

To Reform TEFL according to the Implicit Nature of Language -- A Brief Description and Analysis of TEFL Reform in China

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Abstract

Since reform and openness was initiated in China in December 1978, TEFL has undergone changes to a certain extent. Progress can be observed in terms of teaching concepts, teaching evaluation, national standards for language acquisition at different levels, teaching methodology, teaching facilities, teaching materials, and a monitoring system for TEFL. However, problems still exist. The most striking ones are related to the weak ability of learners in speaking and listening ability for social communication, a traditional problem on English teaching programs. To make the reform of TEFL in China develop further in a healthy way, careful attention should be paid to these problems and greater efforts be made so that more successes can be achieved in the field of TEFL in China.

A Brief Introduction to the Development of TEFL in China

The learning of foreign languages came into existence due to societal demands. Based on recorded historical information, China started its commercial business, cultural and technological exchange with some other countries as early as the Qin (221 - 207 BC) and the Han Dynasties (206 BC -220 AD) via the "Silk Route" (Fu Ke, 1986). From then on, foreign languages have had a definite impact on the lives of some of the Chinese people.

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From 1902, foreign languages were firstly formally listed in the school curriculum. (For details, see *The Imperial Order of Teaching Standards in Secondary Education in the Qing Dynasty*, 1902). However, during the period from 1902 to 1949 when the new China was founded, English teaching in China was characterized by evolutionary change from an imitation of the practice in Japan to the adoption of Western models represented by Britain and America (Tang, 1983). In the “Japanese” period, English instruction in school was emphasized. Learners were encouraged to acquire a solid foundation of basic explicit knowledge and expected to develop their reading, writing and translating skills. Under the influence of the Western model, language practice was given a greater emphasis. Students were essentially expected to cultivate their reading and writing skills through classroom instruction and reading of literature to prepare themselves for future work. Consequently, reading and writing were emphasized in TEFL.

Since 1949 when the new China was founded, English has been taught at different levels in schools for primary, secondary, and tertiary education. In the universities and colleges, English is taught to both English majors and non-English majors. However, in the period of 1950s-1970s, the history of TEFL was full of twists and turns, because of the changing domestic situation and political influence at that time (Tang, 1983). English teaching was not systematically and scientifically planned and taught at different levels of education, even though some attempts were made to introduce some new pedagogical practices in language teaching.

December 1978 witnessed the beginning of Reform and Openness in China. Since then, with the emergence of foreign ventures and joint ventures in many municipalities, provinces and autonomous regions, English has become more and more important and popular in China. TEFL has been booming. Some impressive features of the development can be seen as follows:

- A large number of English native speakers have been employed to teach in the universities and some middle schools.
- New textbooks and reference books at different levels have been published to meet educational needs.
- Original modern literary works and monographs on linguistics, applied linguistics, translation and the like are available in bookshops.

- Teachers and students of English majors are permitted to listen to English broadcasts from the West and a number of well-known English newspapers, magazines and journals are available in school libraries for English studies.
- Private English schools have been set up and private English classes are organized outside school to provide more opportunities for English learning.
- Training programs for English teachers are provided in different universities for young teachers, and opportunities have been given to them to study abroad as well.
- Academic exchanges at home and abroad are encouraged to push forward the development of TEFL.
- Audio-visual aids such as the Internet, computers and software for language learning have been developed, and strategies for online English teaching and CALL are studied in different universities. As a consequence, students have more opportunities to get exposure to the English language and to improve their aural-oral ability.
- National English tests such as TEM 4 (Test for English Majors) and TEM 8; CET 4 (College English Test) and CET 6 are carried out every year. Consequently, the quality of TEFL in different universities and colleges is monitored and the students' enthusiasm for learning has increased.
- A large number of joint-ventures have been established in China. Hence, there are more opportunities for students to work with English after graduation (Wang Zhiyun, 2002).

Some Problems that still Exist

As English teaching in China has a history of over 100 years, and as China has a large population of English learners, the reform of the English language teaching cannot be completed within a short period of time. Though measures have been taken in different places to improve TEFL in China, problems still exist. Some obvious ones are as follows:

- (1) Compared with the students' reading ability, their speaking ability is still underdeveloped. Many students, especially the non-English majors, cannot speak English well when required in work or even in study. Some employers even question the value of English teaching in schools.

(2) Some teachers and textbooks adhere to the importance of English vocabulary expansion, but neglect the practical application of the vocabulary. As a result, many students have a large stock of vocabulary but do not know how to use it correctly in oral communication and written composition. Some of them are disappointed, and some even suspect the usefulness of increasing their vocabulary in this way. This will often affect students' English learning motivation and the teaching results.

(3) Some teachers still hold on to the traditional view that English teaching can be completed inside the classroom. They do not help their students to develop the idea of autonomous learning after class, but adhere to the traditional practice of teaching. Based on a study by Zou Xiaoling (2000), 44.4% of the students that she investigated did not often or did not participate at all in English learning outside the classroom. Based on another study by Zhu Wang (2002), 96% of the non-English majors in a university could not use English successfully, and 98% of them had not read an original English book related to their majors in the four years of their university studies.

One of the reasons for this is that quite a lot of teachers still regard English as explicit language only. Therefore, they reinforce the instruction in class and consequently the implicit nature of the language cannot be satisfactorily met. Another reason is that in the university, a lot of students think that if they can pass the set examinations, their English will be satisfactory. So what they learn English for is to pass the examination. Oral English, which is often not included in the test, is henceforth, neglected and underdeveloped.

In the field of second language acquisition research, there is no great controversy about the distinction between explicit and implicit, or between declarative and procedural knowledge, but different opinions can be frequently heard about the relationship between the two concepts. The focus of the debate is whether explicit L2 knowledge can lead learners to a successful acquisition of a second language by converting itself into implicit L2 knowledge. The traditional grammar-based school of thought assumes that explicit knowledge can become implicit knowledge through practice (Carroll, 1966; Lawley and Selinker, 1971; Chernikov, 1979; Stevick, 1980; Harmer, 1983). However, the naturalistic theorists hold that conscious explicit knowledge cannot be transformed into

intuitive implicit knowledge (Krashen, 1981, 1982). Based on his research, Ellis (1993) points out that the two views are not clear because they do not distinguish explicit/implicit knowledge from declarative/procedural knowledge (p.95). Discussing the possibility of conversion, he established two positions—the non-interface position and the interface position. According to the former, he thinks that it is impossible to make this conversion take place, because this position has separated conscious knowledge from intuitive knowledge, and the two factors cannot interact with each other. However, according to the latter, this change or conversion is possible. Now research evidence can be found (White, Spada, Lightbown and Ranta, 1991; Doughty, 1991; Van Patten and Cadierno, 1993; Schmidt, 1990; Skehan, 1996, 1998) to support the existence of the second position. Therefore, in TEFL we cannot reject the role of explicit knowledge in SLA completely; we must try to find an appropriate approach to SLA by laying emphasis on the development of learners' linguistic implicit knowledge, because this is of crucial importance if we expect students to acquire their L2 communicative ability successfully.

The Social Change in Reform and Openness has Enhanced the Government Decision to Speed up the Development of TEFL in China

With the reform and openness, China has experienced a tremendous change. English is needed more than before in society. This has attracted great attention from the central government. The Ministry of Educational has decided to take three measures to improve English teaching in tertiary education.

(1) Advanced information technology should be widely applied in teaching to stimulate computer-assisted English teaching and learning. To implement it successfully, more software for TEFL should be designed and put into practice to increase the students' exposure to the target language after class.

(2) English teaching programs should be modified and upgraded. An all-round development strategy for four skills should replace the traditional way of taking reading comprehension as the main target of teaching. To ensure the development of each skill, specific criteria have been set for different levels, so that teachers know what they should do for at each level.

(3) Based on the two measures mentioned above, CET 4 and CET 6 should be further improved to stimulate the development of educational reform (see Liu Runqing and Dai Manchun, 2003).

In 1996, when vice-premier Li Lanqing inspected Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, he pointed out

I have noticed the disadvantage confronting China in terms of foreign language: the level of learner's target language seems lower than that in the Philippines and Thailand... Though they have learned it for ten years when they finish university study, the graduates from the ordinary universities have only a smattering of that language. This is indeed a great loss to China. (Cited from Guangdong University of Foreign Studies Newspaper, October 30, 1996, and translated by the writer.)

He encouraged the teachers to find a solution to this problem and to popularize English in China by saying

“Now I invite your participation. One thing is clear to me: we cannot copy foreign methods indiscriminately or follow the traditional methods without any change.”

These words point out the significance and urgency of reforming foreign language teaching strategy in China.

Reform in TEFL

(1) The Change of the Concept of EFL Teaching

China is a big country, where TEFL teachers for tertiary education number over 50,000 (Liu Runqing and Dai Manchun, 2003: 5). With such a big population, it is not easy to get a unified view towards the strategy of TEFL. However, traditional views of laying stress on grammar and on reading have been weakened, and the implicit nature of the language has been realized and accepted by more and more teachers. Studies on student-centered and autonomous learning have increased rapidly, especially among postgraduate students. In the research supported financially by the government, it is clearly stated that applied research

projects will be prioritized. In a survey of over 1000 English teachers on the strategic planning of English teaching of tertiary students in school, 35.5% of the participants hold that listening and speaking should come before reading and writing, and 40.8% of the teachers follow the strategy that students' language practice comes first and teachers' instruction second; while 25.4% of the participants hold that reading and writing comes before listening and speaking, and 9.2% of them hold that teachers' instruction comes first and students' practice second (Liu Runqing and Dai Manchun, 2003: 61). It is clear that though there are different views towards TEFL concepts, generally, the former outweigh the latter now in China.

Language learning, as Ellis (1994) points out, is a process of skill development. It is implicit (Ellis, 1994) and procedural (Anderson, 1983) in nature. If the teaching strategy is not designed to meet this need, it is difficult to achieve a successful result. In this sense, a change of TEFL concepts among English teachers in China is of great significance if TEFL is to be developed successfully in China.

(2) The Change of Language Assessment

The assessment of students' language skills is a strategy that will help to guide students to learn the target language. In the 1950s and 60s, examinations were related, to a great extent, to the textbooks. The students practiced mainly what they were taught in the texts within the class. After the 1970s when TOEFL was introduced into China for the first time, the examination in many English subjects underwent great changes. Multiple choice questions replaced a lot of written work and test materials increased considerably. "Proficiency" replaced "achievement", and language assessment entered into a new phase. With the popularization of the proficiency test, it was possible to set a national English test. Therefore, CET 4 and CET 6, TEM 4 and TEM 8 came into existence. However, the limitation of multiple-choice tests in the form and nature of these examinations restricts significantly the development of all-round language skills. Even though many students have obtained high marks in CET 4 or CET 6, their ability for language communication is not correspondingly well developed. Therefore, many employers often set new criteria for the assessment of English language ability when the students go for an interview following the application for a job.

A key problem for an effective solution to language evaluation lies in the difference between the evaluation of explicit knowledge and implicit knowledge. With the former, vocabulary and grammatical structures are easy to assess for a large number of testees; while for the latter it is not easy at all in schools. This has aroused the awareness of the English assessors and curriculum designers in China; however, how to produce an effective approach to the correct evaluation of the students' language ability, and how to lead them to develop their language skills for communication is still under discussion and exploration.

(3) The Establishment of the National Standards for Different Levels of Language Acquisition

After the 1980s, a national committee to guide English language teaching was established. With the birth of the committee, the national teaching programs for English majors and non-English majors (College English) have been worked out respectively, in which there are specifications for the development of phonetics, grammar, vocabulary, writing, reading, listening, speaking, translation for English learners at different levels. For example, for English majors in reading, when they enter the university, they should be able to read correctly 70% of a passage in which new words are less than 3%. At the end of the first year (in the second term or at Level 2), they should be able to read a simplified novel at a rate of 70-120 words per minute such as *Thirty-Nine Steps*, or *Reader's Digest*, with a good understanding of the general idea and the main details of the plot. At the end of university study, that is, for Level 8, English majors should be able to read the editorials and book reviews in British and American newspapers or journals, able to read intermediate-level history and literary works, able to comment on the views, structure of passages, linguistic features, and rhetorical methods, and able to read 1600 words in five minutes for fast reading with an acquisition of the general idea and an understanding of details in the passage. (For details, see *The National English Teaching Program for English Majors in Higher Education, 2000*; *English Examination Program for TEM 4, 1997*; *English Examination Program for TEM 8, 1997*). For College English teaching, specific requirements and criteria have also been set for the teachers and students for the aspects of vocabulary, grammatical structures, tense, voice, mood, punctuation, word formation, etc. That apart, specific requirements for language skills, such as reading, writing, speaking, listening and translation have also been worked out for different levels from 1 to 6. (For details, see *College English Teaching Program, 1999*). The set criteria for English learning

at different levels in China has touched off arguments over different views. However, the advantages outweigh the disadvantages, for they will, at least, give the teachers some guidance for language teaching and stimulate them to think how they can achieve the set criteria. In the end, the gap in TEFL between different universities will be narrowed if appropriate measures are taken and efforts are made.

(4) The Change in Some Other Areas

Language teaching is not a one-faceted discipline, but multi-faceted in nature. To bring about a successful result, reform in one aspect is not sufficient. Hence, changes can be observed in other aspects as well. For example, in teaching methodology, multi-media classroom, sound laboratory, the Internet and computers have been widely applied in TEFL. In teaching materials, for example, textbooks with an emphasis on language application and textbooks covering more and more different areas have been published and used. And a new project for TEFL -- the national evaluation of the facilities, programs, teaching staff, teaching results, students' language skills, after-class activities etc. -- has been worked out in order to ensure that TEFL in China can be well improved.

Some Points that Deserve our Attention

The reform and openness in China has produced good results in TEFL; yet, it does not mean that all the problems have been solved. Instead, as China is a big country with a large population of English teachers and strong traditional influences, reform in TEFL will not progress without obstacles. In fact, some problems need great attention and efforts if TEFL is to be improved in China. These requirements are presented below:

(1) A complete, workable, well-arranged TEFL program should be worked out, which will deal with TEFL in the primary, secondary, and tertiary education as a whole. As a consequence, English teaching can be reasonably and scientifically divided into several phases which are organically connected and which are clearly informative to the teachers so that they know what they should do in the at primary, secondary and tertiary educational levels respectively, and that the overlapping and repetition of English teaching of grammar (a very common

phenomenon observed in English language textbooks, that is, grammar is taught and reinforced in the junior middle school, senior middle school and universities, resulting perhaps from the view that language is rule-governed and explicit in nature) will not exist at different levels in the future.

(2) Appropriate TEFL training classes will be held in schools or on TV to raise the teachers' consciousness of second language acquisition theory, so that they will know better how to teach English effectively and efficiently. Teachers are the crucial factor in TEFL. If they do not understand how a language is acquired, they will not select or design workable materials for TEFL, and they will not apply new strategies appropriately. Consequently, reform in TEFL will not proceed effectively even if there is an urgent need for it to do so.

Conclusion

Since reform and openness in China in December 1978, TEFL, like other walks of life in China, has undergone changes to a certain extent. Progress can be observed in a number of aspects such as teachers' concepts of language teaching, the evaluation of language proficiency, the establishment of national standards for language acquisition at different levels, and some other aspects, e.g. teaching methodology, teaching facilities, teaching materials, and the establishment of a monitoring system for English teaching in different schools for tertiary education in China. Even though improvements are obvious, problems still exist. The most striking ones are related to the weak ability of learners in speaking and listening for social communication, the traditional views on English teaching programs that regard English learning as instructionally developed, so that overlapping can be observed at primary, secondary, and tertiary educational levels. Therefore, to make the reform of TEFL in China improve effectively, it will be necessary to work out a scientific and effective program that treats TEFL as a whole in school teaching, so that it will not overlap or be repeated at different levels. Teachers and students must become aware of the implicit nature of language so that appropriate strategies can be applied to solve the existing problems and to ensure the successful development of TEFL in China.

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