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THE DILEMMA IN CHINESE ACQUISITION FOR NON-ENGLISH INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN CHINA

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With the development of the internationalization of higher education in China, an increasing number of international students with different nationalities, cultural backgrounds, and language backgrounds have come to China to further their studies. Some of them speak English as their mother tongue, but some do not. However, most Chinese teachers in China only know English as a foreign language, and most Chinese materials for foreigners are edited in English. Therefore, Chinese classes for international students are generally carried out with English as an auxiliary language, which meets the needs of many students but leaves others unserved. This research takes the international students of Huzhou University in China as research samples and finds a noticeable gap between the native and the non-native English speakers in their Chinese acquisition.⁴ Based on this finding, this article finally puts forward a series of teaching reform suggestions for Chinese teachers in China.

Key words: Chinese acquisition; non-native English speaker; auxiliary language; comprehensible input; teaching Chinese as a foreign language.

ДИЛЕММА ОБУЧЕНИЯ КИТАЙСКОМУ ЯЗЫКУ ИНОСТРАННЫХ СТУДЕНТОВ, НЕ ГОВОРЯЩИХ ПО-АНГЛИЙСКИ, В КИТАЕ

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С развитием интернационализации высшего образования все большее количество иностранных студентов разных национальностей, культур и языков приезжают в Китай для продолжения учебы. Некоторые из них говорят на английском как на родном языке, а некоторые нет. Однако большинство китайских учителей в Китае владеют только английским как иностранным, и большинство учебных материалов по китайскому языку для иностранцев создается на английском языке. Поэтому уроки китайского для иностранных студентов обычно проводятся с использованием английского в качестве вспомогательного языка, что удовлетворяет потребности одних студентов, но оставляет без внимания других. В этом исследовании проанализованы успехи иностранных студентов Университета Хучжоу в Китае в качестве исследовательских выборок. Был обнаружен заметный разрыв в усвоении языка носителями английского языка и теми, для кого английский язык не является родным. Основываясь на этом открытии, автор статьи выдвигает для китайских учителей в Китае ряд предложений по реформе преподавания.

Ключевые слова: овладение китайским языком; не носитель английского языка; вспомогательный язык; понятный ввод; преподавание китайского языка как иностранного.

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Till 2018, the number of international students in China has exceeded 490,000 [1]. Today, China is keeping working on integrating the opening up of education into the broader framework of national in-depth reforms [2]. China, one of the most popular destinations for students to study abroad, has been and will keep attracting international students of various countries. Due to their diversified national backgrounds, the international students, who come to China to further their education, have distinct mother tongues. Take Huzhou University, a university in Zhejiang Province in China, as example, in the past three years, in a Chinese language class consisting of twenty students, the students' native languages are usually very different, with an average of five to six types in one class, mainly involving English, French, Russian, Arabic, Korean, and so on.

Many Chinese teachers, especially the language experts, have noticed the diversity of the international students' mother tongues, and most of them advocate teaching Chinese in Chinese [3]. However, apart from Chinese, avoiding using any non-Chinese auxiliary language is very hard, especially in the classes for beginners. When teachers need to use an auxiliary language, they usually choose English, and there are three apparent causes: First, most language materials for foreigners to learn Chinese are edited in English. Second, most Chinese teachers only speak English as a foreign language. Third, as a practical matter, English meets the communication needs of most students. Therefore, in most colleges and universities, applying English as the auxiliary language in Chinese classes is a compromise teaching strategy, and it is hard to find an alternative.

Using English as the auxiliary language of instruction can help native English speakers greatly, but for non-native English speakers whose English proficiency varies largely, its impact is hard to predict and control. Since 2019, our team has been investigating the language acquisition of international students at Huzhou University. One of our focuses is to examine whether students' English proficiency affects their Chinese learning or not? If it does, what Chinese teachers should do to respond to this problem?

In 2019, our team chose fifty students whose mother tongue is English and another fifty whose mother tongues are not English as the research samples from Huzhou University. All of these students came to China for the first time in the autumn of 2019 and started to learn Chinese systematically just after they arrived at Huzhou University. In their first semester, these students joined four Chinese classes for beginners. These four classes have different Chinese teachers, but all the teachers can only speak Chinese and English. Besides, these teachers follow the same teaching framework and use the same Chinese textbooks edited in Chinese and English. At the end of the semester, all these

students took a Chinese test using the same standardized exam. After collecting the test results of the students, we used the SPSS software to examine the results.

Table 1. (Results of the Chinese exam)

Native language	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Range
Non-English	50	78.50	13.81	61.00
English	50	85.53	11.58	44.00
Total	100	82.02	13.17	61.00

Figure 1. Distribution of the results

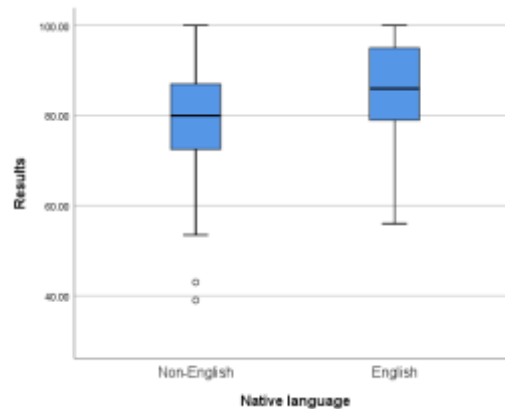


Table 1 highlights some significant facts. The numbers demonstrate better results for native English speakers than for the non-native, with the mean exam score of the native English group reaches 85.53, whereas that of the non-native group only reaches 78.50. The score range of the non-native group (61) is larger than that of the native English group (44). Meanwhile, the standard deviation of the non-native group (13.81) is larger than that of the native English group (11.58), indicating that the former has a higher degree of dispersion. Figure 1 displays the distribution and degree of dispersion of the two groups' test results. The median and quartiles of the two sets of data demonstrate that nearly 3/4 of the native English students received a score of 80 or above, but only 1/2 of the non-native English students reached a score of 80 or higher.

The comparison between the two groups manifests a noticeable gap between the native and the non-native English speakers in their Chinese acquisition. However, without close attention, teachers may fail to see the gap or to measure the impact of students' English proficiency on their Chinese learning. Not every native English student learns Chinese well, nor does every non-native English student fail in Chinese acquisition. From Figure 1, we can see that in both groups, there are students who can get the full mark on the test; likewise, both groups involve the students who failed the exam. Their Chinese acquisition is not simply determined by their English fluency.

To further reveal the dilemma of the non-native English students in Chinese learning, we organized a series of classroom observations in Chinese classes and have interviewed many international students about their classroom interaction strategies. We found that non-native English students,

especially those who can hardly talk in English, have noticeable problems in classroom performance compared to the students with high English proficiency. Two types of classroom performances can reveal the dilemma of the students who have difficulty using English.

First, the students with low English proficiency could suffer more communication anxiety in classroom interaction. Every student may encounter questions that are hard to understand or to answer. To deal with these questions in a Chinese class, the students with high English proficiency tend to be more relaxed than their classmates, as they explained in the interviews, that they know if they have problems understanding the teacher's question in Chinese, they can use English to communicate with the teacher easily.

In contrast, when students cannot effectively use the target language or communicate with teachers in English smoothly, it is hard for them to stay proactive in classroom interactions. Chinese and English bring them double language barriers, and these students tended to be quiet and passive in interactive activities. The students may avoid interacting with the teacher in verbal communication and eye contact; they may choose a seat far from the teacher; they may excessively rely on their mobile phones for translations. All of these symptoms reveal that the students are suffering from communication anxiety.

Second, the students with low English proficiency tend to show blind obedience in the interaction with the teacher. The blind obedience here refers to a communication strategy used by students to deal with teachers' questions. Blind obedience is usually embodied in that students agree with the teacher's statement or point of view without clearly knowing the answer or even the question. Most students have used this strategy in class.

According to Long and Sato [4], questions raised in class can be generally categorized into two types – epistemic questions and echoic questions, with the former, serves the teaching goals and the latter serves classroom management. According to our observations, it can be perceived that when dealing with echoic questions, such as “do you understand”, very few students answer “no” regardless of whether they understand or not. This is one type of blind obedience. In our interviews, most students stress that even if they did not understand what the teacher said, they did not want to interrupt the class. Affirmative responses, or being silent, helps the teacher to continue the lecture without interruption.

In dealing with epistemic questions, students' responses vary greatly. When a student cannot understand the teacher's Chinese question and can hardly check with the teacher in English, the student may perform blind obedience to

respond to the teacher's question. They tend to address what the teacher said is right, and then repeat the words in the question sentence. The following dialogues were recorded and taken from the Chinese classes for international students. The native language of these two students is not English, and they know limited English words and sentences.

Dialogue 1

教师：你的手机里有什么词典？

(Teacher: What dictionary do you have in your phone?)

学生：对，对！我有词典。

(Student: Right, right! I have dictionary.)

Dialogue 2

教师：你常常在哪儿吃饭？

(Teacher: Where do you often eat?)

学生：对！我常常在哪儿吃饭。

(Student: Right! I often eat at "where".)

The first student's answer in dialogue 1 is inappropriate. He failed to grasp the question word “什么” which means “what” in the question sentence. The second student's answer in dialogue 2 does not make sense. The student did not understand that “哪儿” means “where”. After addressing the teacher is right, he just repeated the question sentence. It should be noted that once students get accustomed to this strategy in response, they can hardly find their problems and hardly repair their utterances by themselves.

According to the exam results and the classroom observation, it is evident that the international students' English proficiency does make a visible impact on their Chinese acquisition in China, and in the process of Chinese learning, the non-native English students have been affected negatively by their limited English proficiency. In the face of this dilemma, what should teachers do to promote every student's Chinese learning?

First, a Chinese teacher should try to avoid using English in class. This strategy can, on one hand, help to eliminate the language barriers for non-English speakers, and on the other hand, to bring down native English speakers' dependence on English. However, this does not mean teachers should use natural Chinese to teach, especially in the class for beginners. The Chinese language classroom is a non-natural language environment and has its specific teaching and learning purpose and focus. Moreover, most international students in China are adults, and their language acquisition relies more on understanding than simply imitating. Understanding is the

precondition of internalizing a language [5] and is of great importance for international students in colleges and universities [6]. In short, Chinese teachers should use comprehensible Chinese to carry out classroom teaching. Besides, to help students obtain a comprehensible input, Chinese teachers should further explore other attempts, especially when teaching elementary Chinese, such as applying non-verbal language, creating practical discourse scenarios, and adopting multimedia teaching tools to activate students' uptake from visual and auditory dual channels.

Second, teachers should have a thorough understanding of the language background and language ability of the learners. We have interviewed some Chinese teachers and found that not every teacher knows clearly about their students' mother tongues and English proficiency. The lack of understanding of the students' language backgrounds can directly lead to improper use of interlanguage in class.

Third, when it is necessary to use an auxiliary or bridge language in class, teachers should pay additional attention to the classroom performance of non-native English students to assess whether they have encountered a comprehension obstacle or not. The comprehension obstacle usually leads to a delay in response, a certain degree of communication anxiety, or blind obedience in answering teachers' questions. To help them cope with the comprehension obstacle, teachers should keep adjusting not only the way how they explain but also the strategy how they ask questions. Effective questioning can engage students in a sound teacher-student interaction and promote their interaction competence. Besides, the teachers should keep following students' responses, which reveals the problems students have, and always be aware of rephrasing their questions into comprehensible forms.

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