The Effect of Using First Language (L1) to Learn Second Language (L2) on Language Learning in Primary School in China

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Abstract

As the development of China from last century, learning English has been valued because of its significance in global interaction. In China, it is not uncommon for primary schools to teach English with the aid of Chinese. In this paper, the author illustrates the benefits of applying first language (L1) to learn second language (L2) in language learning in primary school in China. Both personal language learning experiences and main concepts of this field are employed to support the investigation. Furthermore, the author presents some challenges or suggestions for each part of the discussion to promote the validity of this learning mode.

Keywords: first language (L1), second language (L2), translanguaging

1. Introduction

Since China began its opening and modernization construction more than 40 years ago, attention has been increasingly paid to English due to its impact on modernization and globalization (Hu, 2005). Besides Chinese and mathematics, English is one of the three major subjects in all schools and learning levels (Cheng, 2012). As the mother-tongue of most or all students, Chinese is an essential tool to promote English language education (Qiang & Siegel, 2012). In traditional and common English courses in primary schools, English is taught as the target language assisted by Chinese instructions. In this essay, I will argue that utilizing L1 to learn L2 can cause positive impacts on language learning in Chinese primary school. The theme will be discussed from three aspects, strengthening understanding, enhancing interaction and communication, and developing interest in language learning. The discussion will be supported by my personal experiences of learning Chinese and English as well as relevant literature.

2. Strengthening Understanding of Second Language

I enhanced my English competences by clearly understanding the content in the classes through teachers' instructions in Chinese when I was in elementary school. Like most children in China, I started learn Chinese initially in informal setting, home. Under the environment that all the family members talked to me in Chinese, I gradually picked up some phrases and then could use basic sentences to express my thought, emotion, and purpose. However, I did not know precisely about the pronunciation and written forms of Chinese characters. Then, when I was 6 years old, I went to elementary school. Since Mandarin is the official and national language of China according to relevant provisions of The Law of the National Standard Language of People's Republic of China (The Standing of Committee of the National People's Congress, 2001), Mandarin is taught as the content of Chinese subject from the first grade in public primary school. Language learning in primary school is likely to be a foundation of further language development. At the beginning, I learnt how to articulate the letters including 23 initials, 24 finals and 4 tones. Then, words and phrases were taught from easy level to higher level. Meanwhile, teacher would use basic sentence patterns to help us be familiar with the component of sentences, such as subject, object, predicate and so on, and help us generate sentences.

According to the English National Curriculum published in 2003 by Ministry of Education of China, English should be taught from Grade 3 when learners are at the age of 9 or 10 (Song & Cheng, 2011). Therefore, when I was in Grade 3, I began to learn English as a main subject in primary school. Similar to the teaching mode of Chinese lessons, we started from recognizing the 26 alphabets and the phonetic symbols of English language. Since the phonics of English is alike to that of Chinese involving ordinally spelling the syllables, I felt a sense of

familiarity due to the former experience of learning Chinese. After that, teacher taught vocabulary and phrases by providing us with Chinese meaning and explaining them vividly in Chinese to make sure that we could understand the meaning of those content. When it comes to grammar points, teacher would analyze the constitution of the sentence in Chinese. Because we had leant those sentence components in Chinese classes in Grade 1 and Grade 2, it's easy to comprehend their functions in English. Meanwhile, teacher would conduct translation between English and Chinese to explain the sentences or the readings.

Compared with my experience of public elementary school, the English immersion lessons I attended when I was 10 years old in a private English school requesting only English to be taught and spoken in the classroom. The knowledge was acquired through practically usage, which made me confused by the exact functions and meaning of the grammar points due to the fact that I could not understand the explanation fully in English. Therefore, learning through Chinese was helpful for me when I just start to understand the basic usage of an unfamiliar language.

To begin with, my experience above indicates both implicit and explicit education in language learning. Implicit learning of language is an instinctive and continuous procedure, which contributes to one's communicative skills (Zhang, 2015). My experience of learning Chinese speaking at home before going to primary school belongs to implicit learning. With the help of implicit knowledge, I attained primary and basic usage of Chinese, which established a solid foundation of my learning procedure in primary school. Meanwhile, what I learnt in Chinese lessons and English lessons is representative of explicit knowledge, which refers to certain content of grammar, vocabulary and so on (Ellis & Shintani, 2014). Particularly, Chinese teachers who teach English as a Foreign Language (EFL) are possessed with high level of explicit knowledge of morphological awareness, such as vocabulary (Bae, Yin, & Joshi, 2019).

Moreover, the educational pattern of teaching English assisted with Chinese demonstrates a representative of translanguaging, involved in week 1 content. Translanguaging refers to involving two languages in teaching and learning. Students attain knowledge in one language and create outcome in the other language (Turner, 2019). Turner presents in his investigation that one of the purposes of the application of translanguaging is to guide students to co-construct knowledge, which is consistent with my experience of learning English through Chinese. In addition, it is revealed that students' cognitive competences improve through transfer between L1 and L2 and the abilities develop in both languages (Shum, Ho, Siegel, & Au, 2016). There is a reciprocal relationship between L1 and L2 (Chen, Xu, Nguyen, Hong, & Wang, 2010). For example, Shum et al. (2016) reports that the morphological construction of Chinese acquired in Grade 1 benefits English word reading as well as reading comprehension and composition in higher grades in primary school. In turn, since the phonological structure of English is more complex than Chinese, learning English can contribute to enhance phonological awareness (Chen et al., 2010). Therefore, the language learning involving both Chinese and English facilitate understanding and development of both languages through mutual influences.

Admittedly, applying Chinese much to English learning is not always helpful for language learning to some degree. When teachers adopt a mass of Chinese during English courses, the language environment might be interfered (Qiang & Siegel, 2012). Although students need to make sense of the meaning through teachers' explanation in Chinese, yet students need to develop thinking in English and speaking in English. Thus, to avoid this issue, attention should be paid to the proportion of Chinese and the function of Chinese used in English classrooms.

In brief, learning Chinese and using the knowledge acquired in Chinese courses in moderate extent can facilitate Chinese primary learners understand content of English lessons.

3. Enhancing Interaction and Communication

In my public elementary school, all the English teachers are local teachers who are regarded as non-native speakers since neither of them come from English-speaking nations, such as Britain and America. However, they are qualified in their field of the subject and are quite familiar with the English learning habits of Chinese children in elementary school. At the beginning, I thought that I could not generate a complete sentence to describe my perspective, so I tended to keep silent not only to teacher but also to classmates in English classrooms. In fact, during the lessons, my teacher would use Chinese to explain the difficult points as well as ask us questions to make sure we understand the points. Once any student expressed that he or she is confused with some ideas or wore a confused look on his or her face, my teacher would encourage the child to feel free to speak out. If the students are less able or confident to speak entirely in English, the teacher would let the student use both Chinese and English to present their thought. As we just started learning English from the third grade, our competence of oral English, especially logical speaking, is relatively less than that of spoken Chinese. By

using Chinese, our mother-language and our confusion were precisely and directly delivered to the teachers in order that there was no need to guess our meaning. Feeling reassured to express our views in both languages, we increasingly participated in the class activities and discussion. As a consequence, learners' voice could be heard besides teachers' opinions. Additionally, when I discussed with my partners, I would try to speak in English first and then adopted some Chinese expressions to furnish my statements. In this way, all members of the discussion group could understand each other's ideas.

To view the second period of my experience of learning English with the assistance of Chinese, three relevant topics are included in the following analysis:

First of all, there are assumptions of native speakers and non-native speakers that native speaking individuals are superior to those with non-native speaking background for their mastery of language (Creese, Blackledge, & Takhi, 2014). Native speakerism is a framework that consider native speakers set a good example of using the target language and provide best linguistic teaching outcomes. However, the native speakerism has been criticized by researchers and scholars for the assumptions are negative to non-native speakers (Copland, Mann, & Garton, 2020). It is reported that due to the same cultural background and similar learning experience, local English teachers are able to stand on the position of their learners by explaining the grammatic knowledge and empathizing with the learners at the same time (Kawasaki, 2020). Meanwhile, the surveyed teachers in Kawasaki's (2020) study also claimed that teaching students from their own culture contributes to students' motivation and participation in English learning during the courses. Therefore, viewing English teachers should goes beyond the definition of native and non-native speakers. Non-native speaking English teachers provide students with benefits as well.

Second, my English teacher's way of teaching and in-class interaction mirrored dialogic pedagogy that most or all students are inspired to engage in the classroom. In dialogic pedagogy, teacher enables students express their own perspectives as well as solve problems by working with their teachers and peers (Snell & Lefstein, 2018; Ferrada, 2020). In this way, not only teachers' voice and views but also students' can be heard in the class. Students and teachers can get instant feedback from each other. At the meantime, using Chinese to assist English expression help primary school learners dare to speak out their thoughts and needs as well as express themselves exactly, so that they could interact and communicate fluently with others during English classes.

Third, this experience also reflects features of student's language development. Halliday (1993) illustrated that language, cognition as well as social life are correlated. One of the features of child language development is the promotion of interpersonal interactions. In the above paragraphs, it is indicated that English teachers engage students in interaction during lesson by using Chinese. Actually, interpersonal development is seen as a gateway to logical communication and contribute to further language learning (Halliday, 1993). With interpersonal interactions, students' development would extend beyond linguistic knowledge, such as grammar.

Although majority of teachers in primary school are required of teacher certificates, yet some of them may have insufficient teaching experience or training, which might influence the effectiveness of English language teaching (Song & Cheng, 2011). To address this problem, professional development could be utilized to provide teachers with teaching strategies, social contexts, cultural knowledge and linguistic knowledge. Besides, by knowing more about students and social practices in the school can enhance teachers' legitimacy in school as well (Creese, Blackledge, & Takhi, 2014). As a result, teachers would be qualified and adaptable to the teaching practices.

In short, through implicit instructions, explicit instructions and dialogic pedagogy, adopting Chinese to learn English furnish students with opportunities to engage in interpersonal interaction and communication.

4. Motivating Interest in Language Learning

My English lessons in primary school were conducted with various topics, including friendship, traveling, vacation and so on. With the help of these topics, the lessons could integrate grammatic, lexical as well as cultural knowledge in order to provide learning content for students and attract our interest. Here is my experience of combining cultural knowledge with English learning. When learning about the unit with name of A Big Festival, teacher taught us a plenty of word usage of Chinese spring festival and Christmas Day in western country by explaining some points in Chinese and comparing differences between two festivals. We even compared the expression of same phrases in English and Chinese. On the next day, teacher divided us into groups of Spring Festival or Christmas Day and asked us to bring some items that we thought to represent the festivals. Then, we were assigned to complete a role play or small drama to present these two festivals. During the performance, I learnt some distinct features of Chinese and western culture. For instance, Chinese people are not likely to open the gifts to others' face, while western people would ask for permission to open the gift

immediately and thank the person. After watching, classmates would comment on each other and give gifts to the one that he or she like most. This learning mode enriched my knowledge of cultures. Meanwhile, since I was fond of watching TV plays and was dreamed of being an actress in my childhood, the activity satisfied my wish of performing. Thus, my love for English grew as well.

As for this experience, it suggests that L2 learning is related with affective factors. Affective factors refer to emotional perception of the language, the speakers or the culture of the language (Gass & Selinker, 2008). Pavlenko (2013) demonstrated that affect impacts on linguistic, psychological and social aspects of language learning. At the same time, the relationship between student outcomes of L2 and emotion is dynamic and reciprocal. In regard to my personal experience shown in the above section, my positive affect related with acting turned to motivation of participating in learning English and Chinese languages as well as cultures. Then, the linguistic and cultural acquisition with a sense of success coming from the activity inspired my active affect for further language learning. Therefore, my emotion mutually impacts my language learning.

Admittedly, negative affect, such as anxiety, can also influence learning and cognition. For instance, with negative emotion, learners might close their mind and resist learning (Arnold, 2011). It's significant for teachers to integrate affect and education, but also pursue positive affect in educational practices. Therefore, more attention should be paid to arouse students' entertainment in language learning.

In brief, language learning involving both Chinese and English arouse positive affect. In turn, the positive affect brings students interest in further language learning.

5. Conclusion

To sum up, this paper argues that learning English with the help of Chinese can facilitate language learning in primary school in China. The advantages of this learning pattern contain strengthening understanding of language, contributing to interaction, and motivating interesting in language learning. In order to support the statement, the author critically analyzes the personal experiences of learning Chinese and English in primary school. Meanwhile, the experiences are linked relevant concepts, including translanguaging, implicit and explicit learning, language development, dialogic pedagogy, assumptions of native speakers, and affective factors. Besides, to enhance the effectiveness of using L1 to learn L2, the proportion of the usage of Chinese in English classes should be controlled properly. Meanwhile, attention should also be paid to teacher education and creating positive effect in language learning.

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