

# ***Research on How Average Seventh Grade Students, 12-13 Years Old, Learn English as a Foreign or Additional Language in Chinese Mainland***

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**Abstract:** As a global language, English has always been learned by people all over the world. This study aims to expose some challenges in English teaching and call for reform and improvement. This paper explores how average 12-13-year-old seventh-grade students in Chinese mainland learn English as a foreign or additional language which often focuses on the mechanical and low-interactive learning patterns and are characterized by rote memorization and drilling. It describes these students mainly study English in a mechanical and low-interactive way which is characterized by rote memorization and drilling, evaluates their effectiveness and limitations, and analyzes the social background factors contributing to low-interactive learning. This study aims to expose some challenges in English education and call for reform and improvement in teaching practice.

## **1. Introduction**

In the context of rapid economic development and growing exchanges between the countries, English language learning has become increasingly important. Chinese students' English learning has been described by educators and media as a mechanical and low-interactive learning based on rote memorisation and drilling. This paper will describe how average seventh grade students learn English in a mechanical and low-interactive way, evaluate its effectiveness and ineffectiveness and analyze the factors that may lead to students' low interactive learning from social background.

## **2. Learning English in a low-interactive way**

Throughout the history of Chinese students' English learning, many educators both at home and abroad have always believed that Chinese students' English learning normally take place in classrooms in a mechanical and low interactive way especially for those junior high and senior high students who need English to get into better schools. The learning approach will be presented through the relevant literature and one observed English language learning episode.

According to the data and analysis from Rining Wei and Jinzhi Su(2012)[1], more than half of the

Chinese parents in the study do not know English, less than 30% would use English to read or listen to a radio, let alone use it in daily life. Because of Chinese parents' deficiency of English knowledge and low frequency of English use in Chinese society, most of Chinese students only can learn English in the class. In the English class, teachers are considered the centre of the classroom while Chinese students are often seen as passive recipients who are extremely quiet in class and seldom interact with their classmates or teachers. Their English learning only happens through listening carefully to the teacher and practising without asking questions because the teacher is perceived as the authority of English learning. This is especially true for junior high schools and senior high schools students who only use English as a tool to get good grades or have a brighter future (Xie, 2010)[2]. Chinese students attach great importance to the accuracy of grammar rules in their English learning. The study of a text in a seventh-grade textbook typically involves rote learning of vocabulary, extensive translation word by word or sentence by sentence, analysis of almost every grammar items and the practice of multiple choice, gap-fillings(Hu, 2002)[3]. Rote memorisation and practice are considered the key to success in English learning.

The following is one observed English language learning episode in Grade Seven which is an open class in my internship school to act as supplementary material about how a seventh grade students learns English in Chinese mainland. First, students would be taught some difficult words or phrases before the listening. Next, students are asked to listen to the audio recordings of various conversations and speeches. While listening students need to finish the exercises in the textbook which often involves guessing the gist, gap-fillings, multiple choice and answering questions. Then they need to follow the tape word by word or sentence by sentence. Finally students are asked to memorize the vocabularies and certain part of recordings after class. In the whole learning process, these Grade Seven students do not have any interaction with their classmates or teachers. They just keep imitating and practicing. However, this is indeed the most typical example to illustrate how Chinese students learn listening in class.

Both from the relevant literature and observed learning episode, we can identify the great influences of the Behaviorist theory on our Chinese students' English learning. Behaviorism believes that language learning takes place with the formation of habits, which is mainly achieved through imitation, memorisation and repetition. The knowledge taught by teachers are important sources of input (Lightbown & Spada, 2021)[4]. This is consistent with the fact that Chinese students usually learn English in a rote, low-interactive way, especially for those students in junior high and senior high school who need to pay attention to the accuracy of language forms to enter into a better school.

### **3. Advantages and disadvantages of the mechanical and low-interactive learning**

Rote, low-interactive learning which focus on practice and memorisation has been controversial throughout its history with some researchers commending its effectiveness while others criticizing its deficiencies. Many scholars believe that drilling and imitation could be effective for students to acquire correct language forms and develop good learning habits. According to the behaviorism, in the process of language learning, learners do not simply repeat what others say. A building up of learners' own internal grammar systems would take place when they selectively imitate the speech of others. Students can accurately grasp the form of a certain grammar structure through sentence by sentence translation, the explanation of specific grammar rules and continuous grammar practice. In audiolingual instruction, students could avoid mistakes and the formation of bad habits through controlled language use (Lightbown & Spada, 2021)[4]. According to the interview with three successful English learners, they all agree that memorisation and imitation are effective for English language learning, although they are forced at first and the whole process could be effortful. They claim that imitation and practice can improve their pronunciation, learn word collocations and

develop the habit of paying attention to details because the accuracy in language is highly valued. The whole study suggests that memorisation and imitation can promote the acquisition of a second language (Ding, 2007)[5].

Some scholars argue that practice and imitation without interaction could hinder the development of students' communication ability and the formation of habits can not guarantee the internalization. Focusing on practice and accuracy of language form can not reflect what students really know. The formation of habits also does not mean that students could freely use language to convey information. When learners are able to use specific grammar correctly in a given context through teaching in the classroom and continuous imitation and drilling. But they seems to go back to the beginning level once they need to use it in a real context (Lightbown & Spada, 2021)[4]. Additionally, because of the excessive emphasis on the accuracy of language, students are usually very afraid of making mistakes and will intentionally avoid the use of language, they are more willing to keep silent in class rather than actively participate in class interaction(Lightbown & Spada, 2021, Xie, 2010)[2][4].

According to interactionism, the interaction between the learners and others is essential and indispensable for language learning. An example from Lightbown and Spada's book, the research subject's family peculiarities lead him can only rely on TV or radio as source of language input without any dialogue or social interaction with normal people, which makes his language skills lag far behind those of his peers, especially the communicative competence. However, his language ability is gradually improved and tend to match his peers after he begin to communicate with normal people in the society. Through interaction, learners can relate the form and meaning in the negotiation and understand how to use the language appropriately, which is impossible for imitation and practice (Lightbown & Spada, 2021)[4]. Imitation and practice may be effective for vocabulary learning, but interaction and communication are essential for other levels of language learning.

#### **4. Social background may lead to a mechanical and low-interactive learning**

Besides the influence of behaviorism, policy of exam-oriented education could also be identified as another main reason for the mechanical and low-interactive learning approach.

According to the statistic of 2021 from the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China(2022)[6] "There are 529,300 schools at all levels with 291 million students and 52,900 secondary schools nationwide with 5018 million junior high students." Based on the fact that there are a large number of junior high school students in Chinese mainland, the government has to adopt some certain policies such as teaching in large classroom size to ensure all school-age children could get the compulsory education and examinations are seen as the criteria for testing learning results and selecting talents, which could lead to a mechanical learning approach. In ancient China, education was seen as a tool to gain fame and fortune, whose content was mainly determined by the content of the examination, such as the reciting Confucian classics, essay and poem writing. Rote memorisation was the standard way to learn, and the teacher was considered the center of the classroom. Despite a great deal of criticism and numerous unsuccessful attempts at education policies reform, examination-oriented education has persisted. Nowadays, although primary education is almost universal, there is still a shortage of secondary education, especially high school, which makes the competition for admission to senior high schools more fierce and intensifies the academic pressure of junior high students. Meanwhile junior high schools pay more attention to the examination which makes the low-interactive teaching and learning methods based on rote memorisation and constant practice more rigid(Dello-Iacovo, 2009)[7]. Compared with students who are in prosperous area with more sources and opportunities, those in relatively backward area suffer more pressure from examinations because they heavily rely on education to enter a better school and get a good job. Therefore, as a subject that can help them get better grades, English language accuracy is highly concerned, which also intensifies

the use of more extreme mechanical and low-interactive learning methods by those students(Hu, 2002)[3].

## 5. Education policy reforms are needed

Government, schools and students all have to accept the fact that the large number of students in Chinese mainland makes the large class teaching system and the examination selection system will always exist for a long time. But a series of education reforms can be carried out to make tests more diverse and comprehensive, and to make students' learning more interactive and flexible. The interaction and the use of the second language are essential conditions for language acquisition because both speakers need to constantly modify their utterances to make themselves understood, which push them to make meaningful use of the second language(Lightbown & Spada, 2021)[4]. Based on these facts, a classroom community policy is proposed to stimulate students' sense of belonging and shift them to active interaction and learning in cooperation with teachers and classmates (Tan & Hairon, 2016)[8].

Additionally, because of the criticism and pressure from academics, schools and parents, the government of Chinese mainland has made a series of education reforms, including changes to the English curriculum, textbooks and exams. Since the quality of textbooks has a direct impact on students' learning, the state allows provinces and localities to use different English teaching materials for primary and secondary schools according to the actual situation on the basis of the unified national syllabus, so as to promote diversification. By placing the student at the center of the classroom, these series of textbooks enable primary and secondary English classes to pay more attention to the needs of students, which promote students' meaningful communication in relevant contexts and critical use of textbooks. At the level of English testing, the country has made the English test more comprehensive through reform to optimize students' English learning. Before 1998, the English test mainly consisted of multiple choice and fill-in-the-blank. In the continuous reform of English education policies, the test items of discrete grammar have been continuously reduced, and items reflecting students' comprehensive ability such as reading, writing and listening have been added(Hu, 2002)[3]. All these policy reforms make students pay more attention to the meaning of English language than to the correctness of grammar, which could not be realized through simple memorisation and repetition.

Although there have been a series of policy reforms on English learning in primary and secondary schools, the effect is not obvious. Because it is influenced by traditional culture and teachers' ideas. One of the main influences is the deeply rooted Confucian culture, which sees teachers as authorities and encourages students to learn through rote memorization. The second influence mainly depends on the consistency of primary and secondary school teachers' belief in the reform. Although primary and secondary school teachers agree with the new curriculum reform, it exists simultaneously with their traditional belief that memorisation and practice are still the most effective means of students' language learning(Zhang, 2014)[9]. Therefore, further reforms are needed to continuously optimize the way that students learn English.

## 6. Conclusion

In the midst of increased global interaction, the significance of English learning has grown substantially. The public has prioritize the English learning in Chinese mainland. However, Chinese secondary students' English learning have been characterized as a mechanical and less interactive process that heavily relies on memorisation and repetitive practice, which could be effective but also cause problems. Besides the influence of behaviorism and interactionism, China's deep-rooted exam-oriented environment is also one of the main reasons for students' learning style. It is difficult to

abandon this system for practical social reasons. The English textbooks and assessment have been diversified by a series of policy reforms to optimize students' English learning especially for those junior high school students who pay much attention to the language accuracy to get good grades. Reforms are still needed to enable students to learn English autonomously, flexibly and meaningfully.

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