



Design of English Course in Middle School Based on Multiple Teaching Methods

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Abstract

Since the establishment of the new curriculum standard, the quality of English teaching in public middle schools in China has improved. But the following problems also exist: the class is mainly teacher-centered, and focuses on vocabulary and grammar. Influenced by traditional beliefs, teachers aim to impart language knowledge through a single teaching method. It severely restricts the all-around development of students. Thus, it is proper to integrate the cognitive characteristics and learning motivation of students and the advantages of various teaching methods to design a more efficient English course. Therefore, this paper, which takes the English teaching of the sixth grade in a public middle school in Shanghai as a case, designs the English teaching course “Great Cities in Asia”, combining the theories of constructivism and behaviorism and the situational teaching method.

Subject Areas

Language Education

Keywords

English Teaching, Course Design, Situational Teaching Method

1. Introduction

Driven by achieving high scores in examination, the current English teaching in middle school still focuses on vocabulary and grammar, which fails in improving students’ language skills. Researchers have long pointed out this problem and proposed some strategies to improve it. However those solutions, which lack concrete cases, are a little bit abstract. Thus, in this paper, the author attempts to design an English course aimed at the students in Grade Six, combined with the cognitivist approaches and situational teaching method. This paper is composed

of five parts: introduction, summary of the current English teaching condition in middle school, review of constructivism learning theory and situational teaching method, course design and conclusion. The part about course design, which illustrates the teaching objective, methods, concrete procedures, is the most important.

2. The Current Condition of English Teaching in Public Middle School

2.1. Teaching Objective

The objectives of English teaching in the middle school can be divided into 4 main types: language knowledge, language skill, language strategy and emotion and attitude [1]. Language knowledge includes rules of pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar. The ability to use them in daily life and written exercise needs language skills. It is easier for students to master the former one with enough efforts, while the latter only can be learnt through exercise and the teachers' conduct. However, when many teachers design their teaching objectives, they usually confuse the former two types, focus on teaching language knowledge, and neglect other teaching objectives. It may be out of the excessive emphasis on the achievement of high scores.

2.2. Teaching Method

Influenced by the traditional teaching mode chronically, the majority of English teachers in the middle school have the "teacher-centered" concept rooted in their mind. In their course, they tend to adopt the grammar translation method with fixed steps and boring teaching materials. Although they know that the main purpose of English teaching should not only focus on the grammar teaching, they do not how to change their teaching method because that will be taxing and may affect the scores of the students [2]. Thus they just do their best to help their students master language knowledge through the following changeless procedures: choosing sentences as the basic part of teaching and language practice, taking vocabulary from reading texts the teachers teach through translation, teaching the grammar rules in the mother tongue with little active use of the targeted language, giving assignments with grammar and vocabulary as main content. Thus, in this traditional course, teachers and learners maintain traditional roles of knowledge transmitter and knowledge receiver. This is the situation of the majority of English course in middle schools, resulting in many problems. The first problem is that it fails in arousing the students' interest because this kind of course is actually very boring. Students who are at the lower grade have great curiosity about the world and enthusiasm about learning interesting things. They will resist the monotonous grammar and vocabulary learning, which in turn results in lower testing scores. Thus for them, it is better to provide more opportunities for them to participate in the course actively, which means adding some activities and imparting more cultural knowledge. The

second problem is that the overdue emphasis on the language knowledge will not yield the desired effects. Generally, the increase in scores is the most desirable outcome of middle schools. However, to achieve that objective, it is impossible to adopt the traditional teaching methods, as the English examination involves listening, grammar, reading and writing, in which especially the listening and writing could not produce good learning outcome just by the grammar-focused course. That requires the English teaching to do more efforts on the language skills teaching. After all, the imparting of grammar and vocabulary and related practice are just some fragmentary knowledge and do not train students using them systematically [3]. Besides, the lack of knowledge about cultural difference, these students cannot use vocabulary correctly whether in the writing part or in their daily life. In short, it is necessary for the English teachers to change their rooted belief and produce more vitality in their course by virtue of changing teaching method and adding more teaching content about language skills.

2.3. Feedback in the Course

In the English course of middle school, many teachers give evaluative feedback, which means the content of evaluating is language form in order to make the students understand information and knowledge correctly [4]. This kind of feedback can correct students' mistakes instantly. However, the way teachers give feedback should be improved because directly pointing out mistakes will discourage students, leading to adverse effects [5]. Thus, taking the students' age and cognitive level into consideration, it is inappropriate to correct or criticize something wrong in the students' answer directly.

3. Review about Theory and Teaching Methods in SL Teaching

3.1. Cognitive Constructivist Theory

Educational psychologists such as Jean Piaget and William Perry proposed constructivism learning theory that focused on what are in the learners' mind, as opposed to the belief of behaviorism, which emphasizes observable behavior without consideration of internal mental states or consciousness. Cognitivist teaching methods aim to assist students in assimilating new information to existing knowledge, as well as enabling them to make the appropriate modifications to their existing intellectual framework to accommodate that information [6]. That theory does not pay attention to observable behavior. Instead, it gives priority to mental processes. Similar to most cognitivist approaches, its main idea is that knowledge comprises symbolic mental representations, such as propositions and images, together with a mechanism that operates on those representations. Knowledge is obtained by learners when they constructed them based on their existing cognitive structures [7]. Thus, the cognitive development stage of learner is important for language teaching. This theory views learning as

a process of active discovery. The teacher's role is not to impart knowledge to students by virtue of repetition, or giving rewards and punishments. Actually, teacher should provide resources and guide learners in order to help students assimilate new knowledge. Thus, while designing the curriculum, it is of great importance for teachers to consider the ways of presenting and structuring new material. About the learning motivation, advocates of cognitive learning theory deem that motivation is largely intrinsic and largely self-motivated, which requires the great efforts from the learner's part ([8], p.54). Driven by self-motivation, external rewards and punishments are likely to give full play. That requires students to monitor their own learning through some methods, such as ungraded tests and study questions.

Cognitivist teaching methods focus on the strategies that help students to actively assimilate and accommodate new material in order to help students in adding new information to existing knowledge. Thus, in this kind of course, teachers ask students to explain new material in their own words, which is conducive for the students to strengthen their existing vocabulary. If the course is about reading, teachers may give questions related with the previous reading materials in order to help students construct the structure of the new reading material.

3.2. The Oral Approach or Situational Language Teaching Method

The oral approach or situational language teaching is based on a structural view of language. Between the 1930s and 1960s, British linguists including A.S. Hornby, Harold Palmer and Michael West developed principles for the oral approach, or situational language teaching. It is affected by both structuralism and behaviourism. Firstly, speech is the foundation of language, and structure is the core of verbal competence. Structure is taught through sentences. From this, it is concluded that the situational approach regards language as a structure, a regular system, deeply influenced by structuralism. As for the teaching material arrangement, it is made from easy level to difficult one. This method is also about habit acquisition. It requires repetition and substitution to form language habits in teaching practice, which is influenced by behaviourism. Its core is that speaking and listening are more important than reading and writing. Language is practiced by listening and speaking first, followed by reading and writing part. Another important belief of this theory is that students will form their idea when they had mastered lexis and grammar structures, which are the basis of situational language teaching. Grammar should be based on spoken language and taught as patterns. Other principles about this approach include: grammar should be based on spoken language and taught as patterns, and mistakes should be avoided at all costs. According to Richards and Rogers, the organization of situation means the use of concrete objects, pictures, gestures and actions to present meaning. Situations always occur in a dialogue and series of pictures relating to it [9]. A typical situational lesson can be organized with pronunciation, revision of previous structures, presentation of new structures and lexis, drilling

and reading or writing exercises step by step.

4. The Design of an English Course for Students at Grade Six

This course is about English teaching for students at grade six, with unite one Great Cities in Asia of the oxford Shanghai edition of English textbook as teaching material. In this course, the teaching objectives include mastering language knowledge, skills and culture. Specifically, vocabulary about orientation and name about cities, the structure of questioning about distance and location should be learnt and used fluently. This course will begin with listening practice, followed by speaking and reading part. In order to avoid the prominent problem occurred in the traditional English course, this course does not focus on the vocabulary or grammar teaching. Rather, it emphasizes mastering language knowledge through situation, which is the belief of situational language teaching method [10]. Due to the design of the textbook, in which all language skills are involved and ranked successively, it is suitable to adopt the situational language teaching method. Thus, the teaching steps include presenting relevant vocabulary, doing listening practice, learning the expressions that occurred in the listening text, doing dialogue and finding key information in the reading part. It should be made clear that these teaching steps are not fixed and could be adjusted based on concrete situation.

This course is learner-centered, with the teacher as an instructor. In the course, although the teacher will ask questions in the lead-in part and always give some demonstration to use some new expressions, this course is also dominated by students [11]. Four factors prove it. The first one is the teaching objective. In this course, the primary goal is to help students master language skills while learning language knowledge. Thus the vocabulary and grammar are learnt through dialogue, question-answer and repetition. In this way, students can acquire language skills including reading, speaking, listening and writing. Meanwhile, the teaching strategy must be chosen carefully. It includes the ways for giving lead-in, the frequency for reviewing knowledge and ways of rewards and punishment. That is different from the traditional course, which focuses on the disseminating grammar and vocabulary. Moreover, this course needs the active participation of students, otherwise, it cannot move forward just by the teacher's narration [12]. For example, in the reading part, the teacher asks students what they want to do in their travel. If all students are silent, then they only can review what they have learnt and find new information through reading. That proves the failure of the teacher's work because he does not help student build the cognitive connection between the old knowledge and the new one successfully.

This course takes the cognitive level of students into consideration. To achieve desired teaching effects, it is necessary to judge the students' cognitive level correctly, which help the teacher to adjust the pace and ways of teaching [13]. Generally, the levels of cognitive learning can be classified as memorizing, under-

standing, and applying. Firstly, it takes different time for different student to understand the same concept. For example, when the vocabulary involved in the listening text such as north-east and south-east is taught, maybe some students feel confused. They may wonder why it is not east-north or east-south, which conforms to the sequence of Chinese. Facing this situation, the teacher will not simply explain the meaning of these vocabularies and move to next part instantly. Instead, the teacher may list some Chinese expressions such as “上北下南, 左西右东”, in order to prove the north or east can be put before east and west in Chinese. In this way, the teacher helps the students assimilate the new knowledge into the old cognitive structure. Secondly, memorizing level of each student is different. Although the students have good memory in Grade Six, some of them could not give respond to the questions as quickly as others. For example, in the part of practicing the sentence structure “which city is the capital of Japan”, the word “Tokyo”, instead of the complete sentence “Tokyo is the capital of Japan”, may be given by some students as answer. That is because they do not memorize the sentence structure clearly. As this situation has been considered in advance, the teacher will not just criticize or force the students to memorize that sentence structure instantly. On the contrary, the teacher will guide them by these steps: “yes, you are right”, “Tokyo is?,” “Tokyo is the capital,” “Tokyo is the capital of ____.” By separating the complete sentence into several one, the teacher can guide students to learn the whole sentence and give the correct answer finally. Thirdly, the ability of application varies among different students. For example, some students may give a correct answer to the question “which city is the capital of China”, but they could not give correct answer when asking the capital of the Japan or Thailand. As this cognitive factor has been considered, the teacher will give these students time to do the dialogue in their groups first, which will give less pressure on the students. Besides, the teacher will give rewards to motivate the students to apply those knowledge.

This course involves the active feedback of teacher. As opposed to correcting all wrongs directly, the teacher will select more effective and flexible way.

Imagine the following situations:

(1) T (teacher): How far is it from Shanghai to Beijing?

S (student): It's about one four zero zero kilometres.

(2) T: How can we travel to Japan?

S: We can travel to Japan plane.

(3) T: How long does it take to travel from Shanghai to Beijing by train.

S: It take about ten hours.

In the situation (1), the wrong point in the answer is the pronounce of 1400. In this course, the cognitive and emotion factor are considered, thus the teacher will correct that mistake just like this:

(4) T: How far is it from Shanghai to Beijing?

S: It's about one four zero zero kilometres.

T: One four is fourteen?

S: Yes, fourteen.

T: One zero zero is hundred? S: Yes, hundred.

T: So, One four zero zero is fourteen hundred?

S: Oh, It's about fourteen hundred kilometers.

The situation (4) shows the way in which the teacher corrects the mistake in the course, which is different from the traditional way. That maybe take more time to help students master language knowledge, however, it does not cause negative effect on the mind of students, compared with the crude way of criticizing students using the already learnt knowledge mistakenly. In (2) and (3), the mistakes are the omitting adverb in collocation about transportation and variation of verb. Similarly, in this course, the teacher will correct the mistakes just like this:

(5) T: How can we travel to Japan?

S: We can travel to Japan plane.

T: So can we also travel to Beijing by plane?

S: Yes.

T: So we can travel to Beijing or Japan by ___?

S: Oh, we can travel to Beijing or Japan by plane.

(6) T: How long does it take to travel from Shanghai to Beijing by train.

S: It takes about ten hours.

T: Then it takes the same time to travel from Shanghai to Beijing by plane?

S: No, it takes...

In short, this course is designed based on both the cognitive level and emotion state of students. Teachers will choose a teaching strategy, which gives guidance for students step by step and adjusts teaching steps based on the personal situation of students, rather than one strategy, which requires students to memorize what they have learnt. That also means the teacher will consider the ways of correcting mistakes. It is an unreasonable strategy to criticize the students or just give the correct answer directly. Instead, that requires the teacher to give different response based on different mistakes, which is a challenge for the teacher. However, it can be realized with sufficient efforts from the teacher's part.

This paper gives a concrete case to discuss the situational teaching method, which is conducive for teaching practice. However, it also has some limitation. It mainly focused on language knowledge and skills. More detail about other teaching objects can be analyzed. Meanwhile, the ways for correcting the mistakes in this case seem to be effective. However, it is difficult to implement in English course. After all, the mistakes that students make are various.

5. Conclusion

The belief that English teaching should aim at improving the language skills, instead of language knowledge alone, has been promoted for a long time. However, it is a great challenge to improve the traditional English course in middle school, which is examination-driven. The teaching objectives can be realized only when these courses are designed scientifically. That requires the teachers to consider the students' cognitive level, motivate them and provide timely and

proper instruction. That also needs to combine the use of different teaching theories or methods because each theory has its advantage and disadvantage. In short, the design of a good English course should integrate various factors and teaching theories and methods.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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Appendix

Lesson Plan

1) Teaching content

Listening, speaking, reading about Great Cities in Asia

2) Teaching material

Unit 1 Great Cities in Asia

3) Teaching objective

a) To master vocabulary about great cities in Asia and expressions about locations

b) In the speaking part, using related vocabulary in the situation: traveling to different cities

c) In the listening part, recognizing related vocabulary and sentence structure

d) In the reading part, looking for some information about Beijing, Tokyo and Bangkok based on the knowledge learnt from preceding parts.

4) Teaching process

Step 1 Greetings and free talking

a) Giving lead-in by asking some information about what the students have already known. (For example, which city do you want to travel? Where is it? Is it far from Shanghai? Why do you want to go to that city?)

b) Presenting pictures about the cities in Asia

These pictures include:

Famous museums, palaces and parks in Beijing, buildings, huge department and stores in Tokyo, and temples and beaches in Bangkok

Step 2

a) Listening how to express north, east, south, west and orientation in English

b) Teaching the vocabulary about orientation

c) Listening the text about the great city in Asia, followed by questions such as which city is the capital of ___? where is it?(In this step, giving an example first)

Step 3

a) Encouraging students to talk about which city they want to go, and the vocabulary involved in the preceding listening part should be used

Step 4

Lead-in:

Presenting the picture about vehicles, asking students how can we travel to ___, inviting them to predict how far the destination is from Shanghai, and how long that travel will take by a certain vehicle

b) Listening to the part about travel

c) Learning the listening text, doing practice about the key expressions and requiring students use those expressions in dialogue with their classmates

Step 5

This step is about reading

a) Discussion: motivating students to imagine what they want to do in their journey (including the places they want to visit and food they want to eat). In

this part, hints should be given

b) Presentation: some pictures about delicious food and tourist attractions about the cities mentioned in the reading materials

c) Reading practice: reading the materials and finding important information

Step 6

Summarizing the language knowledge and giving homework

5) Anticipated difficulties

a) Students may feel confused about the expressions such as north-east, which will be used as east-north by some students

b) When it comes to the expressions about distance and time, some students could not pronounce words about number correctly

c) Given the different cognitive level, some students may not master the ways of asking distance, transportation and so on

6) Solutions about the anticipated difficulties

a) Motivating the students to associate north-east with Chinese phrase to memorize that north precedes east

b) In the dialogue with students, demonstrating the pronunciation of number