



Problems in English Education Under the No Child Left Behind Act

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Abstract. The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act exhibits three potential problems in English education in the U.S. from the perspectives of both students and teachers. Firstly, NCLB reduces English language learners' (ELLs) motivation to learn English because of the tedious learning environment. Under NCLB, according to the state's requirement of ELLs' academic performance, English teachers have to input knowledge to ELLs in a traditional way, such as rote memorization, instead of spending time using some enlightening language learning strategies. Secondly, NCLB may ignore to cultivate ELLs' critical thinking during learning English. In order to avoid receiving federal sanctions, English educators may solely focus on ELLs' academic development. However, for ELLs, the understanding of the U.S. cultures is very important, which is helpful to cultivate critical thinking through the comparison between the U.S. cultures and their own cultures. Moreover, except for ELLs, NCLB damages English teachers' passion for English education. According to the state's requirement, teachers have few chances to show their personal identity through their unique teaching style. Under NCLB, the curriculum has to be narrowed down because the target of each teacher is to help students pass the state test. Meanwhile, each teacher under NCLB faces a risk of low salaries because NCLB requires that teachers' salary is tied to students' performance.

Keywords: NCLB · English education · motivation · critical thinking · passion

1 Introduction

There is a general trend that many states have given increasing intervention to education through issuing some educational policies, acts, or guidance, which reflects that the role of government is reinforced in the educational system. A typical example of this trend is the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act in America. The NCLB Act, one federal educational law, was signed by President George W. Bush on January 8, 2002 [1]. NCLB forces all students in the United States, including English Language Learners (ELLs), to meet national standards in the proficiency of language arts and mathematics [2]. The U.S. intends to promote students' academic performance by developing some performance standards under NCLB. No matter what kinds of law or policy the state issues, the common goal is to facilitate children's education and reduce the educational gap.

Among the student population covered by NCLB, English Language learners are deeply impacted. According to economic and geographic factors, the United States is a country with different languages and cultures and is composed of immigrants from nearby countries [3]. From 1970 to 2019, the number of immigrants grew from 9,619,300 to 44,932,900, and the percentage of immigrants increased from 4.7% to 13.7% [4]. To live better in the United States, these immigrant children, who are identified as limited-English proficient students, need to learn English. Therefore, ELLs are the increasing population in the United States [5]. The number of ELL students in U.S. K-12 public schools has increased by 95% from 1991 to 2002 [6]. After considering this situation, the government of the United States formulated Title III in the NCLB Act. Title III of NCLB is aimed to help limited-English proficient students, including some immigrant children, to attain basic English proficiency and academic content.

To some extent, it is effective for ELLs to have an improvement in accumulating English academic knowledge under Title III of NCLB, which refers to some language instructions for Limited-English proficient and immigrant students [7]. For example, Title III requires that each state needs to establish English Language Proficiency (ELP) standard and relates these standards to the state's academic standards [7]. It is helpful for ELLs to improve their proficiency level in English within a short time, such as promoting the ability of reading, enlarging English vocabulary, and mastering English grammar rules. Meanwhile, NCLB Title III requires making an assessment of the English proficiency of each ELL annually [8]. According to the results of the assessment, it is beneficial for ELLs to have a basic understanding of their English learning and make some adjustments for their next English learning strategies. Therefore, under NCLB Title III, ELLs can promote proficiency levels in English within a short time effectively.

However, everything does have two sides. It is inevitable that some policies and laws have some disadvantages. With the popularity of NCLB in the United States, some potential problems exist. The U.S. schools would possibly face some federally mandated sanctions [9]. If one school cannot meet the state's achievement targets or fails to make adequate yearly progress (AYP) for more than two years, this school would get sanctions from the state, like closing the school or turning the school into a charter school [1]. NCLB determines whether schools make progress mainly by students' test scores [10]. In terms of English education, the sanctions in NCLB force English educators to instruct only on academic language in the test for avoiding the federal sanctions on school. In order to meet the standards, it is possible for ELLs to have tedious English classes, such as just remembering English vocabulary and English grammar rules every day through lots of exercises, instead of having the classes with some interesting activities to comprehend English effectively and practically. It is adverse for ELLs to enhance their interests and passion for learning English by taking this kind of daily unattractive English class. Meanwhile, to make sure students' academic performance in the assessment, English educators would ignore teaching some cultures in the United States because, in the assessment, cultures are not the key elements. However, the ignorance of cultural education may impede the ELLs' development of critical thinking. Moreover, under NCLB, teachers would feel pressured because they have to narrow the curriculum and make effort to help students pass the test, which leads to the loss of teachers' unique personal

identities [3]. Based on the above discussion, the shortcomings of NCLB can negatively affect many aspects of ELLs. However, there is little research that systematically analyzes these deficiencies. Therefore, this paper aims to formulate and analyze some potential problems in English education under NCLB, which can provide inspiration for some improvements in English education that depends on the test scores. Among the above-discussed deficiencies in English teaching under NCLB, three most typical ones are selected for discussion in this paper: (1) hindrance to students' motivation in learning English, (2) ignorance of cultivating students' critical thinking during learning English, and (3) the damage to teachers' passion for English teaching.

2 Three Problems in English Teaching Under NCLB

2.1 The Loss of Motivation in Learning English

Motivation is an internal state that stimulates, guides, and sustains human behaviors [11]. In order to achieve or finish something, motivation will give a direction to make and keep an effort. Meanwhile, motivation is impacted by internal factors, such as people's internal needs, cognition, and affect, and by external factors, such as learning environments or teachers' instructional strategies [11]. In education, students' motivation can be assessed by observing students' academic performance. For example, one student who has a high motivation to study will perform actively and have great achievement. Oppositely, the student with the least motivation will be not interested in learning. When it comes to English education, for most students, English learning is difficult and tedious because, in order to promote English proficiency level, students have to enlarge their vocabulary through reciting and need to master English grammar through oral and written practices. Therefore, in order to improve the quality of English education, it is essential to enhance students' motivation for learning.

However, NCLB has a negative effect on stimulating ELLs motivation. NCLB focuses highly on testing as an assessment and a way to increase students' academic performance by rewarding funding to the schools in which students meet the state's targets and proposing sanctions to the schools whose students do not meet the goals [5]. The standard for whether one school will receive federal sanctions is based on whether the school makes AYP [1]. If schools fail to meet the AYP standard, it is possible for these schools to be taken over by the state or to be required to dismiss staff [12]. In the aspect of English education, as mentioned in Title III of NCLB, each state formulates its own ELP Standard [7]. If ELLs in one school cannot meet the ELP standard, this school may receive those federal sanctions mentioned above. To help schools not be penalized with those federal sanctions, it is possible for English teachers to input academic content in a short time. In other words, ELLs face heavy academic knowledge in a tedious English class and homework in reciting English vocabulary and grammar rules, which is disadvantageous for ELLs to achieve high motivation in learning English.

The adverse impact on ELLs motivation is especially true for ELLs from low-income families because, according to their economic backgrounds, it is possible for them to choose schools with low resources [13]. It is hard for low-resourced schools to create a good learning environment, which is the external factor for students' motivation. Unlike some schools with multimedia support, low-resourced schools cannot provide effective

teaching tools. In the low-resourced schools, many teachers can just apply the teaching style of rote-learning which means teaching English by solely using textbooks, instead of using interesting pictures or videos that can attract ELLs' attention and arouse their motivation in learning English. Meanwhile, it is possible that the low-resourced schools cannot be equipped with high-qualified English teachers because of their lack of funds. However, high-qualified teachers master some effective instructional strategies that can motivate students to learn English, such as focusing on differentiated instruction which refers to a teaching approach that educators give instruction according to students' different learning needs and talents. However, as mentioned above, in order to ensure ELLs in school meet the ELP standard, teachers in the low-resourced schools prefer to use the tedious teaching style to input knowledge in a short time. In fact, under NCLB, ELL students in the low-resourced schools have more anxiety about learning English than other ELL students because they lack media support and systematic instructional strategies but need to finish overwhelming academic work. Therefore, it is adverse for ELLs, especially from low-income families, to enhance their motivation in English learning at the age of NCLB.

2.2 The Ignorance of Cultivating Critical Thinking During Learning English

With the development of globalization in the 21st century, it is inevitable for individuals to exist in a society with much information from different media, such as newspapers, the internet, or daily communication. In order to adapt to this kind of society, it is necessary for individuals to develop their critical thinking. Critical thinking refers to a mode of thinking in which thinkers can systematically analyze, evaluate, and reconstruct any problem or subject [14]. To live in the information age, individuals must master the ability to find problems, gather related information, distinguish reliable information, and apply new information in different circumstances [15]. Therefore, the significant goal of education is to cultivate and develop students' critical thinking, which is beneficial for students to adapt to the informational era.

Education is a complicated activity that includes teacher-student interaction, academic knowledge, different characteristics of students, learning resources, and context. When it comes to an English lesson, regardless of English vocabulary and grammar, it may also contain some different cultures of English-speaking nations. A typical example is the English programs in the United States. According to the immigrants from different countries, it is possible that there are different cultural backgrounds in an English class at the same time. Under this kind of situation, critical thinking is the core skill for ELLs in the United States because they can discover why they learn English, set their own goals for English learning based on their own needs and talents, and regulate their own behaviors during English learning [16]. For instance, one ELL student who masters critical thinking can systematically make a study plan about English learning based on his/her ability, apply English to daily communication, and make comparisons between home culture and the United States' culture. Therefore, it is essential for English teachers to cultivate ELLs critical thinking during English education.

Unfortunately, the NCLB might lead to ignoring the cultivation of ELLs critical thinking. As regulated in the Title III of NCLB, in order to avoid receiving federal sanctions, educators may focus on teaching test items to make sure ELLs pass the test

and meet the ELP standards. In this situation, educators might just teach what would be assessed by the state and ignore to develop ELLs fluency and cultivate students' critical thinking, such as how to apply English in daily communication, make comparisons between their cultural backgrounds, and make connections between English and other subjects [5]. To some extent, the ignorance of cultivating ELLs critical thinking under NCLB reflects the violation of the World-Readiness Standards in Learning Language, which is known as the Five C's Goals: 'Communication', 'Cultures', 'Connections', 'Comparisons', and 'Communities' [17].

In fact, there is a difference between daily interpersonal communication skills and academic English knowledge [8]. It is possible that some ELLs have high scores on federal English tests but lack the ability to communicate with others in English in daily life, which is evidence that ELLs in the age of NCLB face the risk of violating the 'Communication' in the above national standard. Meanwhile, in order to input all test items in class, educators may solely teach English academic knowledge in the form of lectures, instead of making the interaction and communication with ELLs in class, which is adverse to students' improvement of communicational skills. The lack of communication impedes ELL students' development of critical thinking because it is hard for them to apply English to practical communication without conducting any teacher-student interpersonal interaction in an English class. Moreover, under NCLB, most educators aim to just ensure to meet the federal-regulated standard of achievement in students' academic knowledge, such as by forcing ELLs to remember English vocabulary or grammar rules as much as possible. However, it is possible for educators to ignore giving some instructions about some cultures in the U.S., which is helpful for ELLs, especially immigrants from different cultures, to integrate into the society well. According to the lack of cultural instructions, ELLs have few opportunities to make the comparison between cultures in the U.S. and their home cultures, which is against the 'Culture' and 'Comparison' in the above world standard. Therefore, under NCLB, for ELLs, one negative effect on critical thinking development is the potential few opportunities to be provided communication skills and the lack of communication with educators, which leads to ELLs' low ability to apply English in daily communication. Another negative effect on critical thinking development is the ignorance of U.S. cultural instruction because of the federal sanctions on schools, which it is hard for English learners to improve their critical thinking by analyzing and evaluating U.S. cultures.

2.3 The Lack of Passion for Teaching English

Education is a complex interpersonal interaction in school that is affected by many factors, such as students' different characteristics, teachers' personal identities, or educational resources. In schooling, teachers are the main group of people who interact with students. Therefore, besides students' motivation, teachers' passion for teaching is also the core of effective education. Passionate teachers refer to those who are enthusiastic, committed, and positive to work with students [18]. Teacher with a passion for teaching are willing to devote himself/herself to providing effective and creatively learning resources for students and is excited to exploit students' potential [19]. Meanwhile, passionate teachers understand that it is their responsibility to improve students' academic achievement and create a positive environment for students' psychology. Therefore, in

schooling, a passionate teacher can facilitate students' academic development and give students encouragement, which improves students' motivation.

When it comes to English education, passionate English teachers are willing to make research on different kinds of teaching strategies that are beneficial for students' effective English learning. For example, as mentioned above discussion, it is necessary for ELLs in the United States to have an understanding of the U.S. culture because it is helpful for these ELLs to integrate into the U.S. In fact, teaching cultures in schooling is difficult for teachers because teachers need to guide students to understand cultures through English learning, instead of just telling students what the U.S. culture is. Therefore, passionate teachers will research what kind of teaching strategy is effective for students to comprehend the cultures. In terms of teaching cultures, the IMAGE Model for Exploring Cultural Perspectives refers to one approach to teaching cultures [20]. The IMAGE includes four steps in a cultural lesson: Image & Make observation; Analyze additional information; Generate hypotheses about cultural perspective; Explore perspectives and reflect further [20]. In the IMAGE cultural lesson, students can comprehend the target language cultures effectively and clearly through their own observations and analysis. Therefore, it is important for ELLs to be guided by teachers with passions.

However, NCLB hinders the development of English teachers' passion because teachers lack the opportunities to express personal identities and face the risk of unemployment. As mentioned in NCLB, if students in one school cannot pass the standardized test, this school will receive federal sanctions, such as shutting down schools or dismissing staff in this school. In an effort to avoid the federally mandated sanctions and help students to have high scores on the required test, teachers are forced to teach to the test and narrow down their curriculums [3]. Meanwhile, it is inevitable that teachers' personal identities are eroded because of the tedious curriculum. During the teaching-to-the-test education, it is highly possible for teachers to neglect students' needs and strengths because according to the test, teachers have no time to provide effective and creative English classes and just bore themselves and students with lots of practice [10]. Furthermore, under NCLB, educators' salaries are tied to their student's performance, instead of their efforts in education. That means it is possible that teachers' returns may be out of proportion with their efforts. This disproportionate assessment may discourage those word-hard teachers' passion [10]. For example, it is unavoidable that there are some students whose parents neglect the importance of education in a school. Based on this situation, no matter how much effort teachers in this school make, these students still cannot meet the state standard. Therefore, teachers in this school may lose their passion for being a teacher and even make a resignation from this job. Under this kind of circumstance, the U.S. government may face the risk of a declining number of teachers. In fact, after NCLB is signed, there is a decline in the number of teachers in elementary and secondary schools. As National Center for Education Statistics (2004) researched that in 2001, there was a total of 3388 educators in elementary and secondary schools, but, in March 2002, the time after NCLB was signed, the number of teachers in these schools declined to 3369. Therefore, NCLB damages teachers' passion for teaching and leads to a decline in the number of U.S. teachers.

3 Conclusion

To some extent, under NCLB, the development of both students and teachers can be impeded because of the emphasis on students' academic performance. In the U.S., the increase in immigrants leads to a large proportion of English language learners. Therefore, NCLB has some effects on English language learners. Firstly, NCLB has an adverse impact on students' motivation in learning English, especially for those students from low-income families. According to the high emphasis on students' grades and academic performance, in order to avoid receiving federal sanctions, teachers in school have to input an amount of knowledge tediously in a short time, which is highly possible for students to lose focus on what teachers said. However, for those students from low-income families, it is possible that the school they choose provides low resources for them. Then, their learning environment is more boring than others. Therefore, if students are in a tedious learning environment for a long time, they will lose their motivation for learning English. Secondly, NCLB hinders English language learners' development of critical thinking. For students, the cultivation of critical thinking is vital, especially for language learners, because, during language learning, students need to have the ability to make comparisons between target-language cultures and home cultures. However, under NCLB, in order to make sure all students pass the state test, English teachers may just focus on teaching test items, but ignore introducing some cultures in the U.S. Therefore, English learners have no opportunity to develop critical thinking by making comparisons between the U.S. cultures and their own cultures. Meanwhile, it is advantageous for the immigrants in the U.S. to integrate into the society because of the ignorance of introducing to the U.S. cultures. Thirdly, besides the hindrance to students' development, teachers' passion may be decreased under NCLB. According to the state's requirement for academic knowledge and the high risk of receiving federal sanctions, under NCLB, teachers have to narrow down their content of teaching and teach to the test, which leads to the low opportunity for teachers to show their personal identities and lose their passion to education. Meanwhile, under NCLB, teachers' salaries are bound to students' performance. Then, teachers may face a risk of unequal income, which damages teachers' passion.

Besides the above discussion, this article has some deficiencies. This article just focuses on analyzing some problems that NCLB exists in English education from the perspectives of students and teachers. When it comes to the topic of education, parental involvement also plays an important role in children's education. Nevertheless, this article does not mention the problem of parental involvement under NCLB. Therefore, future research can focus on the parents under NCLB, such as how parents can participate in children's education under NCLB or some problems existing in parental involvement under NCLB. In addition, NCLB is a law that forces students to meet the standards in the aspects of language arts and math, instead of just English education. Therefore, future research can focus on some problems existing in other language education or mathematics education, and even on concluding some benefits of English education under NCLB.

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