

Evaluating the Use of Chinese at English Classrooms in Chinese Undergraduate Education Level

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Abstract: Whether the use of learners' first language should be included or excluded from the EFL class has been discussed by many EFL researchers. However, learners may have different attitudes to the use of L1 in English classes due to their various learning purposes and proficiency levels. Meanwhile, learners' attitudes could affect teachers' selections of using first language in their teaching process. Therefore, this research wants to see teachers' beliefs on using Chinese in their English teaching process. This research showed that teachers have different attitudes on the use of Chinese in English classes mainly because of their students' proficiency level. In the meantime, this research attempt to illustrate the use of L1 could not impede learners' exposure to L2; by contrast, L1 plays the positive role in developing learners' language skills to a great extent.

1. Current situations of English language teaching in Chinese undergraduate programs

English teaching has been becoming an integral part in Chinese university, which becomes a compulsory module for all undergraduate students in the first four terms. Due to the test-driven teaching environment which require teachers to focus on the traditional teaching approach such as GTM, as a result students do not have sufficient opportunity to speak English out of classes [1]. Moreover, each class containing over 50 students; students are taught in the traditional grammar-based classes, focus on accuracy, and teachers usually use Chinese to instruct them how to produce the correct sentences and push them to study grammar rules explicitly which aim to help them obtain the satisfactory score in English exams.

Although many universities have tried to use English to practice students' proficiency level, many teachers still found it difficult to monitor students' learning process [2]. Since students are unwilling to speak English in class due to the fear of making mistakes. Also, students usually feel anxiety in English class activities, because they may not clearly about teaching tasks, and also they are afraid of being laughed if they are wrong with peer interactions. Moreover, English based classes could cause students' anxiety because learners may not obtain the sufficient comprehensible input in English.

Also, teachers are expected to use Chinese to explain grammar rules and structures, because students found it easier to understand grammar items in their native language, as they need to pass college English proficiency test, which grammar is a dominant part in the whole exam. Additionally, teachers may not speak fluently in English; because their main focus is still helping students pass the grammar-oriented exams, which may result in Chinese-based teaching environment in the Chinese higher education.

2. Critical development of this issue

Grammar-translation approaches dominated language teaching in Europe until 1950s. The main purpose were helping students learn how to grasp reading and writing skills in the target language

by memorizing vocabulary, and grammar rules [3]. In addition, grammar rules are presented explicitly; sentences are translated into L1, and a strong focus on accuracy [4]. However, using L1 to some extent could restrict students' exposure to second language since L1 was considered as classroom instructions.

Also, the use of L1 in L2 classrooms is uncommunicative, useless and irrelevant, because students find it difficult to improve their English speaking ability and also they may not improve their proficiency level [5]. Moreover, using L1 could interfere with students' cognitive ability, especially when learners understand English grammar items, which specific grammar items would be misunderstood by translating into L1. Also, the use of L1 would challenge students' ability in peer interactions and communication skills in the target language [4].

Then, CLT was developed in 1960s as a revolution to address the criticism of traditional teaching approaches such as grammar translation methodology (GTM) which brings new perspective on applied linguistics and potentially addresses the importance of communicative skills in language teaching and help to establish students' communicative competence [6]. Subsequently, English as a foreign language teaching transferred from the dependence on L1 instruction, gradually moved to using target language in EFL classrooms.

Moreover, students could obtain gist of using target language (TL); despite they may not master every words and exact structures in TL. Afterwards, using TL in foreign language classrooms is supported by many applied linguists [7]. Although the use of L1 was still considered as unsuitable teaching approach in 1970s and 1980s, many EFL teachers still use the native language in their teaching process, which limits students' exposure to English and still keep them thinking in their first language.

Nevertheless, some researchers believe the use of native language will be benefit for young and intermediate level students in EFL classrooms [8]. Since L1 could provide clearer instructions and may help learners understand new language easily. Also, L1 could be used as classroom instructions which help learners to learn new language, communicate with new language. Therefore, teachers could develop students' prior knowledge from L1 experience and apply it into the L2 classes.

2.1 Monolingual and bilingual teaching approach in EFL classrooms

Many teachers use 'monolingual approach' since they believe use learners' native language could interfere with students exposure to L2 [7, 9] and hence to use English-only in classes. By contrast, some teachers consider using 'bilingual approach' as use L1 wisely may help students understand linguistic knowledge more properly [9]. In order to deal with these approaches successfully, Nation (2003) proposes a new methodology-'balanced approach', because he believes students that use L1 in classes should be respected by their teachers, as learners' English proficiency level may not as fluent as their teachers and usually they need to use their native language to help them understand specific terminologies[7]. Also, balanced approach is not only helpful for teachers to realize the role of L1, but maximize use of L2 in classes. In addition, teachers need to encourage their students to use target language in communication so that students' proficiency level could be enhanced.

Additionally, monolingual approach which translates vocabulary, sentences between L1 and L2 could be dangerous, because students may translate words uses their prior knowledge from L1 to L2. Therefore, two languages should be separated and using L1 to explain some terms are necessary. Since grammar teaching is complex, students especially for young learners may be confused with the grammar structures, without explain the particular terminology in learners' L1.

However, Pachler and Field (2001) argue that a great amount of grammar terms could be explained in target language (TL) by using visual techniques (PowerPoint) and body language [10]. Therefore, support for bilingual approach is increased by some applied linguists [3, 4]. Also, Miles (2004) recommend using bilingual approach into the EFL classrooms because it could develop students' proficiency level in L2, and L1 could be used as classroom instructions to explain grammar rules [8]. Moreover, Miles (2004) criticized monolingual approach as (1), monolingual are insufficient for students' learning process. (2), affect students' proficiency level in L2 [8]. Thereby,

students' first language can be used only when analyzing the grammar structures.

2.2 The use of L1 in teaching language skills and activities

Learners' native language plays the significant role in teaching language skills and sub-skills. When students acquire new grammar rules and structures, L1 could be used as classroom instructions to explain specific terms. Moreover, successful language learners usually use a great number of linguistic skills and knowledge which they have accumulated through their L1 [3]. Moreover, a good learner should proficient in four language skills (Reading; Listening; Writing; Speaking), also, using L1 is helpful for both teaching and learning process in improving learners' language skills [4]. Similarly, Miles (2004) stated he observed a language class that student taking notes in their native language while listening to lectures. He further claimed students use L1 to translate few phrases and words while taking notes may not be a bad learning strategy if their learning purposes are to understand the teaching materials [8]. Moreover, young learners have lower proficiency level in speaking and they may not express themselves properly in English, and therefore, they would think in their native language immediately before they speak in English.

In addition, vocabulary and pronunciation is also important when teaching language sub-skills. Using L1 would be effective when teaching language sub-skills. For example, when teaching new vocabulary, students are encouraged to make the bilingual word cards with L1 definitions and examples, because this learning strategy could monitor their learning progress. Moreover, the use of bilingual words card would be helpful to increase students' vocabulary size by translating into L1 [7], although there are many disadvantages of L1 translation, and rote learning, such the learning strategy could be effective under the test-driven teaching environment.

Moreover, L1 plays a positive effect on conducting class activities, because L1 could instruct students to understand class tasks successfully or motivate students to be involved in the class activities. Teachers could use learners' native language as a shortcut when students feel teaching tasks is too difficult for them, and directions of using L2 are vague, or they may not clear about what task is and they do not have motivations in English class activities [4].

It is clear that using native language when teaching EFL classes is necessary, but meanwhile it is also important to consider using English to improve students' proficiency level and try to motivate them to speak English in peer interactions. However, Mattioli (2004) criticizes using L1 in EFL context and points out main reasons which cause overuses L1 are students' proficiency level, their learning purposes, and difficulty in understanding teaching tasks [11]. Furthermore, Mattioli (2004) recommends English could be used in the class teaching, and provide two possible solutions that L1 could be used in the teaching practice [11]. First of all, teachers could organize class meeting each month to discuss their problems in L1. Secondly, after finish the main teaching contents in each session, teachers could arrange five minutes in their native language which aims to encourage students to ask questions and share their ideas.

3. Further suggestions on using Chinese in the English language teaching

Since using English-only may have obstacles in the English language teaching process, in order to solve these problems, integrating use both Chinese and English could be a good strategy in the future, because students' exposures to target language are limited, students are always thinking their prior knowledge in Chinese before they speak in English. Also, students prefer to use Chinese in English learning, because they will be assessed by grammar-based test, and they found it difficult to study grammar in English, because some grammar structures and rules are easily to understand in Chinese [11]. Therefore, teachers could use Chinese when explain grammar rules and terminologies.

Moreover, Chinese could also be used in English classes in improving students' language skills, sub skills. For example, when teaching new vocabulary to students, teachers would show how to memorize glossary efficiently by making the bilingual word cards with definitions in Chinese. Compared to use English- English memorization, this learning strategy not only help learners memorize vast amounts of vocabulary, but also to monitor their learning process in daily life. Furthermore, students could be encouraged to use their native language in taking notes when

listening to the lectures, because they have insufficient time on taking notes in English, when they taking notes in their native language, it could be helpful on their understandings, and also these notes materials could be helpful to prepare their future exams.

Moreover, teachers should use both English and Chinese together to conduct the class activities. Furthermore, Chinese should be used as classroom instructions to give students clearer explanations when they are confused with class tasks. More importantly, Chinese could be used as a shortcut when students feel teaching tasks are too difficult for them, and they do not know what task is in class activities [4]. In this way, students could better understand tasks so as to perform better in peer interactions. Moreover, teachers are encouraged to use English when presenting ideas in order to improve students' oral competence. Meanwhile, teachers would use Chinese for further explanations if students could not understand specific terms.

Furthermore, in order to enhance students' competence in oral- speaking, students are encouraged to practice their spoken language skills out of classes. In fact, forty-five minutes class teaching may not fully practice students' spoken language; therefore, teachers may assign assignment for students to finish out of classes. Each term, students are required to give an individual presentation, and teachers give students two weeks to prepare after class. Therefore, students could discuss these topics in English with their classmates, and each week students should hand in the audio files which show what they discussed in group. Meanwhile, teachers may offer tutorials for students not only to monitor students' assignments, but also to provide help with their questions and problems. Therefore, students could enhance their oral spoken ability by communicating in English.

4. Conclusion

This research has attempted to investigate the use of Chinese in English classes should be accepted by teachers in Chinese university. Chinese could be used as classroom instructions when dealing with grammar rules and terminologies. Moreover, English also should be presented to improve students' proficiency level through a variety of teaching activities.

Then, this research tried to provide two possible suggestions, although there are some critiques of using Chinese in language teaching. Due to the test driven teaching system, teachers should combine both Chinese and English on improving their language skills and also encourage students to practice their oral-spoken competence out of class in the future.

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