

Researching the Use of L1 (Chinese) in Junior EFL Classes in China (Focusing on Listening Tasks)

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Abstract: *This article studied the influence of using L1 in junior high school English classes. Two teachers and five students from a public middle school in China were interviewed. Through communication with them, the author found that neither teachers nor students pay as much attention to listening teaching as grammar reading. The two teachers the author interviewed have different ideas about using L1 in English class according to their own teaching experience. But their ultimate goal is to improve students' English scores and abilities. Students agree with the teacher's rational use of L1 in class. They also put forward some advantages of using L1. However, the listening teaching is mainly based on the teacher's requirements, and the main task is to complete the listening training questions. Only one student suggested that if English-based teaching environment can help them improve their English listening level and other abilities.*

Keywords: L1, Junior high school, English class, Listening task.

1. Introduction

The language used by educators in classrooms is an important parameter of foreign language teaching methods. Languages used in English classes mainly include L1 and target language. In foreign language classrooms, which language should teachers use as the medium of instruction? Whether it is the learner's L1 or the L2, or the use of both, has always been controversial. Some linguists believe that in English teaching, the use of L1 will affect the development of learners' pragmatic competence (Kalivoda,1983; Duff&Polio,1990). This is also the source of language errors such as Chinglish. English as a medium of instruction can provide a good foreign language learning environment. Others believe that L1 can promote foreign language learning to a certain extent, and L1 should be used appropriately in foreign language class (Atkinson, 1987; Cook, 2001;) In China, a scholar thinks L1 can help teachers' teaching. He also says it is not practical to put the learner in a complete target language input environment. The single language teaching principle should not be strictly followed in foreign language classes in universities, primary or secondary schools. (Heng Renquan, 2004)

2. Methodology

The method of data collection for this project was through semi-structured interview. And the author used qualitative research. This chapter aims at discussing the methodological underpinnings of the study. The author started by presenting the philosophical framework, followed by a discussion of the methods of data collection. Then the author introduced the students and teachers who were interviewed. The author asked them some questions related to the topic and transcribed their interviews and compiled the interview draft. During the interview, the author further explored their answers to find out some unclear opinions released by them. When sorting out the interview draft, combine the current research background and the limitations of researchers to think about findings and explore the limitations. The author closes this chapter with ethical considerations and a reflective discussion of the research process. This study combines both academic theory and practical experience of teaching, in order to analyse and

justify arguments.

In the study of foreign language learning, the process of second language acquisition may be interfered by the native language. Some students may blame the interference from the L1 for the main reason of poor foreign language learning, and often use the "foreign" accent in the spoken English of foreign language learners to prove their views. On the other hand, some teachers will regard the foreign language learning process as a process of how to overcome the influence of the L1, or gradually replace the language features of the L1 with the language features of the foreign language, and thus gradually approach the foreign language form. As a result, many teaching methods with different viewpoints have emerged. Teaching and research workers in Chinese middle school English field have also begun to explore the suitable mode of English teaching in Chinese middle schools. One of the main questions remains whether Chinese should be used in English teaching in Chinese middle schools, or should all-English teaching mode be used instead of Chinese, or should English teaching be conducted with the help of Chinese? This study thus set out to find answers to the following research questions:

- 1) Why do teachers feel about the use of their L1 across different classrooms?
- 2) How do students experience the use of their L1 as part of their English learning? (listening skills)
- 3) What are the advantages and disadvantages of using Chinese? (Discuss listening teaching in detail)

2.1 Data Collection & Methods

2.1.1 Semi-structured Interviews

The author interviewed two junior high school English teachers and five junior high school students. The author aimed to discuss with them the influence of Chinese on their foreign language development- focusing on their English listening skills. The interviews conducted on the premise of network, and the whole process was recorded without camera. The interview main questions were as follows: 1. Why do

teachers feel about the use of their L1 across different classrooms? 2. How do students experience the use of their L1 as part of their English learning? (listening skills) 3. Can teachers fully use L2 in English class help students improve their English listening ability? 4. What are the advantages and disadvantages of using Chinese? (Discuss listening teaching in detail)

The first research sub-question sought to understand teachers' perception of the use of their L1 across different classrooms. Through this wanted to gain an overall understanding for the reasons why teachers draw on their L1 as part of their English teaching and the beliefs that may shape their teaching. Whereas through the second sub-question, the author wanted to learn more about students' views on the use of their L1 during their English lessons. Through the third question, the author aimed to learn more about the teacher's views on the influence of L2 on students' listening ability in English class. And whether their views are the same as their actual classroom language use. Finally, the third sub-question sought to develop a broader picture of the disadvantages and advantages of using Chinese in the English classroom.

2.2 Data Analysis

2.2.1 Thematic Analysis

Interview content was transcribed and organized under the main research questions. Thematic analysis was used to develop themes from the interview material. The author coded the data according to what had been said regarding research questions, and then developed themes. The author aimed to highlight the parts related to the topic in the document and use shorter words or sentences to comment on these contents. According to the content of their answers, the author summarized participants' views. The author thought about the reasons for their particular views meaning their underlying assumptions. This helped the author to understand the teachers' beliefs about L1 in the English classroom as well as to gain a deeper understanding of the students' experiences of their English lessons regarding the use of L1. The author found three themes from data. English(L2) in the classroom; Chinese(L1) in the classroom; A mixture of both language in the classroom. After sorting out and marking their interview drafts, the author found that some of them would have the same idea, while others would have the opposite idea. For example, the two teachers showed in the interview that their attitudes towards using L1 were different. However, their ultimate goal is for students to learn English well, and there is some agreement on the advantages and disadvantages of using L1. Five students sometimes have the same view. For example, they all think that appropriate use of L1 can be allowed. Maybe all these students are from public schools, and all the English teachers are Chinese. They have never encountered the situation of teaching in English. But there is one student (A) whose ideas are obviously different from those of other students. He will agree that the L2-based teaching method can help him improve his English listening ability. At a deeper level, the author learned that he had friends of the same age attending private schools. His friend's main language in class is L2, and most of the teachers are teachers from countries where English is the main language.

In the communication with friends, he found that his friends' oral English and listening to English materials are much better than his.

2.2.2 The Use of Chinese in the Classroom is beneficial

Teachers and students agree that proper use of L1 is indeed beneficial. Both teachers believe that "using L1 can help students better understand what they have learned", and three students share the same view. Three students think that "teachers can relieve their nervousness and relax themselves by speaking Chinese properly in class". Teachers think that using Chinese can help them save classroom time. Two teachers and three students think that proper use of Chinese is conducive to better maintaining classroom order. At the same time, teacher B thinks that it is convenient for him to express himself clearly when using Chinese. Both teachers agree that the use of translation teaching in grammar teaching can help students learn. Student A put forward his own views, such as "teachers should use Chinese to tell jokes and enliven the classroom atmosphere".

With regard to listening teaching, teachers and students generally think that there is not much time spent in class. To train students' listening ability, listening test questions are generally adopted. Teachers also use Chinese when explaining listening topics, in order to facilitate students to understand words they don't understand more quickly. At the same time, both teachers think that if teachers increase the frequency of using English in class and create an English-based school atmosphere, students' listening will be improved to some extent. Students don't care much about whether teachers use Chinese in listening teaching. Because the teaching of listening is not so important in English class. In the English listening part of their English test, as long as you can do English listening questions and ensure the correct rate, it means that their English listening ability is good in junior high school. However, the listening materials of their English listening test can hardly play real-life dialogue clips. It may be that the English listening level of public schools in junior middle schools is not high as a whole. At the same time, the teacher's teaching focus may be on grammar and writing. Because these two parts have a higher score in the test paper.

2.3 Discussion

Excessive use of Chinese in English class also has many disadvantages. Both teachers think that excessive use of Chinese will reduce students' English input, which is not conducive to students' English proficiency, especially the improvement of listening and speaking ability. Three students agree with this view. The teacher A thinks that excessive use of L1 will hinder the formation of English thinking. Both teachers think that overuse of Chinese will make students form Chinglish. Teacher B thinks that excessive use of Chinese in class will cause students to rely too much on their L1. Teachers are more aware of the disadvantages of overusing Chinese than students.

According to the Chinese Senior Middle School Teaching Program, the teaching aim of English for senior middle school students is, "on the basis of junior middle school English teaching, which is to consolidate and broaden students' basic

knowledge, develop their basic techniques for listening, speaking, reading and writing. The main aim of this approach is to cultivate students' initial communicative ability both in spoken and written English, laying particular emphasis on cultivating the ability of reading comprehension.

The results of this qualitative study show that both teachers and students have confirmed that their L1 is widely used in foreign language classes, and they all hold a positive attitude towards the use of L1. Most teachers and students think that using their L1 is helpful for learning foreign languages. Therefore, the author believes that we should be in favor of the use of L1 in junior high school foreign language class, and should not arbitrarily and completely reject the use of L1. Second, the use of L1 has certain advantages. From the data of questionnaire and teachers' collective discussion, we can see that there are still many advantages of using L1 properly.

First of all, it helps students to better understand what they have learned, relieve students' nervousness and facilitate their self-expression, because teachers can express their views more clearly and deeply in Chinese when necessary, and at the same time, it can reduce students' cognitive burden, deepen students' understanding and help them master relevant English usage.

Secondly, English is not their first language for both students and teachers. There is still a gap between teachers' English level and junior high school students' English level. Even if the teacher wants to communicate with the students in English, the teacher needs to use words that the students can understand. Communicating with teachers and students in Chinese can improve communication efficiency and quality. Besides, not all junior high school students concentrate on their studies in class. Sometimes teachers need L1 to keep order. In the introduction part of the classroom, teachers can also use the cultural background of the first language that students are familiar with to enliven the classroom atmosphere. This can help teachers get into the theme of the new unit more smoothly. When students feel that they can't answer a question with their current knowledge of the target language. They can solve this problem by using Chinese for reference and comparison. For example, students may know most of the words in a sentence, but the sentence meaning connected by the words is not suitable. Then students can try to translate this sentence in Chinese at this time, and try to make the Chinese meaning of this sentence more logical. When the students have finished the Chinese meaning of this sentence, their understanding of the original English sentence has also made progress. There is also a reason why teachers use translation teaching in grammar teaching. By comparing the grammar rules of L1 and L2, students can have a deeper memory through comparative study. L1 can also help teachers explain some grammar rules and professional vocabulary. Students can also understand more quickly. When students feel that they can't answer a question with their current knowledge of the target language. They can solve this problem by using Chinese for reference and comparison. For example, students may know most of the words in a sentence, but the sentence meaning connected by the words is not suitable. Then students can try to translate this sentence in Chinese at this time, and try to make the Chinese meaning of this sentence more logical. When the students have finished

the Chinese meaning of this sentence, their understanding of the original English sentence has also made progress. There is also a reason why teachers use translation teaching in grammar teaching. By comparing the grammar rules of L1 and L2, students can have a deeper memory through comparative study. L1 can also help teachers explain some grammar rules and professional vocabulary. Students can also understand more quickly. Therefore, (Cook, 2001) thinks that when "the cost of using a foreign language is too high", teachers should consider using their L1.

Third, the L1 is overused in junior high school foreign language class. Fourthly, too much use of L1 has certain disadvantages. Through my research, two teachers clearly realized that there are many disadvantages of using L1 too much. It seems that my research has made teachers aware of the disadvantages of using students' L1. The most important one is to reduce the amount of English input of students, which is not conducive to the improvement of students' English level, especially listening and speaking ability. In addition, there are obstacles to the formation of Students' English thinking, resulting in students' over-dependence on their L1, the formation of "Chinese-style" English, resulting in students' understanding of English and so on. This is consistent with the views of many scholars. (Cook, 2001) believed that students should be exposed to foreign languages to the maximum extent, while (Turnbull, 2001) believed that teachers should use foreign languages to the maximum extent in class to stimulate students' interest in learning foreign languages.

3. Conclusion

The author answered research questions through qualitative research. In class, teachers use L1 for the difficult teaching branch to facilitate students' understanding. Students also understand that the teacher uses L1 in this part of the class. For the listening part, teachers usually only spend a small amount of time in class to help students train their listening skills. By comparing the interviews with two teachers, the author found that the proportion of L1 used by them in class is related to their own English level. And if the teaching content is more difficult, they are more likely to use L1. Through interviews with students, the author found that they prefer teachers to use L1 in class. Students don't have a lot of vocabulary in junior high school, and using L1 can help them get into the learning state faster. Some students don't have a lot of their own ideas about listening teaching, which are mainly based on the teacher's requirements. Although the teacher knows that if L2 is fully used in class, it can help students improve their English listening ability. But the foundation of the students in the class is not all the same. Some students may not understand what the teacher said in class. At the same time, teachers hope that students' grades can be improved. Therefore, for the part of listening teaching, both students and teachers focus on doing exercises. However, one of the students mentioned in the interview that the whole English teaching environment might be helpful for learning. If students have this awareness, their acceptance of L2 will be higher. The author also learned a lot about the advantages and disadvantages of using L1 in class through their interviews, most of which are based on students' learning effect. But one of the reasons mentioned by teacher B that he uses L1 in class

is that he thinks his spoken English is not very proficient. This is something that the author didn't expect before. If this teacher continues to mainly use L1 for teaching, it may be difficult for him to improve his oral English.

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