

Some Thoughts on the Oral Approach to College English Language Teaching and Learning

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Abstract This paper discusses some problems in current English teaching; analyses the disadvantages of grammar - translation method; and emphasizes the necessity of relating the structures of a foreign language to their communicative functions in real situations and the importance of the oral approach to college English language teaching and learning in China.

Key words English teaching and learning; oral approach; communicative function

Introduction

In daily life, we often talk about different 'methods' of language learning and language teaching. Teachers often discuss how to improve teaching methods and leaders of educational circles often emphasize the importance of making researches on teaching methods. As a teacher, he is either conscious or unconscious in using some kind of teaching method to teach a subject. But, since the improvement in the quality of teaching depends much on teaching methods, teachers should be familiar with teaching methods and make teaching methods meet the aims of the course.

Methods of foreign language teaching is understood here as a body of scientifically tested theory concerning the teaching of foreign languages in schools and other educational institutions. It covers three main problems:

- (1) aims of teaching a foreign language;
- (2) content of teaching, i.e. what to teach in order to attain the aims;
- (3) methods and techniques of teaching, i.e. how to teach a foreign language to attain the aims in the most effective way to meet modern requirements.

In teaching English, there are several previously - accepted teaching methods, for example, the grammar - translation method, the direct method, the audio - lingual method, the cognitive - code method, the functional approach and the eclectic approach. Here, opinions

are given only on oral approach compared with the grammar - translation method from Chinese students' real acquisition of English language.

1 The Effect of Current Language Teaching

In China, many students, including those who have already graduated from colleges and universities, are usually weak, perhaps very weak in oral skills. They cannot speak, or understand spoken English, and can only read slowly with constant reference to a dictionary. It's true that too many students are very good at reciting grammar rules and analyzing sentences. But can we say the students have 'possessed' English? And is this the objective of English language teaching and learning in China? Obviously, the answer to both the questions is 'No'. Chinese students have the same problems year after year in learning the oral aspects of English. The main reason, I think, is that grammar - translation method has been prevailing in China for quite a long time, and, what is more, it is, so to speak, the main teaching method now widely used in secondary schools in China.

2 The Grammar - Translation Method and its Disadvantages

The grammar - translation method is the oldest method of teaching English which can be traced back to more than three centuries. The students must first learn grammar and vocabulary, which are learned through reading and writing exercises. Understanding and assimilation of grammar and vocabulary are put to the test in translation.

In teaching English by means of the grammar - translation method, attention is paid to the assimilation of grammar rules. The vocabulary is 'turned up' to grammar. Translation is extensively utilized both as a means of explanation of new words, grammar forms, and structures, and as a means of mastering the language, all exercises for assimilating the language material being limited to translation from the mother tongue into English or vice versa. So under this method of language teaching, students cannot easily achieve a fluent use of the spoken language, because they spend much of their time studying abstract grammatical rules, memorising word - lists and doing translations. They learn the rules for rules' sake, as a result, the students, although may have learned a lot about the rules of the language, they cannot apply them even in writing, much less in speaking. What they've learned through grammar - translation method is only the rules of the language and analyses of the grammatical structure of each sentence. So the Chinese students are often considered by the foreigners as grammar - analysis experts, and their books often look like complicated traffic maps which are full of markings and arrows. They are poor in the four language skills, especially in hearing and speaking. Even their reading ability is often questionable, because they do their reading

very slowly with translation being done during their reading.

Then why is the grammar - translation method still affecting current language teaching in spite of its obvious disadvantages? The causes, I think, are as follows:

(1) The grammar - translation method, as a traditional teaching method, seems to have been deep - rooted in many Chinese teachers of English, who become so used to it in their English courses at all levels.

(2) There is a serious shortage of teachers of English in China, and a teacher can deal with a large class if the grammar - translation method is used.

(3) The method is not too demanding of the teacher, who need not be a fluent speaker of the target language, nor do any imaginative work beyond passively following the textbook

(4) It is easy to test the students, and the class is easy to control.

3 The Importance of the Oral Approach to English Language Teaching and Learning

(1) The necessity and possibility of emphasizing the oral aspects of English

The open - door policy in China has resulted in extensive international exchanges and the importance of English language acquisition has been fully recognized by both the people and the authorities concerned. Qualified scientists and technicians with all four language skills - hearing, speaking, reading, and writing are badly needed in the country's modernization, and the development of language abilities has been stressed in English language teaching and learning.

In colleges and universities there has been an attempt to change the traditional teaching patterns and teachers of English now begin to give students more training in the oral aspects of English. But the difficulty is great when the teachers are facing the students who have formed the habit, after their six years of English in secondary schools, to learn English by analyzing grammatical structure and doing translation. Clearly, a reform in English teaching methods is extremely urgent in secondary schools.

We know that language is not knowledge, but a set of skills. The teaching of it, therefore, must be different from the teaching of a 'content' subject like science. A linguist studies a language in the way a 'content' subject is studied, so that he can analyze and describe it. But as a language learner, learning a language is learning a set of skills.

In foreign language teaching there has been a tendency to advocate the primacy of speech over writing as a general educational goal. The 'oral approach', as its name suggests, is based on the assumption that the spoken language underlies writing, and not vice versa. It can lead to smoother, more efficient language learning—to a higher return on the many hours of hand work that language mastery requires, and it has been summarized:

'Hearing before speaking, speaking before reading, reading before writing'.

First, language is actually a stream of sounds, and speech is basic to learning a language. People in general have the notion that learning a language has something to do with speech. Students come to school to study a language with the strong conviction that they want to speak the language. So we should emphasize the sounds rather than forms, and begin with and center on oral practice, that means ear and tongue should be trained first. In fact we know that everyone learns his mother tongue in the spoken form before being introduced to its written form, and many of the human beings who live in this world are illiterate, yet virtually all speak a language.

The aim of oral drill is to develop the students' capacity for immediate and spontaneous assimilation of complete utterances, to develop automatic speech habits. So the students must be made to think the whole sentence integrally while they are saying. Hearing, as the first stage of language development, forms the basis for learning to speak and then develops continuously to support further growth in speaking. Then reading follows, and writing comes last. Students may first be asked to copy what they have learned and then are expected to write compositions based on the language material they have learned. So hearing - speaking - reading - writing is the well - known order of presentation. It is the natural order in language learning, including both native and foreign languages.

(2) Giving priority to hearing and speaking at the initial stage

Giving priority to hearing and speaking is especially effective at the initial stage. Students listen to model sentences, imitate them, and act them out; or they may look at a picture, listen to the model, then imitate. They spend more time on hearing and speaking when they are in the first and second years, because younger students have great facility imitating foreign sounds and remembering them. They can make quick responses, and they are not afraid of making mistakes. It has also been discovered in teaching primary and junior high students that an early introduction to the hearing - speaking skills can increase the students' interest and enthusiasm for language learning. The more interesting and exciting activities at the early stage of learning are those in hearing and speaking, and definitely not in reading and writing. Of course, the four basic skills are all interrelated and interact on each other, but sufficient practice in hearing and speaking at the early age can make students use the language spontaneously.

(3) Lay emphasis on different skills at different learning stages

The basis of a sound approach to language teaching is to know what the objectives of teaching are. If the learning and teaching of foreign languages is inefficient, the inefficiency is due in considerable measure to the devoting of time to tasks which are not part of learning a language, or which have their place later in the sequence of language learning activities than

the point at which they are typically taken up. For the students who begin to learn a foreign language, language learning should consist of oral practice. The students should do so much of oral practice that they can say the sentence they have practised even when they are sleeping, not just in class. While they are practising, of course, the students should have in mind the meaning of what they are repeating. But at different stages, it is necessary to lay emphasis on different skills. It may be suggested that at the elementary stage, priority be given to hearing and speaking. The students can do a lot of manipulative language activities in which the sounds, words, and structures to be used are supplied to them by the teacher, taperecording, or textbook. The manipulative exercises seem most effective in forming habits. At the intermediate stage, a balanced development of all four skills is to be sought after, but the ability to speak a language is again highly valued. At this stage, the teacher moves from manipulation to communication by relaxing the controls and allowing the students more and more freedom. That is, the students themselves supply the sounds, words and structures needed to express their thought. The emphasis is on putting thoughts into words rather than decoding the thought from the words. At the advanced stage of language learning, emphasis should be laid on reading and writing on the basis of the constant growth of oral skills. Remember, the criterion of a student's mastery of the language is still how well he can use it, not how much he knows about it.

(4) The purpose of language learning

The purpose of language is communication. Correct speech is what people say, not what grammarians think they should say. Proper language is based on descriptions of how the language is used by the speakers of that language. So learning a language is not a matter of acquiring a set of grammar rules. The teacher's efforts should not be concentrated on informing his students about the language, but on developing the students' skills in using the language in communication, that is, students should have an ability to talk the language, but not to talk about it.

4 Conclusion

Now we can see language learning, whether by infants or adults, is first of all a matter of imitation. But we should put forward a question how the students can progress from straight mimicry to the freedom in analogical creation. So it is now generally acknowledged that language learning is not simply a mechanical process of habit formation, but a process which involves the active cooperation of the learner as a rational individual. Researches on language learning and teaching have suggested that a combination of inductive and deductive methods can produce the best results, and the teaching of grammar is only used as an aid in helping students to achieve the practical mastery of a language.

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大学英语教学中开展口语教学的几点思考

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摘 要 本文讨论了当前大学英语教学中存在的一些问题;分析了语法翻译法的不足之处;强调了把外语语言结构的学习和实际交际功能相联系的必要性,从而提出了在大学英语教学中开展口语教学的重要性。

关键词 英语教学 口语教学法 交际功能

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