ELT in China

1992

Papers from

Tianjin Conference

中國英語教學

ELT in China 1992
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中国英语教学
天津研讨会论文集

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Foreword

The 47 essays gathered in *ELT in China 1992* are the offspring of a 4-day conference held in Tianjin in March 1992. A total of 230 papers were read, commented on, and selected and edited to form a volume which is now before the reader. Of the authors here chosen a sizable number are from Normal Junior Colleges (a promising sector of China's growing institutionalized education) in the provinces. They have little love for Chomskyan or Hallidayan Linguistics, aiming as these do at theoretical sophistication than ELT and all that involves. Many of our contributors are just 30 plus, reinforced by a year or two at an ELT (or ESL, or EFL) curriculum overseas. Trained in the basics of research, they open their essay with a survey of related literature, followed by data-based argument, ending with a conclusion conditioned on data. They never assumed formulaic modesty nor any 'Here is the last word' air. Further, the essays possess a computer-finish which saves much editorial labour unavoidable in pre-computer days.

Last but very important, they write clear, ser-

viceable international English. While calling for papers, the Conference Preparatory Committee had more than once stressed that papers be data-based, not built on barren empiricism, which was the bane of so many of our pre-1980 summing-up papers. Let's hope this data-based feature to be a notable characteristic of all our papers to come.

One well remembers what was said back in the early 1980s, the hey-day of 'open-up and reform'. Let's have the use of the computer and the use of English, and then we can modernize. We cannot say we have made a good use of both but here at least is an effort made to that aim.

May I ask our readers to treasure this volume as a first sample of China's ELT writings that are re-search-formated, data-based plus computer-ser-viced.

Xu Guozhang

Chairman, Preparatory Committee of Conference

President, China English Language Education Association

Introduction

Liu Runqing (刘润清)

1. Basic Research

For centuries, efforts have been made to look for the best teaching method there is in FLT/SLT. Numerous methods evolved, but not one seems good enough to be universally accepted as the BEST. It has been found, instead, that whatever the methodology, the material, the condition under which a second language is taught, some learners are always more successful than others, while there will be, invariably, one or two total failures. This has led researchers to consider if it is NOT difference in individual learners that causes such disparity in ultimate attainment when the external environment is very nearly identical. Researchers have now then begun to shift their attention from seeking the best method to studying 'individual differences' (ID). The basic argument is that important as they are, textbooks, teaching techniques, syllabuses, curriculum and instructors are, after all, external factors; what constitutes the decisive role could well be internal factors that individualize the achievement.

It is research into questions of this kind that we call basic, since we believe this is basic to questions related to ESL teaching. What characteristics, then, does a successful language learner

possess? After more than two decades of research, different people have come up with different findings, and no one single answer to this question is generally accepted as satisfactory. This may be due to the differences in research methodology, instruments for measurement, and subjects under investigation. However, ID research has made undeniable progress in the sense that methods have improved a great deal, instruments have grown in variety and reliability, and the number of variables has shrunk to a few. To date, more researchers would agree that the following are important variables in which individual learners may differ: intelligence, language aptitude, cognitive style (field dependence and field independence), personality traits (such as introversion and extroversion, perseverance, anxiety), learning strategies (such as cognitive, metacognitive, formal, and functional), motivation (such as integrative and instrumental), and attitudes towards the target language and its native speakers.

The paper by Wu Yi'an and her team 'Learner Factors and Learning Achievement' is a report of their study of the effect of psychological, socio-psychological factors and learning strategies on English language learning. Investigating 18 variables and 13 demographic factors of 250 end-of-2nd year English majors, it had been found that 63.4% of the variance in the subjects' language achievement is accounted for by the following 6 variables: language aptitude, motivation, college type (key or non-key), the cognitive style of field independence, sex, and type of middle school attended. Though we are cautioned not to generalize too much beyond their available data, their research is the first of its kind in China and probably also the first in the world in terms of the number of subjects and their geographical spread. Admittedly no

decisions can yet be reached in the strength of these findings, yet the paper will surely set many people thinking along completely new dimensions about ELT in China.

Zhou Yan's paper 'Socio-psychological Factors and Language Learning' goes into even greater detail about intricate workings on language achievement. The paper uses one questionnaire in Wu's survey and can be taken as a good illustration of the many instruments used in the language learning project. Apart from sex, college type, and type of middle school, factors such as motivation, involvement in non-English related activities, teaching materials, classroom instruction, and benefit from Intensive Reading class are all found to be significantly correlated with English learning achievement. Factors such as family income, parents' education and occupation, previous experience with English are also discussed.

Along similar lines as Wu's project, Tan Zhi conducted a small-scale investigation on learning style preference of Chinese college students in English language learning. One interesting point of his study is that the 300 subjects come from 6 ethnic groups, majoring in 10 different areas, all reporting their preferences among 5 learning styles: visual, auditory, kinesthetic, group, and individual. Major findings are: all subjects prefer individual learning; most are more visual and auditory; minority groups seem to like group learning more than Han students.

It is possible that a teacher's learning style could affect the learners' learning style, and that a good knowledge of one's learners' learning style could have important implications for course design and classroom strategy. Such an investigation was carried out by Zhou Rong who, for subjects, had 50 middle school

teachers of English. Interestingly enough, Zhou's findings were similar to Tan's: subjects prefer teacher-centred activities, individual learning, kinesthetic learning as against learner-centred activities, or pair and group work. Zhou concludes with useful suggestions for teacher-training programs.

Learning a language involves memory. However, memory has a many-faceted involvement. First, there is the question of what gets stored in memory when learning a language? This has been a major concern of psychologists and psycholinguists alike. Some hold that it is the form of language that is stored, others believe that it is the meaning derived from the form and still others consider that it involves both form and meaning. Second, there are the questions of storage: if it is stored, where is it stored and what goes into short-term memory and what goes into long-term memory? Thirdly, storage or memory has to do with the manner and depth with which utterances are processed. Fourthly, it is not easy to explain why immediate recall of a sentence is more accurate than recalling it days afterwards. All these psycholinguistic issues (and many others) bear, ultimately, on the teaching and learning of an L2. 'A Contrastive Study of the Short-term Recall of Sentences' by Gui Shichun and Li Wei reports a very interesting experiment in this direction. Their study shows that surface representation and conceptual representation work together in the recall of sentences, and that the more familiar one is with a given language, the more obvious is the role of meaning in STM. The paper suggests in its conclusion that the teaching of a language should be firmly based on meaning, not on form, from the very beginning— meaningless mechanical drills go against the very nature of cognition. A piece of solid research of this kind speaks louder than years

of empirical impressions.

Also in the psychological vein, Guo Qingzhu's paper is a study of natural and unnatural pauses in learners' speech as of result of EFL tension. The paper shows, among other things, that high learner motivation might generate higher anxiety which, in turn, might result in more unnatural pauses in speech, much against the speaker's wish. Obviously, a learner's psychological state influences his or her oral performance.

Contrastive studies constitute yet another area of basic research, often indicating possible sources of L1 transfer when learning an L2, either syntactically, or phonetically or phonologically. Though nowadays contrastive analysis is not perceived as important as its advocates originally claimed it to be, some contrastive knowledge about L1 and L2 is absolutely necessary for the L2 teacher both in the prediction of learner errors and in remedial work. Among the papers collected in this section, Chen Jianping's paper contributes to contrastive syntax, but more importantly, it shows that topic-prominence tends to characterize different EFL learning stages of the Chinese learner possibly due to L1 influence. However, language transfer does not take place only in syntax, but also in stress, rhythm and pitch patterns. Gong Qi's paper is an effort to identify those Chinese stress patterns that can interfere with learning English stress patterns while Wang Guizhen's paper studies the systematic differences between the pitch movements of utterances in Chinese and English and looks into the correlation between a learner's pitch movement and listening comprehension as well as L2 achievement in general. Both studies display a high degree of professionalism.

The group of papers on basic research shows how rapidly EFL

teachers in China are catching up with their peers overseas. In advancing ELT in China, both basic research and applied research is needed—research with first hand data and statistical analysis, not the lengthy, speculative, non-data-based kind, as was the wont before China opened up itself to the outside world.

2. Making Intensive Reading More Efficient

Over the years there have been loud cries that Intensive Reading (IR) should be done away with from the ELT classroom in China, for the simple reason that it is too intensive to be any good for effective reading. It is also blamed for learners' slowness in reading, their habit of using the dictionary too often, and their inability to see the wood for the trees. Surprisingly enough, at the 1992 Tianjin Conference, not a single voice was heard against IR as a course, but numerous suggestions for its improvement. Yao Naiqiang believes that IR is a suitable course in the Chinese environment and our task is to 'make a good practice better'. In fact, Gong Dengyong lists four merits of IR, two of which are its integrativeness whereby the four skills are not arbitrarily separated, and its flexibility whereby teachers can adopt any method they think fit. Ding Xinjie and Mu Lei, after some investigation, told the conference that the number one problem with IR is that teachers spend too much time on grammatical analysis and lexical explanation. The consequences are: teacher dominance of the classroom, an imbalance between language input and output, and underdevelopment of learners' communicative competence. They call for more learner participation in class, a good balance between input and output, a desirable balance between accuracy and fluency.

Included in this section are mostly papers that attempt to

make IR a course that is less teacher-centred but more learner-centred, less form-oriented but more meaning-based, less mechanical but more communicative. 'Teaching Intensive Reading within a Communicative Framework' by Shu Baimei, for example, speaks for the classroom procedure of 'free communication→presentation→drill if necessary→discussion' which emphasizes interaction between teacher and learner and between learner and learner. Interaction before an IR class operates as a diagnosis for teacher but as a motivator for learner, while interaction at the end serves more than one purpose. The paper also discusses how to teach learners reading skills implicitly. 'Teaching Use in Use' by Bao Jiaren et al. reports a study of the relationship between knowledge of use and ability to use. They found that 'the more conscious one's prior knowledge of usage is, the poorer one's ability to use the language will be'. This seems to bear out W. Johnson's paradox that 'the teachers of English teach English so poorly largely because they teach grammar so well'. Based on three interactive models, Yue Meiyun puts forward a holistic approach to advanced reading which emphasizes both global understanding of the text, directing learners' attention to meaning and the cyclic nature of the reading process. The demonstration section could almost be copied for the next day's reading class. Huang Liping's paper discusses in some detail the merits of task-based approach and simulations techniques after some incisive criticism of the grammar-translation method.

However, not everybody is saying the same thing. After discussing at some length why ELT is of communication, by communication and for communication, Wang Cairen and Zhang Shuning aired their suspicion about aiming our ELT at 'communicative com-

petence' as defined by many first language teachers. They doubt if it is important or necessary for Chinese learners to achieve that over-embracing competence. They stress the need of adaptation for the reality of the Chinese context. Similarly, Shao Jindi's paper, which does not dwell on any theoretical discussion but abounds in revealing illustrations, concludes in the note that methodology cannot work wonders. It is learner motivation that makes learning take place. 'No wind blows in favour of the ship that has no port of destination,' the paper quotes.

At a more practical level, Yang Xueyan puts forward useful suggestions for doing paraphrase both as a teaching technique and as an exercise. A good paraphrase, she says, should retain the meaning of the original sentence at 5 levels: lexical, structural, contextual, socio-cultural, and interpersonal, all of which are well illustrated with sample sentences taken from *College English* Book 2.

Reading through these papers, one cannot fail to be impressed by the authors' firm grasp of the Chinese ELT reality and a genuine effort of integration of Western theories with teaching practices in China.

3. Training of Fast Reading Skills

It is a known fact that the reading ability of Chinese learners of English is unnecessarily slow, and this is because of the training they get from Intensive Reading but more importantly because they have not been trained in skilled fast reading. Our reading course proper, Extensive Reading (ER), often content-oriented, is not designed to provide learners with fast reading strategies. Su Xinlian discusses the current problems with ER as follows: (1) learn-

ers do not attach as much importance to ER as to IE; (2) too few extensive reading materials are available; (3) the materials that are available are far from satisfactory in terms of length and levels of difficulty; (4) classroom teaching is more or less a 'teacher monologue'. He observed that learners' habit of slow reading manifests itself in the following: (1) move a finger or a pencil alongside with the eye span; (2) move the head left and right; (3) read a sentence repeatedly for fear of wrong understanding; (4) inability to do guess work and overreliance on the dictionary. He considers that some systematic training of subskills is needed: movement of eyes by sense groups; prediction of content to follow; scanning for general idea of text; and skimming to locate some specific piece of information.

There were a number of papers at the Conference that suggest ways of speeding up the reading rate as well as comprehension rate. Fan Xianlong presents the following: (1) teach learners to adopt different reading strategies for reading texts of different genres and for different reading purposes; (2) give learners tasks to complete before, not after, a reading session; (3) let the teacher be an organizer or director in class, guiding learners' discussions. Yang Yingjun experimented with a compulsory outside reading course which required learners to do a great deal of reading by themselves with only two class hours for checking every other week. Aided by planned management, the course increased the annual amount of reading from 600 pages to 3,000 pages, and greatly aroused learners' enthusiasm in reading. He adds, however, this course, dealing mainly with fiction, is only a complement to other courses such as newspaper reading.

Monitoring learners' reading speed, their amount and compre-

hension presents another problem. Cui Sufang offers an alternative to writing book reports which can be boring for learners and tedious for teachers correcting them. There are many tasks that can keep learners' interest high and render reading beneficial: fill in questionnaires and graphics; design book covers or draw illustrations, maps, family trees; making up interview questions and answers with characters; writing an imaginary invitation or a letter to a character, and so on. Li Yongfang presents an entirely different way of monitoring fast reading training, a computer program specifically developed on LOTUS for helping teachers with their calculation of statistics in daily fast reading training sessions. It produces a numerical training score report of a class after each session, a graphic score report of each learner, and a graphic score report for a class. These reports give learners such a clear and objective picture of themselves that they feel spurred on with motivation and direction.

4. A More Business-like Way of Teaching Writing

It is generally agreed that writing is one of the four important skills a learner should acquire. It is the last course, however, that teachers tend to offer. Marking compositions is very demanding both in time and in skill. For the learner, it takes time to finish a paper and to make it read better.

The Tianjin Conference received a number of papers on the teaching of writing. Wu Bing holds that, first and foremost, the writing teacher should teach with dedication and care for his/her students. Students should be trained to summarize, analyze, and criticize whatever they read and then express their own ideas in their own language. Teachers should keep a good record of stu-

dents' errors and discuss them with the writers in individual tutori-als—sessions when frank discussions about errors can take place more effectively. Xing Minjie discusses 'brainstorming' techniques for a writing class. She provides a demonstration after elaborating on five steps: (1) to think individually; (2) to verbalize ideas in pairs; (3) to brainstorm ideas on the blackboard; (4) to classify ideas into categories; (5) to complete the writing in 30 minutes. Li Xiaoping's paper stresses that writing is a process, not a prod-uct, and that students should be encouraged to write about things meaningful to them, with a clearly defined purpose and in a non-prejudicial situation. The writing teacher, the paper asserts, should be a trained writer, a willing reader of learners' writings, and then a coach.

The scoring of writing in an examination can be notoriously subjective and unreliable. Reliable scoring costs dearly in time and in energy. Li Wei and M. Luxon conducted a case study where they tried out several scoring methods to compare their reliability. They found; (1) uncontrolled single marking followed by computer adjustments yields reliable group scores, but not reliable individu-al scores; (2) controlled double marking yields reliable individual scores but is too costly in manpower; (3) controlled single mark-ing followed by computer adjustment produces reliable scores both for groups and for individual candidates and this is recommended for large-scale testing.

5. Cross-cultural Communication and Language Learning

There is an increasing awareness of cross-cultural differences and their importance in second language teaching. In an intercul-tural interaction, people from two different cultures speak the

same language, but their communication may break down due to differences in ways of thinking, rules of speaking, social values and lexical connotations, and other factors. The study of culture in connection with second language teaching is becoming distinct from sociology, ethnography and anthropology, and developing into an independent field of enquiry. It is now generally realized that for efficient verbal communication and correct understanding, it is not enough for L2 learners to know only the formal rules, but also the rules of use, i. e. the pragmatic principles and socio-pragmatic conventions. However, the contrastive study of cultures is still in its initial stages and will probably be not systematic enough in the near future to be in a position to offer language teachers full-fledged course materials.

The Conference saw a dozen presentations on cross-cultural differences in relation to ELT. Chen Youlin's paper analyses sources of misunderstanding due to inadequate use of contextual clues, the nonlinguistic part of which includes cultural and social factors. He stresses the importance in ELT of contextualizing language items and teaching sociolinguistic rules. Based on her investigation among Chinese scholars studying in Britain, Lian Xian designed a predeparture course for cultural orientation for those who are going to work or study in English speaking countries. The problem areas she found include: introduction, address systems, greetings, phatic communication, taboos, giving and responding to compliments, body language, physical contact, losing face, and other attitudinal problems. Jia Yuxin and Song Li evaluated a course on intercultural communication by comparing the scores on a socio-cultural test from two groups of students: Group 1 who took the course and Group 2 who did not, and by analysing the re-