

The Goals of English Language Teaching in Chinese Primary School

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Abstract: Why should we teach languages? For some, this can mean cognitive training, where understanding a language is itself about being exposed to the culture of the language, while for others the goal is based on social change and general educational values. This present essay will elucidate the goals of English language teaching, contextualized within a specific situation of Chinese primary schools on internal and external aspects, discussing it in relation to individual goals.

1. Introduction

Why should we teach languages? The diversity of answers to this question is dependent upon the various perspectives and purposes that individuals possess. For certain individuals, this can refer to cognitive training, whereby understanding a language itself is to access the culture of that language (i.e. a foreign culture), while others have goals based on social change and for general educational values such as for travel, career or higher education. The most popular response for teaching languages is for communication purposes; however, the intent behind teaching the English language in particular stems far greater than communication. According to Cook (2008), the goals of English language teaching could be divided in three parts: central goals, international goals and individual goals. Taking these three aspects of purposes into consideration, Cook (2007:238) gives an open-ended list on the goals of language teaching including “self-development”, “a method of training new cognitive processes”, “an entrée to another culture”, “a means of communicating with those who speak another language” and “the promotion of intercultural understanding and peace”. Alternatively, there is another way to classify the goals of language teaching, which Cook (2002) further divides into two main categories: “external goals” and “internal goals”. This is based on different settings, people or manners at the time of languages being used. The use of language for social interactions or communication outside the classroom can be regarded as external goals, while internal goals refer to the usage inside the classroom for promoting mental exploitation of the learner himself or herself such as counting, reckoning, diary writing or note taking which are pointed out by Mackey (1962). Undoubtedly, the world is rapidly emerging as a global society, of which English has shifted from being a mere language, to becoming a *lingua franca* around the world. Evidence of this is seen in such countries where English had never been their priority, such as China, Japan or Korea, but has grown exponentially in recent years.

This present essay will elucidate the goals of English language teaching, contextualized within a specific situation of Chinese primary schools on both internal and external aspects, discussing them

in relation to individual goals. In addition, the purpose for being a successful second language (L2) user and cognitive training will be analyzed in accordance with the current circumstances of primary school students in China, as well as supported by previous literature.

2. External Goals of Efl in Chinese Primary School

As Cook (2002) explains, uses for learning language outside the classroom refers to external goals such as furthering higher education in an English-speaking country or watching movies in another foreign language. Most English language teaching methodology is fulfilling the functions of these external goals, such as communicative language teaching or the audio-lingual method. Both these methods teach the language in an interactive learning environment or under authentic situation outside the classroom. However, Cook (2007) recognizes that another methodology entitled the Task Based Learning Teaching (TBLT) approach, which originated from the classroom-oriented programs of Prabhu (1987), declares that it is not essential to get the external effect outside the classroom from the tasks inside the classroom. In this essay, the external goal of students from primary school in China being a successful L2 user will be the main focus.

2.1 The Goal for Efl in Primary School in China

2.1.1 The Definitions of Native Speaker and L2 User

One of the oldest definitions about native speaker was given by Bloomfield (1933:43), who defined it as “The first language a human being learns to speak is his *native language*; he is a *native speaker* of this language”. Through many years’ of redefinition, a well-acknowledge modern definition is given as, “a person who has spoken a certain language since early childhood” (McArthur 1992:682). However, the emergence of L2 users provides an alternative choice of learning goals. L2 users are described as individuals who have a capacity and are able to use a L2 no matter at what level (Cook 2008). The concept of L2 users should be that of individuals enriched in the content of multi-competence of SLA to some extent. The word multi-competence refers to both the knowledge of L1 and L2 composed in one mind simultaneously (Cook 1991), which exists like a distinctive boundary between L2 users and native speakers.

2.1.2 Discussion on the Target of Efl between Native Speaker and L2 User

Firstly, as McArthur (1992) explains, the native speaker acquires a particular language (namely their native language) from their childhood, which is therefore under this basis, one would suggest it is logically impossible for a L2 user to completely obtain the same level of proficiency of a native speaker of a second language if they did not speak it from a very young childhood. As explained by Stern (1983), the second language for a native speaker is acquired naturally from the routine life without explaining the segmentations of knowledge one by one. Some habitual use of the second language is formed by native speakers themselves, but L2 learners are capable of using the language by imitating the use of language that coined by others. This fundamental reason determines that it is unattainable for L2 learners to be native-like without encountering the second language in childhood.

Secondly, the premise of reaching native speaker-like or indeed close to this level, requires L2 learners having a clear understanding and even be provided a role model of what indeed a native speaker is. However, if one takes English as an example, what is the standard of English that can be set as the native example for L2 learner? As Cook (2008) explains, a language is made up of variations, due to different region, countries, occupations or gradations, as well as distinctions from each other as a result of accent, dialect or the habitual use of the language. If one was to make a

general survey related to this among English-speaking countries, one could hypothesize that it would highlight all their unique, typical and discriminative use of English in domestic areas. For example, the word “autumn” in British English has the same meaning of the traditional use of “fall” in American English. Consequently, such variations exemplify that it is next to impossible to establish a standard and ideal role model of native speakers for all the L2 learners to imitate, nevertheless the choice of model for L2 learners should take all the variations into consideration and relate to the assumed role in the future of L2 learners.

2.2 The Goal of ELT in Chinese Primary School

In order to illustrate a practical example of goals for second language teaching, it is important to first provide the specific context of Chinese primary school. As mentioned earlier, with the sharp increase in the status of English worldwide, English has been incorporated in the compulsory curriculum in most Chinese primary school, especially the schools at coastal provinces. Thus it is evident that the purpose of English teaching is no longer just to stimulate students', but also to motivate in learning English, which ultimately cultivates their competence in grasping two languages in daily life. Some primary schools will employ foreign teachers to teach English and students will be sent to some institutions to enhance their English. Recently, a question is raised among English teachers that ask what truly the significant goal of teaching English is: making the students to be like a native speaker or to get access to higher education.

Concerning on the real situation of primary school in China, to be native-speaker like is unrealistic for primary school students, whereas successful L2 learner is an achievable goal. Firstly, to be a native speaker is not realistic in all the China's primary schools due to the unbalanced development between regions. Primary education is the first step of the nine-year compulsory education in China, which has covered all regions of China. Unfortunately due to social, economical and geographical reasons, not all primary schools across China are at the same teaching level and scale. The schools situated at the coastal areas have advanced educational level on account of having strong technical strength, teachers as well as adequate educational appropriations. Consequently, they are able to attract good foreign native teachers from all around the world. On the contrary, the schools in remote regions are “economically backwards” whereby certain localities are too needy to get access to good teaching resources. Thus, if the goal of primary education is cultivating native-like speakers, the students in impoverished regions cannot achieve this due to the lack of financial support. This is not good for balanced development of Chinese elementary education and it will also cause difficulties in formulating a standard syllabus and choosing appropriate teaching materials for all the students. Moreover, when teachers teach a certain aspect to students, the goal of teaching and the materials should be based on the needs of students, not the native speaker. In China, English is a foreign language which is seldom exposed to the population rather than an official language or a second language. The identity of the L1 is strongly entrenched in the Chinese students' mind. Their needs of communication are mainly talking with non-native speakers who put both L1 and L2 into use, which is consistent with the nature of L2 learner who can switch between L1 and L2. This is different from native speakers since it is assumed that native speaker can only speak one language---the concept of “monolingulism” that has been added to the generalized definition of native speaker (Paikeday 1985). The focus of formulating goals of ELT should be L2 learner-oriented, not native speaker. Therefore, it is more workable to educate them into a successful L2 learner by knowing how to drive both the L1 and L2 at appropriate conditions rather than requiring them to be a native speaker.

3. Internal Goals of ELT in Chinese Primary School

The internal goals of ELT refers to making the progress on mental aspect of the students themselves, such as developing creative thinking, cognitive training and culture awareness (Cook 2002). Since almost the mental development of L2 learning will precede in the teaching process inside the classroom, it will be less affected by the native speaker outside the classroom, thus the traditional language teaching methods often take effect on internal goals of ELT (Cook 2007). Given that the students in primary schools are still in the process of forming the cognitive competence, the internal goal of ELT in China's primary school will be discussed in terms of cognitive training.

3.1 Cognitive Training with Elt

Indisputably, the linguistic competence of bilingual students is not the same as that of their monolingual peers. The differences between them in cognitive development have increasingly aroused the attention among L2 learning researchers. Moreover, in the past, people have misunderstood that the L2 learners who own the knowledge of two languages will be delayed in their intellectual development (Wei 2006). However, this misconception is overturned by most researchers, such as Bialystok (2011), who claims that the bilinguals do have the cognitive superiority when compared to their monolingual peers. The outcomes from various research prove that even though in linguistic tasks, like that of vocabulary assessment, bilingual students perform weaker than monolinguals (Bialystok, Luk, Peets, & Yang, 2010), but they perform better than monolinguals in metalinguistic assessment. One may conclude therefore, that L2 learner contains the multi-competence of both L1 and L2 no matter what level, which means they possess two linguistic systems in their mind at the same time. These two systems constantly keep switching in their brains to stimulate brain operation, as well as try to putting things into perspective from different angles. Generally speaking, students with bilingual background are more flexible in problem solving.

3.2 Cognitive Training in Chinese Primary School

Students in primary schools are too young to control every expression they speak and whether it is appropriate or not. There is an old Chinese saying that says, "take no offense at a child's babble". At this stage, the cognitive competence of children is still in forming, so they are not sufficient to control all the words they speak, whether it is semantically or phonetically. From the previous research, we can see that children with multi-competence are as expected to focus on abstract aspects of language that are naturally lucid to monolingual children. In the process of L2 learning, Bialystok (1999:637) states that, "bilingual children need to be aware at some level (but not necessarily consciously) of the language that is needed in a particular situation or with a particular speaker, and they rarely make mistakes in selection". Therefore, it is the responsibility for teachers to assist students to learn how to control their utterance in an appropriate manner since a large portion of a primary school child's time is spent with the teachers. For example, after teaching primary school students we speak both Chinese and English about one object, they will have a clearer understanding of what the object is than the monolinguals, which can help them to strengthen the distinctiveness of form and represent it explicitly. To surmise therefore, the development of cognition is crucial in their childhood, and since English is now has become a compulsory curriculum in China's primary schools, teachers should take advantage of English learning to establish students' cognitive competence effectively and efficiently.

4. Conclusion

The vital point of this essay is discussing the appropriate goals of second language teaching based on English language teaching in Chinese primary school. To be a native speaker is an impractical external goal for primary school students of which, this unique status of L2 user should be recognized. When it comes to Chinese primary school students, native level-like speaking ability is also unrealistic since the unbalanced development of English teaching and the communicative needs in daily life. The internal goal of English teaching was explained around cognitive training. Cognitive development should be reinforced in early childhood by taking advantages of English learning. To draw a conclusion, the goal of second language teaching should be set in account of nature of each goal and the current situation of each target group.

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