

The Investigation on the Status Quo and Demands of English Multi-Literacies of College Students in Hebei Province

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Abstract

As a need of global cultural diversity and multimodal communication in Big Data era, the cultivation of college students' English multi-literacies becomes an indispensable new trend of English teaching at college in China. This paper firstly introduces the basic concept of multi-literacy briefly. Then, it analyzes the statistics of the questionnaire about college students' multi-literacies in Hebei Province. Based on the status quo and demands of students' English multi-literacies, this paper makes some suggestions on how to improve students' English multi-literacies. Hopefully, this paper may have some enlightenment for English multi-literacy teaching and learning.

Keywords

English Multi-Literacies, Questionnaire, Status Quo, Demands, College Students

1. Introduction

UNESCO defines literacy as: "The ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts." (UNESCO, 2004: p. 13). Nowadays the form and connotation of literacy have changed. Besides traditional text forms, the ways of spreading information have multiplied. College English classes are also affected by new media. The traditional teaching method focused on reading and writing can employ more diversified approaches. Multimodal learning is able to be accomplished through multiple channels such as space, images, animation, networks, etc. What's more, college students, as digital natives, are more open to the multimodality in forms of vision, hearing, touch, etc. The cultural diversity and world unity re-

quire college English teaching to abandon the shortcomings of the traditional literacy pedagogy which only focused on language teaching. Cultivation of students' multi-literacies becomes necessary. Instead of obtaining knowledge only through printed text, college students can acquire knowledge through the auditory, visual and other multimodal media channels. Meanwhile their ability of multicultural exchanges and critical thinking will definitely be enhanced.

2. Literature Review

The New London Group (1996) first proposed the concept of multi-literacies in 1996. In the Harvard Educational Review, they published a paper entitled "A Pedagogy of Multi-literacies: Designing Social Futures". They proposed a series of hypotheses for college literacy teaching, aiming to help students adapt to rapid social changes in the near future and meet the challenges of economic globalization, language and cultural pluralism, and communicative technology diversification.

Many foreign scholars have done a lot of research on multi-literacies. For example, Gamble and Easingwood (2000) pointed out that traditional sense of literacy is far from enough for modern people, they must acquire multi-literacies by searching, selecting, designing and utilizing online resources. Duncum (2004) thought multi-literacies refers to the ability that based on the interactive use of different communication patterns. Williamson (2005) insisted multi-literacies refers to the ability that is able to read all kinds of media and modes. Domestic multi-literacies research is still in its infancy, and related presentations and research results have only appeared in recent years. For example, Hu (2007) and Hu & Dong (2006) have conducted in-depth study of multimodality in social semiotics, emphasizing the importance of cultivating college students' multi-literacies; Wei (2013) constructed a multi-literacies training model in college English class based on the research of hyper-textualized teaching concepts, and proved that multi-modal teaching can effectively improve students' English listening and speaking ability. By carrying out an empirical study, Zhang (2011) explored the application and influencing factors of multi-literacies of English major undergraduates in senior and junior levels. There is no doubt that foreign scholars have made outstanding achievements in language teaching and learning of multimodality and multi-literacies, and the findings offer valuable guidance and reference to domestic studies. Whether the concept and practice which have been proved successful abroad can possibly apply to Chinese conditions is still an open question. Therefore, it is necessary for domestic scholars to conduct deeper studies on multi-literacies in the context of Chinese English teaching and learning. Besides theoretical studies, empirical studies are also necessary for domestic research in this field, with the fact that it can provide more first-hand data from the real context of English teaching class.

This paper tries to investigate the current situation of Hebei college students' awareness and ability of multi-literacies by questionnaires and provide the first-hand data for improving college students' ability of multi-literacies.

3. Research Design

As mentioned above, multi-literacies is introduced to China in recent years, and teaching practice under its guidance is still undergoing. However, with the expansion of global multicultural exchanges in digital information age, it is an indispensable requirement for college students to cultivate the ability of interpreting and constructing information and meanings through various modal forms, that is, the ability of multi-literacies. The research aims to find out the current status of multi-literacies of college students in Hebei and to know student's needs to promote their multi-literacies. Questionnaire is the major research method, accompanied by random interview.

3.1. Subject

Hebei province has rich higher education and a large number of college students. Promoting college English teaching and cultivating qualified graduates with high-leveled English are the major targets for college English teacher in Hebei Province. In order to reflect the status quo of college students' multi-literacies to the greatest extent, the researchers selected five universities as the survey objects, namely Yanshan University, Hebei University, Baoding University, Langfang Teachers University, and Shijiazhuang Science and Technology Information Vocational College. Located in different urban areas of Hebei Province and with different levels of schooling and recruitment, the five schools can objectively and comprehensively reflect the current status and needs of college students in Hebei Province. 660 subjects participated in this questionnaire survey, majoring in law, news communication, preschool education, biochemical technology, and electronic information engineering technology respectively. They are from Grade 1 to 3 of the above-mentioned schools with the ratio of male to female basically balanced. Totally, 660 copies of questionnaire were distributed and 653 valid were recollected.

3.2. Research Tools

Three research tools are employed in this research, namely, questionnaire, statistical software, and interviews.

The questionnaire is divided into two major items (see **Table 1**). The first item (Titles 1 - 30) aims to investigate Hebei college students' recognition of multi-literacies and the main modalities. Likert Scale is used here to show the preference. 1 means that it is completely in line with subject's situation; 2 means that it is in line with subject's situation; 3 means uncertainty; 4 means that it does not meet subject's situation; 5 means that it does not meet subject's situation at all. Students choose the corresponding statement according to their own situation. The second item (Titles 31 - 37) is multiple-choices with the purpose to investigate the situation and needs of college students using the Internet to conduct multi-literacies. The data is collected and sorted by statistical software. In addition, the researchers randomly interviewed the students to know more about their understanding and needs for multi-literacies.

Table 1. Structure of “Multi-literacies Questionnaire”.

Components	Objectives	Items
Awareness	to check the concept of “modality”, “multimodality” “multi-literacies”	1 - 4
Forms	to check the different forms of multimodality language form (written & oral) visual form (picture, animation, color, table, etc.) auditory form (sound, music, volume, tone, etc.) gestural form (facial expressions, body languages, etc.) spatial form (proximity, spacing, layout, etc.) combination of different forms	5 - 9 10 - 12 13 - 15 16 - 18 19 - 20 21 - 23
PPT teaching	to check students' acceptance and usage of PPT	24 - 30
Internet usage	to check students' usage and needs of Internet	31 - 37

3.3. Research Results

3.3.1. Students' Awareness of Multi-Literacies

As for the three terms, namely “modality”, “multimodality” and “multi-literacies”, 51.45% of the participants show that they have never heard of the two words “modal” and “multimodal”. The figure indicating students who do not understand the meaning of the two words is as high as 58.96%. In comparison, the proportion of students who have never heard of the term “multi-literacies” falls to 39.82%, but the proportion of students who don't understand the meaning of the word rebounds to 47.93%. These figures reflect that more than half of the participants in this survey know little about both the concept and meaning of modality and related terms.

In terms of different forms of multimodal communication, 58.04% of the students do not know that besides the language mode, there are other modes, such as: auditory, visual, physical, spatial modal. In the survey of language modalities, 71.36% of students know that language is a form of information presentation, usually in both spoken and written form. This result indicates that language is still the major way to communicate. However, compared with other presentation methods (sound, picture, video, animation, color, etc.), language is not the respondents' most favorable way. Less than one-third (26.65%) prefer to use language, the traditional way of expression, to present and exchange information. When it comes to communication in oral English, only 30.93% of the subjects can use appropriate pronunciation, intonation, and vocabulary according to different occasions. In terms of translation, (both written and oral), the proportion of students who can accurately translate only accounts for 18.38%. All of these show that language is gradually losing its prominent stage of communication. Students' ability of using language appropriately according to different occasion, style and listeners needs to be further improved. In terms of other modalities, namely, visual symbols, auditory symbols, physical symbols, and spatial symbols, most students believe that sometimes these modalities are more effective than words, and can read and utilize the information presented through these modalities. Nearly half (45.79%) of the students admit that modal combinations can

better convey meaning and present information. More than half (64.32%) of students often touch, read and enjoy a variety of information symbols including pictures, sounds, videos, and texts in their daily life and study. These reflect that nowadays students can easily access to multimodalities, and they also come to realize the satisfying effect of multimodalities in information exchange and communication. However, as for the statement “I can quickly understand the information presented by different modal combinations”, the proportion of students who choose uncertainty and disagreement accounts for 61.4%. It indicates that how to decode the meaning of different modes should be taught to students and continuous practice is a must.

3.3.2. Students' Situation and Needs of Internet

As one of the important embodiments of multimodal teaching—PPT teaching, 60% of students express that they prefer multimodal PPT teaching. This shows that the traditional teaching mode of “blackboard + teaching aid + textbook” can no longer meet the needs of students. They want to acquire knowledge and master skills in a more diversified way. But at the same time, students confess that they still have many difficulties in PPT-making, from information query to PPT production. For example, students who received interview say they can't find the channels through which they can quickly find the information they need in the information-overloaded virtual world. They don't know how to examine the authenticity of information, how to select information, and how to make effective use of video and audio, space layout, Color fonts, etc. when making PPT.

As for the situation and needs of using the network for multi-literacies learning, 93.72% of students think the main role of Internet is to find information, followed by communication (78.87%) and entertainment games (76.11%). This coincides with the choice of the statement “What are the tools for you to get information” 99.23% of the students choose the network, 60.18% of the students choose to communicate or discuss with others, and only 39.51% of the students choose the library. It is obvious that most of the students prefer internet due to its convenient and timely characteristics. About the question “which capabilities have you already obtained?”, making PPT presentation is on the top with 86.37% voting. However, through interviews, many students say that they can make PPTs, but the ability to search and filter information is relatively weak. Texts, pictures are still the two main employed-forms of finished PPT work. Students rarely use other forms in PPT presentation, such as music, animation, layout, etc. About the question “In the information age, what skills do you think you should have?”, the top three choices are information acquisition capability (94.79%), resource integration capability (88.36%), and network tool application capability (83.61%).

4. Suggestions and Conclusion

Based on the previous survey results, it can be easily found that although Hebei college students are still unaware of the concept of “modal” and “multimodal” and “multi-literacies”, most students have actually accepted the various modes

such as words, video, audio, gestures and space which are the main presenting forms of multi-literacies. Especially the form of text which is the important part of language learning, most students know that text is a form of information presentation, (both in spoken and written form), but it is not necessarily the only or preferred way to exchange information. However, students are not good at using phonetic intonation, selecting proper words according to different occasions, communication purpose and target listeners, which leads to the result of communication failure. To solve this problem, in the process of teaching, teachers need to provide context for the students to experience the subtle differences of synonyms, the formality of words in different styles. Teachers should also train students to properly select the words and sentence structure for different situations.

In response to PPT-making problems, teachers should equip themselves with high network information collection ability and critical thinking ability. At the same time, teachers are required to master PPT production technics. Through teachers' demonstration display, students can understand that various modes can be employed in PPT and they can also represent different meanings. Gradually, students come to know the benefits and advantages of multimodal combination of information transmission. On the basis of the demonstration, through the students' personal practice and explanation, they can practice while learning and *vice versa*. Finally they can truly understand the unique advantages of multimodality in information presentation and interpretation. This will definitely lay a solid foundation for students to readily accept multimodal teaching and enhance their own multi-literacies.

Information literacy is increasingly gaining the priority compared with other traditional literacies. Besides the ability of understanding information resources, ability of critically selecting information resources to solve various practical problems is becoming more and more important. As "digital natives", on the one hand, contemporary college students accept and enjoy the convenience of network, but on the other hand, students' ability to effectively use network tools to obtain information and integrate resources is still weak. This requires teachers to actively use the network, broaden the teaching channels, and enrich the teaching methods. For example, teachers can recommend the available software tools and show students how to use them. Under teachers' guidance and instruction, students should be given more chances to make use of software tools, search for key words and make comparative reading between news that reporting the same event. Teachers can also recommend prominent and reliable websites of foreign countries to reduce students' risk of being cheated by false news released by insecure websites. In this way, students' ability of making full use of internet and their multi-literacies will be gradually improved.

Multi-literacies possesses huge potential in English teaching. It is hoped that this empirical study can further enrich the domestic research on this topic and also provide practical guidance and suggestions for College English teachers in China.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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