

Comparative Analysis of Teaching Methods in EFL Education: German and Chinese School Practices Across Levels

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Abstract

This comparative analysis examines the teaching methods in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education in Germany and China across various educational levels. While Germany emphasizes immersive learning and practical language application, China focuses more on theoretical understanding. Despite these differences, both nations share a commitment to enhancing English proficiency among students. Evaluating effective teaching methods for adult second language acquisition in English requires careful consideration of the strengths of each approach, as well as individual preferences, learning styles, and cultural contexts. Considering the multicultural and international perspectives, Total Physical Response (TPR) is recommended as a valuable adjunct from primary school level onwards, alongside a synthesis of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and the Grammar-Translation (GT) Method. Furthermore, the augmentation of the Natural Approach can enhance the language learning experience. The findings offer pedagogical insights for Chinese educators to develop a more tailored English education methodology that aligns with China's specific context.

Keywords: EFL education, Germany, China, teaching methods, English proficiency

1. Introduction

1.1 Disparities in English Proficiency Between Germany and China

Secondary and tertiary students in Germany generally exhibit higher English proficiency compared to their Chinese counterparts. English education in Germany primarily focuses on basic education stages. Shu (2011) noted that while German secondary students receive comparatively fewer years of English education than Chinese students, their mastery level is notably higher. Despite less prevalence of English skill courses at the university level, the overall English proficiency among Germans significantly surpasses that of individuals in China. In the cohort of Chinese students aspiring to study abroad, there's a noticeable discrepancy in English proficiency when compared to German candidates.

According to data from the official IELTS (International English Language Testing System) website, both Academic and General Training test takers from Germany have shown more impressive performances in contrast to Chinese test takers, as shown in Figure 1. The two following tables illustrate the average performance data across the overall result (denoted as OR), rank (denoted as Rk), and four fundamental sections—Listening (denoted as L), Reading (denoted as Rd), Writing (denoted as W), and Speaking (denoted as S) — of the IELTS exams conducted in 2018 (Academic and General Training Test), 2021 (Academic Test), and 2022 (Academic and General Training Test), distinguishing between test-takers whose native language is German (denoted as G) and Chinese (denoted as C), as shown in Figure 2. Across the years, German native speakers have exhibited an upward trend in average scores across all sections. Conversely, Chinese native speakers showed improvements in Listening and Speaking, but a decline in Reading and Writing scores in 2022. Overall, Chinese native speakers consistently displayed lower average scores across all four sections compared to their German counterparts. With the exception of the 2018 General Training test, German native speakers ranked first globally in total scores across the other four tests.

2022	2022(GT)	German	7.5(L)	7.2(Rd)	6.6(W)	7.3(S)	7.2(OR)	1(Rk)
		Chinese	6.6(L)	6.5(Rd)	6.1(W)	6.1(S)	6.4(OR)	/(Rk)
	2022(AC)	German	8.1(L)	7.8(Rd)	6.6(W)	7.5(S)	7.6(OR)	1(Rk)
		Chinese	6.2(L)	6.5(Rd)	5.8(W)	5.7(S)	6.1(OR)	/(Rk)
2021	2021(AC)	German	8(L)	7.74(Rd)	6.56(W)	7.47(S)	7.51(OR)	1(Rk)
2018	2018(AC)	German	7.84(L)	7.6(Rd)	6.6(W)	7.42(S)	7.43(OR)	1(Rk)
		Chinese	5.89(L)	6.17(Rd)	5.39(W)	5.39(S)	5.78(OR)	33(Rk)
	2018(GT)	German	7.3(L)	7(Rd)	6.4(W)	7.4(S)	7.1(OR)	2(Rk)
		Chinese	6.3(L)	6.2(Rd)	5.7(W)	5.9(S)	6.1(OR)	/(Rk)

Figure 1. IELTS scores: German vs. Chinese (2018-2022)

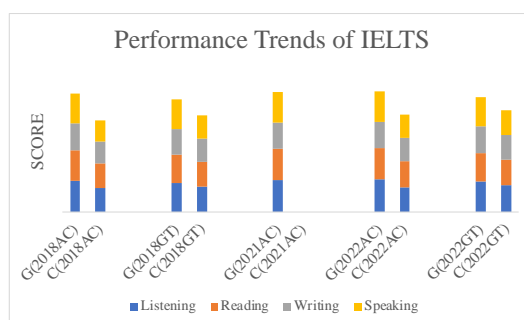


Figure 2. Performance trends of IELTS

For the general populace, a clear contrast in English proficiency also emerges between Germany and China. The EF English Proficiency Index (EF EPI) is an annually released benchmark for adult English proficiency, considering countries or regions with over 400 participants in the EF Set test. This index categorizes surveyed nations into five proficiency ranges, ranging from very high to very low levels. According to the EF EPI 2023, Germany ranked 10th among 113 surveyed countries, indicating a very high level, while China (Mainland) stood at the 82nd position, indicating a lower proficiency level.

1.2 Analysis of Commonalities and Differences Between Germany and China

Both Germany and China are countries where English is learned as a foreign language. According to Kachru's Three Concentric Circles Model of English Language, which allocated the presence of English into three concentric circles: the Inner Circle, the Outer Circle, and the Expanding Circle (Widdowson et al., 1987), Germany and China fall into the category of "Expanding Circle" nations, implying their use of English as a non-native language. Despite not being English-speaking nations, English finds extensive use socially and within government sectors in these two countries. In terms of the linguistic context, in everyday life, local communication among Chinese predominantly occurs in Chinese. Similarly, Germany doesn't present a significant advantage in terms of the linguistic environment when compared to China. Speaking of the comparable socioeconomic status, as per the IMD World Competitiveness Rankings of 2022, China held the third position among economies with populations exceeding 40 million, following the United States and Germany. This indicates China's significant global competitiveness, placing it on par with Germany.

Furthermore, conflicting perspectives on English learning are evident among both the German and Chinese populations. German perspective on English is contradictory. Zhang (2015) pointed out that, while there's a push to protect the German language, with 74% avoiding English in daily life and minimal English signage in places like Berlin, 70% of Germans are proficient in English. This paradox suggests a resistance to cultural influence while emphasizing English proficiency, often learned predominantly in school due to limited external linguistic exposure. Similarly, Gao (2015) highlighted the contradictory stance of the Chinese towards English: while it's considered a vital tool for China's global prowess, it's also perceived as a threat eroding the native identity of the Chinese language and culture. Although Luo (2015) found that a majority of netizens (75.4%) express negativity towards English, the Ministry of Education's 2018 data revealed over 31 million tertiary education students contributed to a near 200-million-strong foreign language learning community in China, the world's largest.

However, there are some differences between Germany and China, primarily seen in the close linguistic connections and cultural proximity Germany shares with English-speaking countries. This proximity renders Germany an ideal environment, facilitating greater immersion in English and its practical utilization in daily contexts.

Therefore, given Germany's remarkable English proficiency, the shared traits between Germany and China, Germany's favorable English learning environment, and a recognition of the crucial role of teaching methods in English learning outcomes, it's imperative to explore teaching methodologies employed in both countries. This endeavor aims to identify the most efficacious practices in China, thus bolstering English education across the country.

2. Application of Teaching Methods in English Education in Germany and China

In *Second Language Acquisition*, Ellis (2002) delineates seven distinct teaching methods, which can be classified into two major categories: Traditional Methods and Modern Methods. Under the Traditional Methods, the following are included: Grammar-Translation Method (emphasizing grammar through translation exercises) and Audio-Lingual Method (prioritizing grammar learning through listening and repetition). The Modern Methods encompass five subcategories: Natural Approach (emphasizing natural acquisition and context, providing spontaneous communication opportunities while gradually introducing grammar features), Direct Method (stressing exposure to grammar features gradually), Total Physical Response (reinforcing learner memory through active participation), Suggestopedia (creating a relaxed learning environment using music, art, and positive suggestions), and Communicative Language Teaching (integrating diverse teaching methods through real-life contexts).

Having noticed the classification of teaching methodologies as outlined by Rod Ellis, the focus now shifts to a detailed investigation into the utilization of these methodologies within the English education systems in both Germany and China. In order to comprehensively analyze the practical application of these methods, this section first takes an in-depth look at the overview of English teaching methods in Germany, examining education from primary school to university level based on a systematic collection of empirical evidence and literature.

2.1 Application of Teaching Methods in English Education in Germany

Firstly, for native German-speaking students in primary school, English education primarily embraces the Natural Approach and Total Physical Response (TPR). At this level, German educators emphasize the development of language acquisition skills, adhering to the philosophy of "following the child's native language learning process." Consequently, English learning during primary education involves activities tailored to children's age-related characteristics, emphasizing holistic language acquisition with elements of play and interdisciplinary approaches (Zhang, 2015).

Moving into the secondary level, German English education demonstrates a more diverse and in-depth approach. Research indicates that German educators employ various teaching methods to foster students' language proficiency and cultural awareness, including Traditional Methods, Natural Approach, Direct Method (DM), and Language Teaching (CLT).

The application of the Traditional Method is evident in the comprehensive impartation of specialized and language knowledge, emphasizing systematic language instruction and specific exercises involving text comprehension, listening, speaking, and translation (Shu, 2011). A notable instance of the Natural Approach's application is observed in Frankfurt University researchers' creation of the "Language Town" activity targeting students facing challenges in foreign language acquisition (Qian, 2015). This initiative provides a natural language environment, fostering spontaneous English acquisition through practical engagement. The Direct Method manifests in a classroom culture emphasizing low teacher control and dialogic teaching. Teachers predominantly function as organizers and facilitators, directing activities, overseeing individual or group learning, and guiding student discourse to practice and utilize language skills (Zhang, 2015). Moreover, the utilization of the Direct Method is evident in the direct recruitment of native English speakers as teachers, encouraging students' direct exposure and usage of English (Zhang, 2009), emphasizing practical language application. The adoption of Communicative Language Teaching is exemplified in various scenarios. One instance is seen in the "Language Town" activity, fostering genuine interest and practical usage of English within authentic contexts. According to Zhang (2009), German foreign language curriculum prioritizes dialogue-based materials, listening, and speaking activities, with 75% of class time dedicated to these aspects. Establishing connections with foreign counterparts and utilizing authentic language materials, German secondary education aims to enhance language proficiency and cultural appreciation through engaging experiences.

Advancing to the university level, the predominant learning methodologies encompass heuristic and research-oriented approaches. Building upon the foundation of accumulating knowledge in language and literary theory, the emphasis is on continually shaping students' robust academic proficiency and professional capabilities (Liu & Qin, 2010). Notably, the employment of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) emphasized authentic language usage environments, successfully encouraging students to communicate in English during their studies and highlighting the practical application of language skills and the development of communicative abilities.

2.2 Application of Teaching Methods in English Education in China

For the majority of pupils in China, the initial English education on them is implemented by Total Physical Response (TPR), followed by Audio-Lingual Method and Grammar-Translation (GT) Method. Since they step into middle school, teachers gradually strengthen and emphasize the application of Grammar-Translation (GT) Method, leading to test-oriented preparation and spoon-feeding education. There are only few cases characterized by Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) Method like introducing foreign culture, recruiting foreign teachers, and encouraging Chinese students to engage in exchange programs and mutual visits with students from foreign schools in some metropolitan areas or foreign language schools. Although, for senior students, there has been a notable increase in international exchanges, as more parents now possess the financial capability to send their children for both short-term and long-term study abroad with the rising living standards in China in recent years (Qian, 2015).

To conclude, both countries engage in Total Physical Response (TPR), Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) Method and Traditional Methods including Grammar-Translation Method and Audio-Lingual Method, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Teaching methods applied in English education of Germany and China

	Traditional Methods	Natural Approach	DM	TPR	Suggestopedia	CLT
German	√	√	√	√	/	√
Chinese	√	/	/	√	/	√

During the application, Chinese institution and instructors have laid more emphasis on Grammar-Translation Method affected by the exam-oriented education system and grade-fixated evaluation standards. Under the dominance of such a teaching method, children tend to experience a decline in their interest and enthusiasm for learning English, resulting in lower language proficiency and a deficiency in practical application skills.

In comparison, English education in Germany prioritizes the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) method, the Natural Approach, and the Direct Method (DM). Although both countries employ the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) method, it is more widespread and deeply embraced in Germany, leading to more outstanding achievement among students. In the context of the Natural Approach, with ample exposure to the second language (L2), children naturally acquire the L2. In comparison to China, Germany's geographical location and cultural environment do contribute to providing a favorable linguistic setting for German students. For instance, subconscious exposure to the second language input or exposure at a level slightly beyond their current proficiency can facilitate the acquisition process. Concerning the Direct Method (DM), the outcomes of English education in Germany demonstrate the effectiveness of DM. It doesn't necessarily require L2 exposure or a natural context; teachers can implement DM successfully by gradually exposing students to grammatical features. This approach also yields favorable results in English language learning.

Moreover, Total Physical Response (TPR) plays a crucial role in the English education of primary schools in both countries. This is because active motor participation and immediate exposure to everyday language use significantly strengthen learners' memories of the second language (L2), especially for young learners with shorter attention spans. Despite offering learners a relaxed learning environment with music and art, Suggestopedia has not gained widespread application in either country so far.

3. Justification of the Most Effective Teaching Methods for English Language Acquisition in China

To commence, the Grammar-Translation Method falls within the realm of conventional language teaching approaches and is also a type of form-focused instruction, teaching learners grammar as a kind of direct intervention. This teaching method has been into wide use for many years across the world. It was also hoped

that, through the study of grammar of the target language, students would become more familiar with grammar of the native language (Larsen-Freeman, 2000, p. 19). Chang (2011) conducted research that showed grammar teaching in the framework of the Grammar Translation Method is better than the Communicative Approach. Nevertheless, the Communicative Approach emphasizes fluency, and the Grammar Translation Method is concerned with accuracy. He concluded that the best way to improve the situation is to combine both methods in teaching English Grammar (Chang, 2011). Natsir and Sanjaya (2014) observed that the Grammar Translation Method (GTM) was commonly used previously and CLT is very famous nowadays and identified that the more beneficial method nowadays is CLT, but GTM also still has some positive things offer. Within the realm of English language education in Chinese schools, the Grammar-Translation Method (GTM) has demonstrated effectiveness in specific domains, thereby warranting its continued promotion.

Secondly, according to Savignon (1991), the focus of CLT has been the elaboration and implementation of programs and methodologies that promote the development of functional language ability through learner participation in communicative events. CLT is seen to be not a British, European, or U.S. phenomenon, but rather an international effort to respond to the needs of present-day language learners in many different contexts of learning (Savignon, 1991). Hence, adopting a well-rounded strategy that incorporates components from both the Grammar-Translation Method (GTM) and Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is a rational approach. English teachers in China can elevate the overall efficacy of language instruction by skillfully harmonizing the precision-oriented aspects of GTM with the fluency-centric principles of CLT within the Chinese educational context.

In terms of Total Physical Response (TPR), Asher (1969) pointed out that the strategy of the total physical response is to have the students listen to a command in a foreign language and immediately obey with a physical action. TPR aims to provide non-stressful learning when learning a second language. The experiment of Asher (1969) demonstrated that when acquiring the second language with guidance of TPR, children's comprehension was accelerated far beyond those who tried to learn with translation method. Drawing on experiences in both Germany and China, there is an anticipation for the promotion of Total Physical Response (TPR) in the initial stages of English language learning at the primary level.

As emphasized by Krashen and Terrell in their book *The Natural Approach*, the Natural Approach stresses input over practice, fosters emotional readiness, encourages extensive listening before speaking, and promotes the use of written materials for input (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Based on insights derived from English education in Germany, it is evident that the Natural Approach has proven to be effective and warrants increased consideration from teachers in China.

Furthermore, individual preferences, learning styles, and cultural contexts should be emphasized when considering the most effective teaching methods. Savignon (1987) pointed out that language teaching is inextricably tied to language policy. Viewed from a multicultural intranational as well as international perspective, diverse sociopolitical contexts mandate not only a diverse set of language learning goals, but a diverse set of teaching strategies (Savignon, 1987). Given the holistic consideration of English proficiency, instructional methodologies, and prevailing socio-cultural landscapes in China, this study concludes that Total Physical Response (TPR) can function as a valuable adjunct from the primary school level onwards. Across the entire spectrum of English language acquisition, a synthesis of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and the Grammar-Translation (GT) Method is recommended. Moreover, when circumstances permit, the augmentation of the Natural Approach can substantially enhance the richness of the language learning experience.

4. Conclusions and Limitations

To conclude, this comparative analysis sheds light on the disparities in English proficiency between Germany and China, exploring the commonalities and differences in their respective education systems. Although both nations are dedicated to enhancing students' English proficiency, distinct teaching methodologies have been discerned within two countries in English education. In moving forward, Chinese educators and policymakers should draw insights from both the German and Chinese approaches to create a comprehensive and adaptable framework for EFL education in China.

While this study provides valuable insights into feasible teaching methods for English language acquisition in China, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. One major limitation is the lack of empirical research methods such as interviews, surveys, and experiments. Future research endeavors should consider employing a combination of these methods to gather more comprehensive current data. For instance, conducting interviews with both students and teachers could provide deeper insights into their perspectives on the efficacy of current

teaching methods in different regions of China. Furthermore, while this study advocates for the justification of the most effective teaching methods, it has not been empirically validated. It is crucial for future researchers in this field to design and conduct experiments to test the applicability and generalizability of the proposed teaching methods. By implementing experimental designs, researchers can gather quantitative data to support or refute the effectiveness of these methods, thus contributing to a more robust understanding of English language acquisition in Chinese learners.

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