teaching other subjects. Second, the improvement of language ability and the study of subject content should be carried out simultaneously. Immersion teaching method realizes the transformation from isolated foreign language teaching to the teaching mode of combining foreign language with different subject knowledge, providing a broad and rich natural language environment for students to learn and use the new target language.

4.2 Trend of Development

Immersion foreign language teaching originated in Canada, and has been used for reference by the United States, Australia, the Netherlands, Singapore and other countries with good results. Immersion foreign language teaching has various forms. According to the starting time, it can be divided into early immersion, that is, the target foreign language is taught entirely or at least 80% of the time from the beginning of primary school to the fourth grade of primary school. Middle immersion, that is, from the fourth grade to the end of primary school, teaching all subjects in the target foreign language; Advanced immersion, that is, learning a foreign language starting in seventh grade learning. Immersion foreign language teaching can also be divided into fully immersion foreign language teaching and partially immersion foreign language teaching according to the proportion of target

foreign language use. Research and evaluation results consistently show that students' second language competence, mother tongue competence, and academic performance through immersion teaching are significantly higher than those of students trained in other traditional foreign language teaching modes. Immersed children have strong cultural sensitivity and show positive attitude and understanding of other cultures. In the process of learning, students not only need to establish the symbol system of the second language, but also need to establish the symbol system between the two languages through frequent and rapid language conversion. The mental agility, comprehension and judgment of immersion students are significantly better than those of monolingual students. A large number of experiments have proved that immersion teaching method can fully achieve the purpose of traditional teaching, and students' interest and language sense to the target language are better than those who adopt traditional teaching methods [13]. Though research in North American and European are rich and well-established, the successful application cannot be readily adopted to many other parts of the world. Some researchers expressed concerns about immersion education in China, including lack of willingness on the part of English immersion students to communicate in English outside of the classroom, [8] lack of adequate teaching purpose and mode that suits immersion teaching, and lack of appropriate curriculum resources and materials [9].

5. THE ENLIGHTENMENT OF IMMERSION EDUCATION TO ENGLISH TEACHING IN CHINA

In China, the research of immersion teaching has just started and is still a brand new subject. In 1997, Qiang started English immersion teaching in six kindergartens in Xi 'an, aiming to teach various subjects in English. Through one year's study, students' English listening and speaking ability has been greatly improved. The success of this teaching model has given other schools great inspiration. The following year, several primary schools in Xi 'an also introduced English immersion. Soon, Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Wuhan and other places have also carried out English immersion teaching [14]. The following paragraphs are going to illustrate some strategies for improving immersion so that it can better fit in the current situations and produce the best possible results.

5.1 Creating an English-rich Learning Environment.

The concept of immersion bilingual education in The University of Ottawa provides useful inspiration for the creation of English teaching environment in China. From the macro perspective, the achievement of immersion

bilingual education in The University of Ottawa is attributed to Canada's social environment and language policy. From the micro aspect, English and French are widely used in the campus of the University of Ottawa. Both languages can be seen in the administrative service institutions, classrooms and living areas of the university [11]. Therefore, in China, schools can increase the scope and strength of using Chinese and English simultaneously according to their specific situations, creating a bilingual learning environment, in order to increase students' language input. At the same time, students should be given more opportunities to use both Chinese and English to form language output, internalizing the language knowledge intaken and develop practical English language skills.

5.2 Prioritizing Students' Application Skills

A former deputy prime minister once pointed out that "a lot of students have learned English for eight to twelve years, but most students can't be able to read original books skillfully, some even can't understand, and find it difficult to communicate directly with foreigners. This shows that China's English teaching effect is not ideal, also cannot adapt to the national economy and social development [15]. Therefore, in the formulation of English teaching objectives, the cultivation of students' English application ability should be put in the first place, so that students can effectively use English to communicate in the future work and life.

5.3 Student-centered Teaching Mode.

At present, there are many phenomena in teaching, such as attaching importance to exam-oriented, neglecting quality, emphasizing form, neglecting cultural introduction and consciousness cultivation. Teachers often give priority to teaching, and the outdated teaching guiding ideology and concepts make teaching inefficiency. While immersion education at the University of Ottawa focuses more on students' language, cognition and emotion [11]. Therefore, in elementary schools the teaching should mostly concentrate on student individuals, fully mobilize students' interest and motivation in learning, so that they become self-conscious learners and actively explore relevant subject knowledge, thus improve their cognitive ability, thinking level and language skill.

5.4 Updating Teaching Materials

For a long time, most college English textbooks in China have been cut, processed or annotated in detail, which makes Chinese students stay in the level of language learning reading, but not in the level of language application reading. Immersion teaching is best to use the original textbooks of various subjects in English-speaking countries. These textbooks cover a

wide range of topics, such as history, geography, politics, economy, religion and festivals of English-speaking countries. The language is pure, close to life, readable and practical [13]. Hence it is critical to import original textbooks into elementary schools to ensure the development of immersion education.

6. CONCLUSION

This paper first introduces language learning principle and current issues of English teaching in China, then elaborates the immersion education model from its definition, features, and development. It further makes some suggestions to integrate western education model in Chinese elementary school context. Immersion education model not only teaches students a foreign language with high efficiency, but also gives them opportunities to get educated in terms of affect, attitude, values and intercultural awareness. Immersion education model in Canada and the United States has been very successful and gained a lot of valuable experience and China can learn lessons from them. However, this teaching model is not mature in China yet, the effect in the implementation process is not ideal and there are several problems to be solved.

For further study, Xu [16] proposed—to cancel the status of English as a major subject in primary and secondary schools, and no longer set English as a compulsory subject in the college entrance examination. This proposal aims to energetically implement well-rounded education instead of denying the importance of learning English. It can be reasonably believed that English education will not be exam-oriented in the future. To put it further, developing students' interests and enthusiasm for English learning should be emphasized in order to cultivate qualified citizen who can really use English.

Here are some suggestions to localize immersion education in China. First, schools can increase the scope and strength of using Chinese and English according to their specific situations, creating a bilingual learning environment. Second, change the English teaching goals from getting high scores in exams to cultivate students' English application ability. Third, the teaching mode should be changed from teacher-oriented to student-oriented, with teachers paying more attention to students' language skills, cognition and emotion in class and fully arousing students' interest and motivation in learning, so that they become self-conscious learners and gain English naturally. Forth, import English-speaking textbooks into China, whose content are extensive, covering history, geography, politics, economy, religion, festivals and other aspects of English-speaking countries, and the language is pure, close to life, readable and practical. Hopefully, more and more people can join in the research of this topic, forming a set of immersion teaching theories with Chinese characteristics to guide

teaching practice and bring English education to a new level through constant exploration.

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