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The Suitable Learning Environment for the Elementary Students: the English-only Instruction or the Bilingual Environment

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Abstract

In recent years, there has been a debate about the suitable learning environment for elementary students. This reflects the fact that Taiwanese parents are increasingly aware of the importance of their children's English education. There is controversy that which kind of English education between English-only instruction and bilingual environment is better to the children. This paper intends to discuss the best performance of children's English education based on the recent research studies of English Language Teaching (ELT) and Learning English as Foreign Language (EFL). The discussion and analysis indicate that no significant difference was found between English-only instruction and bilingual environment. But the first language (L1) definitely facilitates elementary students' learning results in many ways. Based upon the above findings, the researcher suggests that through of process of learning the English, teachers can utilize L1 as a helpful resource to accelerate students' learning situation.

Key Words : English-only instruction ; Bilingual environment ; Elementary students ; First language ; Foreign language

1. Introduction

These days the fever of learning English as young as possible has swept through Taiwan rapidly. The fact is that the number of children's private language schools has increased rapidly. Besides, more and more elementary school students go to the private language schools reveal people's attitudes— toward English education in earlier stage has become a tendency. In fact, the planning and promotion of English education is not only a “heat wave” here in Taiwan but also a common trend all over the world. In Taiwan, with the forced tendency, the government finally decided to fulfill the teaching English to the fifth and sixth graders in elementary schools in 2001.

However, at the very beginning stage of practicing this innovative decision, it is inevitable to encounter many difficulties, including the selection of teaching materials, the application of teaching methods or the training of qualified teachers and so on. Among these, the “instructional language” which teachers' use during class remains a controversial issue for ELT. It is certainly that in different teaching methods, such as Grammar-Translation Method, Direct Method, Audio-Lingual Method, and Communicative Approach, the importance of students' native language role cannot be indispensable (Hadley 1993 ; Harmer 2003 ; Richards and Rodgers 2001). But there are still many opinions to emphasize the importance of the English-only Instructional environment. Thus, the controversy remains many arguments. In what languages should we teach the EFL elementary beginners in Taiwan? Is the usage by English-only or by a mixture of English and Chinese better? Many people argue that students' L1 (Mandarin) should be incorporated into instruction; on the other hand, another group of people claimed that the English-only learning environment is the best nature

way for children.

This question is currently the subject of much debate among scholars and teachers. Therefore, the main issue in this research paper is to discuss whether the English-only learning environment and the bilingual learning surrounding more suitable for learning. The whole paper focuses on English learners on elementary students of 5th and 6th grade. In the first part of this article, some background knowledge will be quickly reviewed. Then, the paper goes through the second body of the main issue—the only-English or bilingual instruction. Finally, a brief conclusion will be included to reflect this paper.

2. Statement of the Problem

Certain wrong concepts still root in people's minds deeply. Because people have wrong ideas about *learning* a language, they believe in the process of learning, they need accept many typical stimuli like vocabulary, phrase, and grammar. But such an outward stimulation cannot easily inspire students' inward motivation. Actually, with really picking up one target language, elementary students' need is one natural environment. An environment which is filled with the daily use of English rather than the grammatical pattern drills. Besides, people also neglect the importance of intrinsic motivation. To utilize grade and prize as one incentive will only produce the opposite effect. However, the intrinsic motivation is the real *thrust* to push students internally.

Moreover, every student has his/her learning style. Many students often feel frustrated. It seems that no matter how hard they try, their learning results cannot always come up with the effort they made. Actually, the problem is the learning style — each person has his/her own learning way. For example, in order to build up the

better ELT practices, here are three theoretical concepts which are important to find the correct foundation of ELT. The first one is about the difference between learning and acquisition. The second one is about the importance of intrinsic motivation. And the last one is to know learners' styles.

2.1 The difference between learning and acquiring

The native speaker knows their first language unconsciously. The idea of the difference between learning and acquisition is discussed in: Andrew (2004). As a learner whose mother tongue is Chinese, possesses the ability of spontaneously conversing Chinese but cannot explain or interpret any rules of Chinese. The reason why the learner's usage of Chinese is so instantly available is because his or her way of absorbing Chinese is "acquisition". This unconsciously natural "picking up" process is totally different from the conscious "learning" process. Learning is the way to forcedly recite and cram learning materials into brain. In contrast to the "picking up" of acquisition, if learners strain to remember and cannot spontaneously use in the daily conversation, he is learning but not acquiring a language, instead. Moreover, for Krashen (1985), students' conscious learning process and subconscious acquisition are mutually exclusive: learning cannot become acquisition. It suggested that the best suitable way is to naturally get L2 for students is to acquire instead learn.

2.2 The real key to inspire students' learning desire: intrinsic motivation

As Brown (2000) points out, the cognitive view of motivation includes factors such as the need for activity, stimulation, success and the self-possession. Motivation is some kind of thrust what pushes students to do something. In order to achieve, the motivation can be divided into two different ways: extrinsic or intrinsic as mentioned

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before. What is caused by any external factors is the extrinsic motivation. Like the good grades, the praise, the prize, all of them belong to the extrinsic incentive. These pushes are not come from the real inward desire but all are the outward attraction. About acquiring a foreign well, the intrinsic motivation should come from students' minds. The motive power to really learn the L2 well which belongs to the inspiration of his/her learning desire is what so called intrinsic motivation.

2.3 The suitable learning type

The individual variations indeed determine the result in which each learner differently. According to the “*Neuro-linguistic programming*”, Harmer (2003), human being possesses these five senses to accept while learning, which are “VAKOG”. One by one, it stands for visual (about seeing and looking), auditory (about hearing and listening), kinaesthetic (about feeling and touching), olfactory (about smelling) and gustatory (about tasting). While touching the new material, each person has his/her most used way to formulate. Every learner should find out the most suitable learning type to achieve the best. For the beginning learners as elementary students, it is definitely better for them to find out the suitable learning style to acquire English naturally.

3. The Approval of the English-only environment

With a “hot fever” of learning English through Taiwan, the most direct impact is the papa and mama of the elementary students. Taiwanese parents are extremely afraid that their children will lose in the “point of starting”. Therefore, there is one group of people strongly insist in practicing the only-English instruction.

3.1 Reasons for English-only instruction

English teaching is now viewed as the development of the communicative competence. The traditional teaching which only focuses on the ability of grammar, vocabulary, and writing is not right anymore. However, if the traditional model teacher cannot be the model to use English communicatively in their classroom, how can the dream of cultivating student's English communicating ability will really come true? Besides, since teachers play the most important role of helping their students learning English, some people even question that whether a non-native teacher can succeed in improving student's English communicated capability well? As Harmer (2003) has suggested, students' native language is interference to barrier students' language development. Students who learn English already have a deep knowledge of at least one language, and where L1 and English come into contact with each other where the confusions which provoke errors in English usage. The interference are can be at the level of sounds, grammer or any possible level. To take Arabic student for example, there is not a phonemic distinction between /f/ and /v/. So when Arabic students want to express *very*, they may be likely to say *ferry* instead. Some beliefs are that the L1 is the barrier to block the development of L2. According to the Hadley (1993), he suggests that a total immersion of the L2 learners in the target languages should be provided in order to get rid of the mixture of L1 and L2. Those are the reasons why some people insist in the English- only should be the best policy to practice in the student's classroom.

3.2 Some Techniques for English-only Instruction

To succeed in ELT, teachers should first change their concept of "teaching" oral English. However, the oral English ability is mainly a matter of practice which cannot

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be “taught” but only cultivated by real practice. Therefore, both teacher and students should be given enough time to communicate with each other in order to achieve the ability of oral English. As some useful methods which can be really practiced in the daily classroom, Welker (1996) points out some easy useful ways for teachers:

I Always use English which opening and closing classroom.

For elementary students, it is not really important for them to exactly realize what “begin” and “close” the classroom means. Only teacher practice in the daily classroom can they use English naturally and then learn it.

II Teach students “appropriate English” which is suitable for their level.

Be sure that elementary students can really figure out how to use and say the expression teachers show in the classrooms.

III Try to use only one or two expressions for the same activity.

By means of limiting the number of classroom expressions, students can learn them faster.

IV To teach grammar in English

Start with what students know. For students’ level is in the first beginning, teachers can also use the tool of picture to help students to comprehend as much as possible.

V Teachers should be confident in their own ability.

It is true because students need a really confident teacher to be the model of learning English.

VI Correct but not “criticize” students.

For beginners, it is important to build up their confidence in learning. AS Krashen (1985) has further claimed, the best acquisition will occur where anxiety is low, or, in Krashen’s terms, it is where the “affective filter” is low. Thus, when students make mistakes, teachers should praise them instead of blaming their

mistakes.

4. The approval of the bilingual environment

While the advent of the Direct Method at the beginning of the twentieth century insists that English-only education is the most suitable environment for elementary students, another group strongly claims that their attitudes to the use of the students' mother tongue have undergone a significant change. As David Atkinson (1987) believed, bilingual environment should be the better learning environment for them.

4.1 Reasons that are against the only-English Instruction

The biggest problem the English-only environment causes is to block the elementary students' psychology through learning process. Indeed, the only usage of L1 increases the anxiety of beginner's learning emotions. Students' mother tongue, Chinese, can be the bridge to solve the communicative gap between teachers and students in class. Besides, students' L1 can also be the greatest tool to be used for explanation and translation while it is necessary in the situation when some specific terminologies and lexical ambiguities exist. To take the word "mule" for example, its semantic value possesses several meanings. If the teacher only explains the word, mule, in English, it would easily create the confusion to students. Not only increases the learning anxieties through students' process of understanding, the English-only environment also makes students hesitate to ask questions because only English is permitted in class. In short, the psychological problems which the English-only instruction causes are exactly the main barrier to block the students' learning way.

4.2 The necessary of the bilingual; the importance of the L1

● The great helper and the time saver in ELT

What is the place of the students' mother tongue in the EFL classroom? Should teachers treat the mother tongue as a helpful resource? According to Pordromou (2001), the issue of using or not using the students' mother tongue in ELT is a paradox. Thus, he uses the following metaphors to reflect the complexity of using learners' mother tongue in the classroom:

1. A drug (with potential therapy)
2. A window (if we look through it we see the students' previous learning experiences, their interests, their knowledge of the world, and their culture)
3. A crutch (it can help us get by in a lesson)

These metaphors indicate that the use of L1 can be useful recourse in language teaching. Whether the mother tongue can surely facilitate students' learning depends on if teachers can take advantages of using L1 in class. Besides, using L1 in class will be a great help to be a big "time saver" for EFL teachers in a number of ways. For example, when teaching difficult vocabulary and grammar, when explaining the procedure of an activity, when disciplining or praising the students, or when something happens unexpectedly and teachers have to tell students what happens.

● A necessary establish basement for young beginner learners in "culture" and "linguistic diversity"

The most common found in supporting the use of L1 in classroom is its efficiency and effectiveness with low level students. David Atkinson (1987) agreed that there are general advantages of judicious use of the mother tongue. His suggestion is that several activities during classroom such as grammar explanations, checking comprehensions, and giving instructions will definitely be expedited more efficiently.

If there is no limitation on time when teaching in class, perhaps the English-only method would produce the best results. However, due to time limitations in Taiwan, students' L1 should be used as a tool or "necessary base", because it saves time.

Besides, L1 is the foundation of the teaching efficiency; it is also the important tool to explain the foreign culture. Through different cultures, students' mother tongue is the best tool to help them comprehend the new material which is indeed challenge. Moreover, to use both target language and the mother tongue is to facilitate students' acquisition in their linguistic development. To the EFL beginners, what the crucial key should notice is the equal distribution of time of using the L1 and L2.

Generally, beginning level students often prefer a bilingual approach and in the long run, due to the benefit result of bilingual environment in a long-term, the diverse linguistic capability makes them become more compete.

5. Conclusion

In summary, L1 may facilitate learning in a number of ways. In the actual classrooms, the teachers reveal that they often found using L1 in class necessary. Although such limited truth cannot be generalized to other different learners in Taiwan, it indicates that the English-only classroom may be difficult and challenging for Taiwan's young learners who are exposed to the mother tongue in the whole 24 hours. It is indeed that the only-English classroom is a goal to be good at the ability of talking. But with such limited exposure, insisting on interaction without the target language will make both teachers and students frustrated. Hence, with careful planning, teachers can and should utilize the L1 as a resource to facilitate the progress of their students towards the learning of English. However, this paper is only limited

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within the review of the current Literature. The further suggestion from this paper is that through the learning process, L1 is necessary. Since students' native language is one helpful resource to accelerate their learning efficiency, the bilingual environment will be better for these elementary children.



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