

Analysis of Cultural and Political Factors Affecting Chinese English Learners to Become Native-like

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Abstract: The EF EPI (English Proficiency Index) ranking survey was carried out in 2020 across 100 countries and areas where the primary language is not English. China was identified as one of the countries with a poor level of proficiency in the measured indicators. English has long received enough attention as a compulsory subject in China, while students cannot master the language well. In order to determine the cause of this occurrence and help Chinese students in their language learning, this essay builds on social-linguistic aspects and analyzes the English language education policy in China prior to higher education. It concludes that the currently prescribed textbooks under the education policy are insufficient for students to learn authentic English. Furthermore, this article recommends that educational government officials and school managers to better improve current jobs and help students achieve more authentic knowledge through several aspects, such as educational policies, suggestions for educational government and school managers.

Keywords: Social-linguistic, Political factors, Language teaching

1. Introduction

Despite China's strong emphasis on English education, a significant portion of the population still believes that they are unable to learn the language fluently and that it is a relatively easy topic. The majority of people also believe that they will never be able to achieve their English learning objectives [1]. In a survey experiment, English majors and non-English majors were investigated for their English proficiency. The conclusion drawn from the experiment indicates that both groups of students, English and non-English majors, exhibit weak abilities in appropriately executing request behaviors and accurately using pragmatic conventions [2]. This analysis examines the historical policy changes in English language education and examples of cultural integration in primary and secondary school textbooks. It aims to understand Chinese students' challenges in learning English and proposes practical approaches from a policy perspective. The analysis also makes projections for the future development of the secondary education model and provides recommendations for addressing potential issues.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Domestic and International Research on learners' attainment of Native-like English

According to Schmitt, a non-native speaker's response is regarded as native-like if found on the norm list of associations, and native likeness is the most proper characteristic that should be used to evaluate learners' English proficiency [3]. Studies have focused on pronunciation, syntactic processes and pragmatics regarding this terminology. It is widely recognized that accent is concerned with learner's age. The learner will typically have minimal to no accent if they started speaking the second language before the age of six. The student is likely to have a little accent if they start speaking between the ages of seven and eleven. Learners who started speaking after age twelve nearly invariably have an accent [4]. As for grammatical structure, the reason why Chinese students are not able to produce standard sentences is attributed to use Chinese base-generated-topic sentences in their daily lives [5]. Chinese pragmatic researchers generally study the level of pragmatics by examining the use of certain words. For example, when saying thank you, in general, native speakers of Chinese say thank you much less frequently than native speakers of English. Influenced by this habit of their mother tongue, Chinese learners of English say thank you less frequently than native speakers of English when expressing themselves in English, no matter what level they are at. Inevitably, this can be misconstrued as impoliteness in some cases - and linguistic blunders arise as a result [6]. Another example is the inability to distinguish between could and would. The reasons for the judgements written by the subjects and the results of the interviews show that the subjects did not know that could/would have the discourse connotations mentioned above, but only knew that 'could/would is more polite than can, and that's what the grammar books and teachers' say [7].

2.2. The relationship between culture and language

Assertions about the relationship between language and culture are broadly divided into two schools of thought. One group believes that language and culture are two separate concepts that interact and have an indispensable influence on each other's growth; the other group believes that language is a culture in itself, that language and culture are inseparable, and that the two are a unified whole. Both views emphasize the existence of a positive relationship between culture and language. Saussure had divided language into *langue* and *parole* to study. Later on, by the time of Chomsky's language revolution, language was again divided into two parts: competence and performance. Competence refers to the linguistic knowledge of the speaker and the listener, while performance is the use of language in a specific context. However, this artificial dichotomy was rejected by Henry W. Hanley, who argued that such categorization was 'misleading and unnecessary' [8]. Hanley advocated a view of language as a social signifier, and a unity of view between abstract linguistic knowledge and actual speech acts. The later Kramsch criticized artificial dichotomies, i.e., problems in teaching and learning were viewed in two, without denying the duality that language possesses, i.e., that it responds both to the will of the individual and to the expectations and meanings of the community to which the speaker belongs [9].

Previous studies have explored learners' acquisition of native-like English proficiency, emphasizing pronunciation, syntactic processing, and pragmatics. Cultural differences are highlighted as a source of misinterpretation. Scholars differ in their views on the intricate link between language and culture. Some posit distinct characteristics, while others emphasize the inherent cultural nature of language. Nevertheless, the importance of cultural understanding for achieving proficient English skills is universally acknowledged. This study aims to derive educational insights from this correlation.

3. Analysis of political and social factors

3.1. Educational policy factors

3.1.1. Curriculum and textbook settings

Politically, integrating cultural awareness into language education needs to be considered. Yuxun Zhu from the propaganda department of the Jiu San Society used to [10]. Subsequently, the importance of cultural education was raised in terms of improvements to the policy on English education. It was suggested by Sun that the conflict between mother tongue and foreign languages should be dealt with in a peaceful state of mind in order to "Planning Foreign Language Education in China from a Scientific Viewpoint of Development" [11]. Although there is little political interest in infiltrating cultural awareness into language education, the educational community supports the idea that learning a language requires learning a culture, and proposes the development of intercultural awareness. Intercultural awareness is the ability to recognize and understand differences between cultures and to be accepting and respectful of these differences; the objectives of intercultural education include the development of character traits such as tolerance and respect for cultural differences or an interest in the unfamiliar [12]. China's new English curriculum guideline 2022 said that English teachers should help their students acquire this ability.

While the topic of culture in education is frequently debated, there is a noticeable lack of discourse around the appropriate evaluation of 'cultural confidence' and 'intercultural awareness' within the new English standard. While 'cultural confidence' requires learning traditional Chinese expressions in English in the classroom, the new requirement of 'intercultural awareness' requires students to learn about the cultures of different countries through the classroom. Lazear analyzed in his article that learners in larger groups immersed in native speech communities are less likely to acquire other languages, and that acculturation reduces the economic benefits of this group in trade with another group [13]. This thoroughly explains the lower level of English acquisition by Chinese students compared to students from other countries.

The narrowness of language must be broken to lessen the detrimental effects of policy on English instruction. English is a humanitarian discipline and a tool for communicating native culture, and its practicality cannot be the sole justification for its value. Second, we must consider the proportion of Chinese and Chinese cultures in English classes. The amount of Western culture in textbooks must be increased because learning a language requires ingesting material from the real world.

3.1.2. English test criteria

This part discusses the challenges inherent in standardized foreign language testing systems, particularly in the context of domestic exams. While these exams often emphasize consistency and reproducibility, they often overlook the complexities of real-world language use. The focus on rote memorization and test-taking strategies, rather than authentic language proficiency, can lead to students who excel on exams but struggle to communicate effectively in real-life situations or abroad. This discrepancy is particularly evident when comparing test scores with students' ability to speak, listen, read, and write like native speakers. As language educators and experts in cross-cultural communication, we must advocate for a more comprehensive and holistic approach to language testing that better aligns with the complexities and nuances of authentic language use.

3.1.3. Allocation of education resources under policy support

The distribution of resources for English instruction in the framework of China's educational regulations demonstrates notable complexity. Enhancing authenticity and relevance, teachers with

training from local sources who are also culturally sensitive and economical are preferred. Resource discrepancies still exist, though, with metropolitan areas having more opportunities than rural and mountainous locations. Policymakers face difficulties due to this inequality, which calls for a thorough evaluation of regional circumstances and student requirements. Resources must be allocated relatively since children living in rural locations find it difficult to attain high levels of English proficiency without sufficient help.

3.2. Sociocultural factors

3.2.1. Educational system and teaching methods

At the level of the education system, we have observed that the current education system has developed a relatively stable framework and process, with clear curriculum setting and evaluation criteria at all levels of education [14]. This stability, to a certain extent, guarantees the orderly conduct of educational activities, but at the same time limits the space for educational innovation. In teaching methods, despite the continuing calls for education reform in recent years, many teachers continue to focus on the traditional teaching of lectures rather than on the cultivation of competencies.

For example, a Culture Time board of the sixth unit of the primary school textbook of the Yilin Edition introduces the Great Wall, Yellowstone National Park, Stonehenge and the Great Barrier Reef, which can help students understand the geographical culture and historical culture of different countries. Based on Kramsch's view, culture should not be separated from language in textbooks [9]. Language itself is a culture, and it is inappropriate to see culture narrowly as a system of shared beliefs, values, customs, behaviors, and artifacts [15]. Presenting cross-cultural education as a separate piece of Western culture. The material should be authentic when choosing the content. At the same time, the post-class practice can also use the Western practice model, making the English classroom an immersive learning experience of the Western atmosphere. In order to ensure the rationality of the input, the vocabulary and width of the teaching material can be gradually reduced according to Western standards.

3.2.2. Learning Environment and Language Input

In cross-cultural communication, language input and learning environment are paramount. However, the absence of a consistent English-speaking and writing environment poses challenges for learners, particularly in non-native contexts. This hinders fluency and native-like proficiency as language acquisition demands frequent and meaningful exposure.

While the absence of a consistent English environment poses challenges, it is manageable. Through innovative practices and technology utilization, learners can still achieve significant progress in cross-cultural communication skills. To overcome this, educators and specialists must innovate teaching methods. In enhancing cross-cultural communication skills, innovative practices and technology utilization play a pivotal role. Effective measures, such as student exchange programs, study abroad experiences, and language partnerships, have demonstrated significant progress. These immersive experiences not only provide learners with first-hand exposure to different cultures but also facilitate language acquisition through practical communication. Additionally, the utilization of technology, including language-learning applications and online platforms, offers convenient access to diverse language inputs, further enhancing learners' cross-cultural communication skills. The continued reinforcement of these practices and technologies will undoubtedly contribute to the advancement of cross-cultural communication education.

3.2.3. Impact of the Family Environment

The parental influence on children is profound, encompassing cultural and financial dimensions. Cultural transmission occurs through parental behaviors, values, and beliefs, shaping children's identity and future choices. Financial status influences educational and career opportunities, as well as social and emotional development. Understanding this multifaceted impact is vital for cross-cultural communication scholars and educators, enabling them to devise more effective strategies to support and guide children's development.

4. Recommendations

4.1. Recruitment of local teachers and introduction of internationally accredited materials

Schools should hire local English teachers, or teach English-approved materials in the classroom as basic knowledge, such as the Oxford Dictionary, and students should not learn only Chinese English, or use English naturally, especially when it comes to writing and speaking requires more accurate guidance.

On the one hand, a fixed educational system helps to maintain the stability and continuity of education, but also makes it easy for students to fall into the dungeon of primary education, neglecting the cultivation of innovative capacity and practical capacity. On the other hand, traditional teaching methods, while helping to transfer knowledge, often ignore the subjective and personal differences of students, which are not conducive to stimulating students' learning interests and motivation. Therefore, reform and innovation should be actively promoted in education systems and teaching approaches.

4.2. Educational structural reform and requirements for teachers

Furthermore, the gap in the teaching structure needs to be improved, and there may be overlapping in two different learning stages, but there should not be a situation of "thinking that the previous teacher spoke. "Teacher's cultural infiltration of knowledge points should be carried out at all times, and if students find that there is a Chinese misuse of a language phenomenon, it should be corrected promptly. This requires a large knowledge system and the ability to replenish the database in a timely manner. Teachers must also learn constantly in the course of teaching.

4.3. More open shared educational resources

In addition to the requirements for teachers, the State needs to open up multiple channels for collecting of language materials. Since not all districts have sufficient funds to hire foreign teachers for all schools, a dedicated educational website could be set up to collect selected local support materials. A website must be open and free to all schools in need, which is essential to breaking the language barrier.

In order to help students change the way they think and approach situations, teachers must focus on the Chinese English phenomenon and compare and contrast the many linguistic structures of the two languages.

5. Conclusion

This paper delves into the multifaceted challenges English learners encounter in attaining native-like proficiency. Drawing upon Schmitt's framework, it underscores the importance of native-like responses in evaluating learners' proficiency. Political and social factors, including educational policies and resource allocation, significantly shape learners' experiences. Sociocultural elements,

such as teaching methods and learning environments, also contribute to the challenges. Although insightful, the study could be strengthened by incorporating quantitative methods to measure proficiency. Future research should develop nuanced frameworks and explore the potential of technology and innovative teaching methods to overcome these challenges. This study underscores the need for a nuanced understanding of the interplay between cultural, political, and social factors in achieving native-like English proficiency for Chinese learners. Future endeavors should address these gaps and pave the way for more effective and inclusive English education practices in China.

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