



The Interaction Between Classical Chinese Learning and English Learning in Middle School Teaching: Theoretical Bases, Applications and Challenges

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Abstract. For Chinese students, Classical Chinese and English are not only the two languages they must learn in middle school, but also the difficulties in their middle school learning. This paper links classical Chinese learning with English learning, summarizes the basis of the interaction between the two languages learning and its specific practice as a teaching method, and lists the challenges faced by this teaching method. It is found that classical Chinese taught in middle school is similar to English in terms of vocabulary and syntax, and this similarity can and has been applied to practical teaching by some teachers. This kind of similarity is mainly used in classical Chinese teaching in middle schools. Although classical Chinese and English teaching can promote each other, due to the lack of competent teachers and relevant teaching materials, the application of this teaching method still faces certain challenges.

Keywords: Classical Chinese · English learning · Middle School

1 Introduction

Since the concept of language transfer was put forward in the 1950s and 1960s, language teaching with similar languages has become an important strategy in language learning.

In China, the study of language transfer in English language teaching has been an important topic since 1995 [1]. However, English learning is not the only concern for educators and researchers. As a compulsory part of China's entrance exam, as well as a language that is different from modern Mandarin, classical Chinese has always been a tricky problem for many students. Therefore, the focus on language transfer in English learning was soon and naturally transferred to classical Chinese, another language that Chinese students must learn in the K12 stage. For the most of Chinese students, the only languages which are different with their mother language and most of these students have access to during K12 stage are Classical Chinese, the predecessor of modern Mandarin, and English. Therefore, whether classical Chinese can be used to assist English learning, or vice versa, has become a matter of concern for many teachers.

In recent years, many researchers and teachers have pointed out the linguistic similarities between classical Chinese and English, and tried to make use of these similarities in the teaching practice of both languages. However, the summary of the interaction between classical Chinese learning and English learning is scattered and one-sided, which makes it difficult to form a systematic operation method, and the specific practice in teaching is also scattered everywhere, which makes it difficult to provide effective reference for peers.

Thus, this article has two purposes. This paper sorts out the existing theoretical materials and practice that can be used for reference by others, and summarizes the challenges according to the interaction between classical Chinese learning and English learning in current middle school teaching.

2 Theoretical Basis

In the long time of teaching practice, some keen teachers and researchers have noticed that classical Chinese and English have similar characteristics in linguistics, and have made a partial conclusion. These summaries of the similarities form the basis of the subsequent teaching practice. Generally speaking, the similarity lies in two aspects: lexical similarity and syntactic similarity.

2.1 Lexical Similarity

Just as there is a difference in vocabulary between Mandarin and English, there is also a considerable gap in vocabulary between Mandarin and classical Chinese. Unlike modern Mandarin, words in classical Chinese are mostly composed of single characters whose meanings are close to the original meaning of the character when it was created. The change of meaning over a long period of time has made the difference between modern Chinese and classical Chinese in the meaning of some same characters. This has left many students needing to relearn these familiar words.

In terms of vocabulary different from modern Chinese, Classical Chinese shows some similarities with English vocabulary. This similar phenomenon has been mentioned by many people, “polysemy” is its common name. However, the phenomenon of polysemy mentioned by many of them is not unique to classical Chinese or English. For example, Ding Ke [2] mentioned the occurrence of “nouns used as adverbs” in both English and Classical Chinese, and Li Jing [3], Xu Yanchun [4] and Ye Zichan [5] mentioned the same words and different meanings with unchanged pronunciation in both Classical Chinese and English. However, these phenomena also occur in modern Chinese, so it is difficult to say that English learning and classical Chinese learning have unique effects on each other.

However, there is a phenomenon which is similar to polysemy can achieve this effect. Scholars who study classical Chinese call it “the Word Class Flexibility (WCF)”, the concept of which is not clearly defined [6], but roughly refers to “a word temporarily changes its syntactic function in a sentence and acts as another part of speech [7]”. One way of the WCF to express different meanings is changing the tone of a character instead of its appearance.

In this aspect, the WCF is quite similar to the English heteronym. Li Xixia [8] pointed out the word “clothes” in Classical Chinese, when pronounced “yī”, refers to the noun “clothes”, while when pronounced “yì”, it refers to the verb “to wear clothes”, which is similar to the pronunciation of [ri:d] as a noun and [red] as a verb in English.

2.2 Syntactic Similarity

Another grammatical feature that English and Classical Chinese have, but modern Chinese do not have, is reflected in its syntax. This is mainly reflected in the following aspects:

2.2.1 Prepositive Object

The basic constituent order of Classical Chinese is subject-verb-object (SVO), but is not fully consistent: there are particular situations where the VS and OV word orders appear. In English, the object is usually placed after the verb, but occasionally it is proposed for emphasis, e.g. He was a famous singer I’ve heard.

The prepositive object phenomenon in both classical Chinese and English has a common feature: the verbs that form a verb-object structure with the prepositive object are transitive verbs [5, 9], while in modern Chinese there are no transitive verbs.

2.2.2 Postpositive Adverbial

The postpositive adverbial is also called postpositive prepositional structure. In modern Chinese, the prepositional structure as an adverbial can only be placed before the predicate [10]. In contrast, in classical Chinese, a prepositional phrase consisting of “preposition + noun” can be placed after the predicate as an adverbial. Many teachers have found similarities between classical Chinese and English in this aspect and have given many examples [4, 11–13]. The following are some of these examples in English and classical Chinese.

We	were	eager	for	news.					
			Preposition	Noun					
Bake	it	for	two	hours.					
			Preposition	Noun					
yòu	zázhí	lán’guìzhúmù			yú	tíng			
also	planted	orchids, laurels, bamboos and trees			in	the garden			
					Preposition	Noun			
qūyuán	yóu	yú		jiāngtán					
Qu Yuan	wandered	in		Xiangjiang region					
		Preposition		Noun					

2.2.3 Postpositive Attributive

In modern Chinese, the attributive is usually placed before the nucleus, the word being modified in a phrase, and the postpositive attributive rarely occurs. In contrast, the

postpositive attributive is a very common grammatical phenomenon in classical Chinese [14]. Morphologically, the postpositive attributive in classical Chinese is very similar to the attributive clause in English. For example, the following two sentences:

qiú	rén	(kě	shǐ	bào	qín	zhě)
Look for	Man	(Could	Send	Reply	Qin state	that person)
	Noun		Attributive			
Looking for a man (who can be sent and reply to Qin state).						
	Noun		Attributive			

It is clear that there is a considerable degree of similarity between classical Chinese and English in this regard, and this is something that many teachers believe can be applied to the teaching of either classical Chinese or English. For example, Wan Zhongyou [15] points out a series of special postpositional forms in the classical Chinese, such as “nucleus + zhī + attributive + zhě” and “nucleus + ér + attributive + zhě”, which can be compared and can learn with the English attributive clauses started with “which” and “what”.

In addition, in Wei Zi-An [16], the morphology of “zhī” in classical Chinese can be considered similar to that of certain postpositions of the definite article in English. For example, the same two sentences in English can be expressed as follows.

A	valuable	idea	An	idea	of	great	value	
Attributive		Noun		Noun		Attributive		
A	moveable	mirror	A	mirror	that	can	be	moved
Attributive		Noun		Noun		Attributive		

The sentences “An idea of great value” and “A mirror that can be moved” are similar in form to classical Chinese. For example, in classical Chinese, “earthworms do not have sharp claws and teeth or strong bones and muscles” is expressed as the follow.

yǐn	wú	zhǎoyá	zhī	lì	jīn'gǔ	zhī	qiáng
Earthworm	no	claws and teeth	sharp	bones and muscles		strong	
Noun		Attributive		Noun		Attributive	

In the example sentence, “zhī”, “of” and “that” are very similar in position within the sentence.

3 Application

Based on the similarities summarized above, many teachers have attempted to apply these similarities to the teaching of English and classical Chinese. For Chinese students, the main difficulty in learning both languages is focused on grammar, and there is less literature related to the application of using lexical similarities in teaching both

languages. In the following, we will introduce the practical application of the English language learning experience to the teaching of classical Chinese and the application of the classical Chinese learning experience to the teaching of English language.

3.1 Application of English Learning Experience to Classical Chinese Teaching

The mutual promotion of classical Chinese and English learning is more often reflected and applied in the English learning experience to promote classical Chinese learning, which is largely caused by the lack of grammar teaching in classical Chinese teaching. There are two main ways of application: comparative grammar learning and grammar borrowing.

3.1.1 Comparative Grammar Learning

Comparative Grammar Learning is a way to help students understand and memorize grammar by presenting two sentences with similarities in both English and classical Chinese. In practice, this approach to teaching has been effective.

For example, Long Bin [17], in his classical Chinese classroom, showed examples of sentences in both English and classical Chinese to enable students to discover the differences between classical Chinese and modern Chinese in terms of word order, and enabled them to successfully master the long-standing problem of how to distinguish the syntactic constituents in classical Chinese.

In addition to comparing syntactic constituents, Guan Qing [18] successfully helped the class master these types of classical Chinese grammar by comparing prepositive object, postpositive adverbial, and postpositive attributive as they appear in both classical Chinese and English in a special classroom on the topic of classical Chinese sentence learning in senior high school, and achieved good teaching results.

3.1.2 Grammar Borrowing

Grammar borrowing is a way of teaching that directly uses English grammar to explain classical Chinese. This method can directly assist students who have some mastery of English grammar to learn classical Chinese.

For example, Kuang Keqing [19] uses the passive voice and the attributive clause in English to describe the similar phenomena in classical Chinese sentences and to help students translate the texts into modern Chinese. However, since this method presupposes that the students listening to the classes already have a considerable level of English, there are few opportunities to apply it.

3.2 Application of Classical Chinese Learning Experiences to English Teaching

Compared to English-assisted classical Chinese teaching, there are fewer instances of classical-Chinese-assisted English teaching because most students have a better grasp of English grammar than they do of classical Chinese grammar. Even so, there are some cases that supports this application, such as the attempt made by Xie Xin [20] in a middle school English classroom.

Xie used the judgment of word class flexibility in classical Chinese to assist in syntactic structure analysis in English in order to help students improve their syntactic comprehension in reading comprehension. In addition, Guan [18] also indicated in the article that comparative grammar teaching in classical Chinese and English helped some students with lesser English proficiency to successfully acquire knowledge of subordinate clauses.

4 Challenges

4.1 Lack of Systematic Practice Programs

Although the attention to similarities between classical Chinese and English languages emerged early, these findings have not been well disseminated. This has kept the similarities between classical Chinese and English in a state of “repeatedly noticed” for a long time. This lack of dissemination has led to a lack of practice and a failure to accumulate enough experience to come up with an effective solution.

4.2 Lack of Teachers with Relevant Competencies

Many teachers at the middle school level are trained only in the subject they teach and lack interdisciplinary knowledge. Using the similarities between classical Chinese and English to facilitate the teaching of both languages requires a certain level of knowledge of either classical Chinese grammar or English grammar. The lack of teachers with the relevant skills makes it difficult to use the similarities between the two languages as a teaching strategy.

4.3 Lack of Teaching Materials

In the practical teaching of classical Chinese and English, teachers usually base their teaching on textbooks. The textbooks do not organize the book content according to the similarities between classical Chinese and English, which makes teachers need some systematic reference books for teaching. The lack of reference books also makes it difficult to apply this teaching strategy.

5 Conclusion

As two languages that Chinese students must learn in middle school, Classical Chinese and English do have similarities in learning and these similarities have been applied to teaching practice by some teachers.

As far as similarity is concerned, the similarity between the two mainly focuses on lexical and syntactic aspects. In these two aspects, teachers mainly apply syntactic similarity in the mutual promotion of classical Chinese and English learning. In terms of teaching practice, teachers make more use of English learning experience to help the teaching of classical Chinese, and successfully improve the teaching effect of classical Chinese.

Although the practice of teachers does show the feasibility of using classical Chinese learning and English learning to promote each other as a teaching strategy, it is still difficult to popularize this strategy on a large scale due to the lack of teachers with relevant abilities and relevant teaching materials. To solve these problems, the continuous efforts of educators are still needed.

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