



The Analysis of Improper Provision of English Course to Primary Schools in China

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Abstract

Many primary schools in China have offered English course widely. Some scholars have focused on the strength of this provision and very few of the critics have noticed the improper provision of English course to primary schools in China. This article gives a brief introduction to the general provision of English course to primary school in China nowadays, states this provision is not proper and probes into the reasons for this improper provision. The general provision of English course results from the misconceptions of the individual factor of age, of the critical period hypothesis and other language theories.

Key words: Improper provision; English Course; Primary schools

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INTRODUCTION

The provision of English course in Chinese primary schools is very popular in recent years, for English has become the pivotal tool for international communication and cooperation. Most of the studies on English learning in Chinese primary schools deal with the proper and reasonable provision of English course in Chinese primary schools. The scholars who are for this general provision hold that the provision of English course in

Chinese primary schools is supported by the individual factor of age and critical period hypothesis. In the eyes of these scholars, the general provision of English course in Chinese primary schools is reasonable and proper. It is quite a shame that very few of them touches upon the problems behind the popular provision of English course in Chinese primary schools, though it is obvious that the current situation of this provision is not cheerful as they imagined before.

Based upon the general introduction of the background and current situation of general provision of English course in Chinese primary schools, this article seeks to highlight this improper provision of English course by analyzing the misconception of the individual factor of age, of critical period hypothesis and of other language theories. In line with that, it will help the government, the scholars and the English learners be more aware of some problems behind the general provision of English course in Chinese primary schools and give some improvement and solutions for it.

1. BACKGROUND OF GENERAL PROVISION OF ENGLISH COURSE IN CHINESE PRIMARY SCHOOLS

With the development of science and technology, there are more and more international competitions nowadays and the key point of the worldwide competition is in the field of science and technology. It is noted that information technology is the ruling mark of the level of science and technology. Foreign language, especially English, has become the important tool for international communication in the process of opening and reformation due to the globalization of the varieties of economic activities. In economic activities, people often need the necessary information to complete business negotiations, business letters and contacts in English. While in scientific

research area, people need to use English to search for large amount of materials to write academic thesis and undertake academic interchanges. Thus, it is necessary for Chinese to have basic skills in using foreign language.

Currently, English is widely offered in China's primary schools, not only in metropolitan cities but also in faraway countries. The provision of English course in primary schools has attracted the attention of many scholars. Chinese government and many scholars attach much importance and give active impetus to the provision of English course in primary schools. The changes of the provision of foreign languages in primary schools abroad have also evoked active repercussions in China. The English language has never been so popular in China. There is a growing tendency of offering English course in primary schools and this tendency develops very quickly, especially from 1979 to 2000.

In the new-run educational reforms of basic curriculums, the National Education Ministry proposed a basic objective of advancing the provision of English course in primary schools. In 1992, the National Educational Ministry proposed a new nine-year compulsory education courses plan for primary and secondary school students. There were no concrete demands to the provision of primary school English in the plan. It was only stated that English course must be offered in high grade if there were proper conditions. In 1997, the Elementary Education Department of the National Educational Ministry issued No.25 summary of talks on national middle school foreign language teaching. The talks put forward that in the stage of elementary education, English course is mainly offered in middle schools, not in primary schools commonly. They can be offered in primary schools on condition that the problems about teachers have been solved. The National Education Ministry decided to popularize English course in primary schools as part of the new curriculum forms in 2001 since the autumn semester and made a great decision that all primary schools in urban areas should offer gradually the English course from the autumn semester of 2001. In rural areas, English course would be offered in the following autumn semester. That is to say, English course became a required lesson from grade 3 to grade 6 in primary schools after 2001. Meanwhile, the new National English Curriculum Standard has been formally put into effect by official proclamation instead of English teaching syllables. The new English Curriculum Standard advocates the Learning-centered Education, the token of which is Task-based Language Teaching. Its supreme aim is to cultivate true communicators, self-guiding and life-long learners, and creative problem-solvers, responsible citizens, cooperative and excellent workers, and integrative thinkers full of modern technology and information.

2. CURRENT SITUATION OF THE IMPROPER PROVISION OF ENGLISH COURSE TO PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN CHINA

Facing the wave of popularizing the provision of English course to primary schools nationwide in China, we should realize clearly that to offer English course in primary schools is a new thing and it is not an easy task. As is known to all, to carry out the decision, we not only have to make the preparations of compiling textbooks, supplying teaching equipments, training qualified teachers, but also do careful research and have a deep thinking of offering English course in primary schools with a scientific attitude both in theory and in practice.

The provision of English course has attracted many scholars. They hold different opinions about the new thing and have argued a lot about it. Admittedly, some scholars, who are against the provision of English course, have more careful considerations. They claim that the general provision of English course to primary schools is improper due to some negative factors: Different functions concerning the age of learners, misconception of critical period hypothesis, misconception of foreign language acquisition and second language acquisition, and misunderstanding of learning and acquisition. Apart from that, the population of our country is very large, and the difference between the urban areas and the rural areas is so obvious that it is impossible to offer English course in all primary schools with the same standard and style. Furthermore, we lack experience in the provision of English course to primary schools. So it is easy for many teachers and experts to neglect the deeper problems in the process of the general provision of English course. This article is to give support to the opinion that it is improper to offer English course in primary schools in China today by means of analyzing some language theories in a correct way and putting these theories into practice in China.

3. DISCUSSION

3.1 Misconception of the Individual Factor of Age

As Ellis claims that,

rate and success of SLA (Second Language Acquisition) appear to be strongly influenced by the age of the learners. Where rate is concerned, there is evidence to suggest that older learners are better. That is, if learners at different ages are matched according to the amount of time they have been exposed to L2 (Second Language), it is the older learners who reach higher levels of proficiency. (Ellis, 1994, p.105)

Ellis also holds that

success in SLA also appears to be strongly related to the age when SLA is commenced. This is particularly the case where the pronunciation is concerned. Oyama (1976), for instance, found that the age of arrival of sixty Italian male immigrants in the USA was a far more potent determinant of the levels of pronunciation they achieved than was the length of stay. In other words, as far as success in pronunciation is concerned, younger learners do better. (Ellis, 1994, p.106)

The general provision of English course of primary schools in China today is affected greatly by the language theory of the individual factor of age. However, some Chinese scholars have made a big mistake in understanding the theory and the specific application of the individual factor of age. According to the theory of the individual factor of age, they hold the opinion that the age of language learner is an essential element for successful language learning. In their eyes, the earlier a foreign language learner begins to learn a foreign language, the better achievement he will get in the future. With the guide of the misconception of the individual factor of age, they advocate the provision of English course to primary schools. Here, this article is trying to make the theory of the individual factor of age clear and demonstrate the reasonable opinion that the general provision of English course to primary schools is improper in China today. The reasons are as following:

Admittedly, starting age affects the rate of learning in terms of the effects of age. However, when grammar and vocabulary are concerned, adolescent learners do better than children. Language learning is a very complicated system consisted of the ability cultivation of listening, speaking, reading, writing and translating. It is noted that vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar is indisputable in the process of learning. If a Chinese child begins to learn English at a younger age of nine or ten years old, he may comprehend pronunciation better than older ones in middle schools. However, it is inevitable that the Chinese child may find vocabulary and grammar quite difficult to comprehend. As a result, his poor understanding of vocabulary and grammar will exert bad influence on his English learning and he may lose interest of study gradually due to the obstacle stemming from the vocabulary and grammar. In this sense, his English learning is a failure for him.

Furthermore, as the individual factor of age explains, when rate of foreign language learning is concerned, older learners are better than younger learners. That is to say, older learners may reach higher levels of proficiency in foreign language learning due to their advantage of age. So, we may get the conclusion from the clear analysis of the individual factor of age that students in middle schools may do better jobs and reach higher levels than students in primary schools when they learn English in China today.

Apart from that, students in primary schools may make bigger progress in pronunciation than students

in middle schools, for younger learners do better when the success of pronunciation is concerned in terms of the individual factor of age. That is to say, students in primary schools have stronger imitating ability than students in middle schools. There is a danger for English learning in China, because teacher's pronunciation, to great extent, determines students' pronunciation. In fact, the level of English pronunciation of primary school teachers is generally lower than that of their counterparts in middle schools, and the current textbooks generally neglect the study of pronunciation. To make it worse, the general lower level of pronunciation of teachers in primary schools has led to the fact that the advantage of age in language learning has become a negative factor, for students in primary schools are easily misled by the poor pronunciation of teachers. The disadvantage will set a big obstacle for the students' further study in English in the near future.

3.2 Misconception of Critical Period Hypothesis

Age is the variable and most frequently considered in the discussion of individual difference in second language acquisition. It is widely held that young second language learners generally do better than old learners. This is supported by critical period hypothesis.

According to Ellis, critical period hypothesis states that

there is a period when language acquisition can take place naturally and effortlessly, but that after a certain age the brain is no longer able to process language input in this way researchers differ over when the critical period comes to an end. (Ellis, 1994, p.295)

Penfield and Roberts argued that

the optimum age for language acquisition falls within the first ten years of life. During this period the brain restrains plasticity, but with the onset of puberty this plasticity begins to disappear. They suggested that this was the result of the lateralization of the language function in the left hemisphere of the brain. (Penfield & Roberts, 1959, p.102)

Ellis also claimed that some evidence to support the critical period hypothesis was supplied by Lenneberg. Lenneberg found that "injuries to the right hemisphere caused more language problems in children than in adults." (Lenneberg, 1976, p.176) He also found that in cases of children who underwent surgery of the left hemisphere, no speech disorders resulted, whereas with adults almost total language loss occurred. Furthermore, Lenneberg provided evidence to show that "whereas children rapidly recovered total language control after such operations, adults did not do so, but instead continued to display permanent linguistic impairment." (Ibid) This suggested that the neurological basis of language in children and adults was different.

In 1967, Lenneberg developed his theory. In biological foundations of language, Lenneberg suggested that "natural language acquisition 'by mere exposure' could only take place in critical period, lasting from about age

two to puberty.” (Ibid) It is this biologically based critical period that was responsible for the fact that “automatic acquisition from mere explosion to a given language seems to disappear after this age (puberty) and foreign accents cannot be overcome easily after puberty.” (Ibid)

In 1977, Lamendella argued that Lenneberg’s conclusion regarding the critical period was overstated and introduced the term “sensitive period” to emphasize that language acquisition might be more efficient during earlier childhood but not impossible at later age.

There are still many doubts about the neurological basis of the critical period hypothesis. The age problem has continued to attract the attention of researchers. Up to now, it is controversial in this field and the controversy focuses on whether there are significant differences in second language learning concerning age, and on the theoretical explanations for those differences that researchers claim to have found. Therefore, general provision of English course to primary schools in China today due to the critical period hypothesis is not proper, for the critical period hypothesis is not really proved to be true in second language learning.

As explained in the critical period hypothesis, the age of second language learner is closely related to the efficiency of language learning. That is to say, if a second language learner wants to be successful in second language learning, an earlier start in second language learning is necessary. Therefore, many experts and teachers in the field of Chinese education take it for granted that the earlier a child begins to learn English, the better efficiency and higher level he will achieve. This misconception of the critical period hypothesis has led to the general provision of English course of primary schools in China today.

If we take a close look at the critical period hypothesis and put it into practice in China, nowadays, we may notice that the second language learning rely on language atmosphere greatly, and our language atmosphere has limited second language learning.

English, as a foreign language, is very difficult for children in our country to learn, for our mother tongue is Chinese and great difference exists between English and Chinese. As is mentioned above, critical period hypothesis is mainly useful in second language learning with good language atmosphere. There is no doubt that younger immigrants in America often do a better job than the older ones, if they begin to learn English at a younger age belonging to the critical period. It is noted that younger immigrants grow in the second language atmosphere. They keep contact with English in their daily life. Their parents, teachers, classmates and friends speak in English. English is everywhere and its power in the critical period hypothesis is indisputable. However, English is a foreign language for Chinese children. They learn English mainly in the classroom, and foreign language atmosphere does not exist in China today. It is a long way to go to cultivate

the foreign language atmosphere, because the language atmosphere is determined by various and complicated factors. It is closely related to many concrete elements in economy, politics, culture and other factors.

In particular, China is a developing country and the national economy is in the state of unbalanced development. The difference between urban areas and rural areas is so obvious that it is hard for all the primary schools to cultivate their language atmosphere with the same standard. That is to say, if we achieve the goal that the language atmosphere in urban areas is cultivated, it is also quite difficult for us to accomplish the same task in rural areas. It is the fact that China is a country of agriculture and children in primary schools mainly come from the countryside. Therefore, it is not a good choice for primary schools in China to offer English course on the condition that the misconception of critical theory may result in the failure of English learning.

3.3 Misunderstanding of Other Language Theories

3.3.1 Second Language Acquisition VS. Foreign Language Acquisition

As is claimed by Ellis,

second language acquisition is not intended to contrast with foreign language acquisition. SLA is used as a general term that embraces both untutored (or “naturalistic”) acquisition and tutored (or “classroom”) acquisition. The term ‘second language acquisition’ refers to the subconscious or conscious processes by which a language other than the mother tongue is learned in nature or a tutored setting. It covers the development of phonology, lexis, grammar, and pragmatic knowledge, but has been largely confined to morphosyntax. The process manifests both variable and invariable features. The study of SLA is directed at accounting for the learner’s competence, but in order to do so have set out to investigate empirically how a learner performs when he or she uses a second language. It is, however, an open question whether the way in which acquisition proceeds in these different situations is the same or different. (Ellis, 1994, pp.5-6)

In practice, study of English is the second language acquisition for American immigrants, because they grow in the language atmosphere and often keep contact with English. Although their mother tongue, to some extent, may exert some good or bad influence upon their English learning, the practical cases of their English level can be analyzed in a correct way by means of the theory about second language acquisition on the condition that both natural acquisition and classroom acquisition appear in the process of their study. On contrary, the study of English in China is foreign language acquisition for students in primary schools, for the students learn English in the classroom and Chinese is their mother tongue. That is to say, the application of the theory about second language acquisition is not proper in the field of Chinese English study. Our language atmosphere is totally different from that of America. So, the general provision of English course of primary schools is not proper due to some

experts' misconception of second language acquisition and foreign language acquisition.

3.3.2 Learning VS. Acquisition

Ellis points out that

second language *acquisition* is sometimes contrasted with second language *learning* on the assumption that these are different processes. The term 'acquisition' is used to refer to pick up a second language through exposure, whereas the term 'learning' is used to refer to conscious study of a second language. (Ellis, 1994, p. 6)

In practice, the study of English for Chinese students is the process of learning not acquisition. Most Chinese students learn English only in the classroom. For them, there are not other situations of English learning. Furthermore, Chinese students have conscious study in English learning. As English is a foreign language for them, they have to focus their attentions on textbook, teachers and examinations if they want to be successful language learners. So conscious study is necessary and it determines directly the state of English learning in primary schools in China today. The misconception of learning and acquisition resulting from some Chinese experts is the careless thinking that is bound to have bad influence upon primary English study in China.

CONCLUSION

China is developing in a particular period with the combination of agriculture, industry and information technology. "Knowledge Economy", which is based on knowledge and technology, will play a leading role in the future. The tendency of the global economy will accelerate China's approach to the world economy. Knowledge and talent become the important signs of a country's comprehensive strength, taking an important part in economic growth and social development. The

obtaining of knowledge and cultivation of talent relies on education. Nowadays, English study is the focus in the field of education in China, and the primary schools generally offer English course.

However, the general provision of English course to primary schools is not proper. The careless thinking is originated from some scholars' various misconceptions of language theories including the misconception of individual factor of age, the misconception of critical period hypothesis and the misunderstanding of the difference between second language acquisition and foreign language acquisition and the distinction between acquisition and learning. The careless practice, general provision of English course of primary schools, will undoubtedly set some difficult problems for Chinese education because of its obvious weakness and bad influence. In this sense, it is very difficult to achieve its supreme aim that is to cultivate true communicators, self-guiding and life-long learners, and creative problem-solvers, responsible citizens, cooperative and excellent workers, and integrative thinkers full of modern technology and information. So it is important to have the right attitude towards the current situation in Chinese education—the general provision of English course of primary schools and to find effective resolutions for the improper action.

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