Study on English Classroom Teaching Techniques Based on Cognitive Principles*

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Abstract—The discussion of different teaching techniques enjoys great popularity among English teachers nowadays. Many relevant researches have been done to investigate the effective teaching principles. This article focuses on three principles, namely meaningful learning, intrinsic motivation, the anticipation of reward, with the aim to explore some concrete classroom teaching techniques in the real teaching settings.

Keywords—cognitive; classroom techniques; meaningful learning; intrinsic motivation; the reward principle

I. INTRODUCTION

In any group of teachers there are some principles that are shared as well as some that are held by individual teachers. As teachers plan lessons and teach, they draw on a teaching philosophy as well as their personal principles to help them shape and direct their teaching (Bailey 1996; Richards 1998).

Cognitive principles relate mainly to mental and intellectual functions. It may focus on the learners’ mental activity as well as the stimulation of their intellectual activities. And cognitive principles proposed by H. Douglas Brown consist of five specific principles, that is, Automaticity, Meaningful Learning, The Anticipation of Reward, The Intrinsic Motivation Principle and Strategic Investment. Each principle has some guidance towards real classroom teaching. The author will mainly investigate three principles and their application in promoting efficient English classroom teaching.

Principles are abstractions. They have to be actualized as techniques in the particular circumstances of different classrooms. The teaching task is to see that the techniques that are used effective in promoting learning objectives, so they have to be designed to account for specific contexts of instruction. (Widdowson H.G, 1999).

It is not surprising that different teachers have different preferences in teaching techniques. With the wide application of computer science and Internet in the actual English classes, teachers may meet the students’ learning needs by giving lessons with on-line resources to produce the nearly real-life, audio-visual effect in the multi-media language laboratories.

II. CONDITIONS AFFECTING TEACHING EFFICIENCY IN THE ENGLISH CLASSROOM

Many factors may affect the efficiency of English teaching in the practical classroom, such as materials, teachers’ background knowledge, the learners’ motivation, learners’ knowledge, teaching skills, teaching styles, etc. Considering so many conditions may have some effect on teaching, it can’t be discussed one by one. In this case, three relevant factors for investigation will be selected.

A. The Teacher Factor

Many things can be done to create a context for good teaching, but it is teachers themselves who ultimately determine the success of a program. Good teachers can often compensate for deficiencies in the curriculum, the materials, or the resources they make use of in their teaching. In this section, how their roles can be supported in a teaching program will be considered.

Teachers’ roles play an essential role in enhancing students’ abilities, in the formation of students’ values and outlook towards the life as well as world. Teaching effects will be highly relied on the quality of the teachers. Therefore teacher education reform in China should focus on improving teaching quality. The government responsible should speed up the development of teacher education by relying on law, executive methods and economic management ways to form an effective teacher education quality system.

B. The Learner Factor

In second language acquisition research, the study of individual learner factors plays an important role. Learning is not the mirror image of teaching. The extent to which teaching achieves its goals will also depend on how successfully learners have been considered in the planning and delivery process (Jack.C. Richards, 2008). It is the learners themselves who have the control over his or her own learning.

Five general individual factors have received the most attention in SLA research, that is, age, cognitive style, personality, motivation and attitude. Lenneberg has proposed critical period hypothesis which states that it needs a long time when it has little difficulty in language acquisition. And cognitive styles of individual learners vary from one to

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another, the teachers are supposed to have a clear understanding of the relationship between their instructional design and learners’ age and cognitive. Over two decades ago, it was supposed motivation was influenced by attitude which could also affect SLA. It is demonstrated that a positive attitude towards the target language was related to SLA success in the Canadian bilingual setting (Lu Yang, 2011).

C. Teaching Techniques

Techniques referred to any of a wide variety of exercises, activities, or devices used in the language classroom for realizing lesson objectives. Techniques are the specific activities manifested in the classroom that are consistent with a method and therefore in harmony with an approach as well.

Teachers should keep students’ needs, interests, and learning styles in mind, apply several kinds of teaching techniques, organize different classroom activities and encourage, praise and appreciate both students’ success and learning process all the time. If teachers place more responsibility in the hands of students, serve as “presenter or facilitator of knowledge” instead of “source of all knowledge”, they can greatly motivate students to learn the language in a very active, cooperative and effective way.

III. THE DESIGN OF CLASSROOM TECHNIQUES BASED ON MEANINGFUL LEARNING PRINCIPLE

David Ausubel (1963) argued that Meaningful learning “subsumes” new information into existing structures and memory systems, and the resulting associating links create stronger retention. Children are good meaningful acquirers of language because they associate sounds, words, structures, and discourse elements with that which is relevant and important in their daily quest for knowledge and survival (H. Douglas, Brown, 2001).

A. David Ausubel’s Meaningful Learning Theory

David Ausubel, a pioneer in studying meaningful learning, pointed out that two things are necessary for understanding to occur: (1) the content must be potentially meaningful, and (2) the learner must relate it in a meaningful way to his or her prior knowledge. For potentially meaningful knowledge to become meaningful knowledge to a learner, it is usually, according to Ausubel, subsumed under a broader, more inclusive piece of meaningful knowledge closely related to it. Understanding of the concept “Christmas” is enhanced when people learn during the Christmas celebration. The more distinct the new knowledge is from the relate subsumer, the harder is to understand. The key to understanding, it appears, is relating it to appropriate prior knowledge. But sometimes, particularly when one understands incorrectly, subsumption does not come easily and it doesn’t fit right. Then there is a restructuring of knowledge Ausubel calls “integrative reconciliation”.

Schema theory extends Ausubel’s theory of meaningful learning by identifying other types of relationships which help lend meaning to new knowledge. But the same two processes remain, only with different names: what Don Norman refers to as “accretion” (plugging new ideas into a schema) and “restructuring” (making important changes to a schema). He also identified an intermediate process, which he calls “tuning” (making smaller changes to a schema), which shows that there is a continuum between these two extreme forms of understanding. Assimilation occurs when you plug new knowledge into an existing schema, whereas restructuring occurs when the new knowledge results in your re-conceptualizing (significantly modifying a schema) in order to understand (reconcile conflicts with your prior knowledge).

B. Setting Proper Learning Goals

According to “Zone of Proximal Development” proposed by Vygotsky, an area of learning that occurs when a person is assisted by a teacher or peer with a higher skill set of the subject. The person learning the skill set cannot complete it without the assistance of the teacher or peer. The teacher then helps the student attain the skill the student is trying to master in hopes that the teacher is no longer needed. (Chaiklin, S. 2003)

In view of Vygotsky’s concept, learning goals should conform to students’ “zone of proximal development”. When the learning aims are set a bit higher than the learners’ existing ability, the tasks are challenging, and it will easily involve the students in the activity. When the students’ prior knowledge is awakened, this process will help them to obtain new knowledge, and meaningful learning may occur. According to Ausubel’s meaningful theory, two elements are necessary to achieve understanding new knowledge. One is that the material should be meaningful self, and the other is that the content should be closely related to the learner’s previous or existing knowledge.

C. Cultivating Good Teacher-student Relationship

Relationship between teachers and students is conductive to the formation of meaningful learning. Meaningful learning process is a process of bilateral activity and also two aspects of dynamic process of human rationality and emotion between teachers and students. Therefore, in the classroom teaching, teachers should not only guide the learners to think fully, but also lead an open communication with them. In this way, the students’ ideas will be completely exposed to the class. Only when the teachers create an anxiety-free atmosphere, can the students keep a kind of heart-to-heart communication with them. In order to promote meaningful learning process, a democratic, affectionate, harmonious and relaxed atmosphere is needed, so that the students can really think fully, creatively with a free state of mind.

In summary, in the process of teaching and learning, teachers should avoid the pitfalls of rote leaning, as rote learning is taken in isolated bits and pieces of information that are not connected with one’s existing cognitive structure has little chance of creating long-term retention. Meanwhile all successful learning and effective studies are the process of meaningful learning. Meaningful learning is not a specific learning method, but a scientific learning process to improve learning effect in accordance with the law of cognitive principles.
IV. The Stimulation of Intrinsic Motivation in English Classroom Teaching

A. Elaboration of Intrinsic Motivation

Edward Deci (1975) defined intrinsic motivation: Intrinsically motivated activities are ones for which there is no apparent reward except the activity itself. People seem to engage in the activities for their own sake and not because they lead to an extrinsic reward. Intrinsically motivated behaviors are aimed at bringing about certain internally rewarding consequences, namely, feelings of competence and self-determination.

Maslow (1970) claimed that intrinsic motivation is clearly superior to extrinsic. According to his hierarchy of needs, people are ultimately motivated to achieve “self-actualization” once the basic physical, safety, and community needs are met. No matter what extrinsic rewards are present or absent, people will strive for self-esteem and fulfillment.

B. Western Culture-based Teaching Activities

Language and culture are closely related with each other. Because of globalization, cultural exchange tends to increase in a fast pace. Students in China are fascinated about western cultures when they learn a foreign language. Knowledge associated with western cultures will stimulate the students’ motivation easier.

Western culture-based tasks are intrinsically motivating, when learning a foreign language, the learners are eager to know about the relevant cultures of the target language. Therefore, the teachers might strive to focus their students on interesting, relevant cultures, for example, western holidays, religion cultures, color preference etc.

C. Effective Teacher Feedback

Intrinsic learning motivation describes the quality of motivation during the process of learning and means doing an activity for his inherent satisfaction rather than for some separable consequences. (Ryan R.M. & Deci. E.L, 2000). Intrinsically motivated students enjoy learning and want to learn more about the content. Teaching contents should be familiar and manageable, awakening the students’ existing knowledge, relevant to learners’ academic and career goals.

Teachers’ feedback plays an important role in the formation of students’ self-esteem. Self-esteem reflects their evaluation, values and attitudes towards themselves. Studies have shown that self-esteem is associated with oral expression. Students with high self-esteem dare to speak a foreign language in a strange situation, and generally do not feel embarrassed; therefore it’s easier to learn a foreign language well. In the classroom teaching, teachers’ positive evaluation and attitude can enhance students’ self-esteem, it is very important to build their confidence. Positive feedback should be conducted throughout the whole process of classroom teaching. Clear information feedback can be effective incentive and specific feedback can arouse motivation, they can both provide large amounts of information and help students to establish the direction and create conditions for success.

D. Stimulating Students’ Interest

Interest is the most realistic, active and practical factor of learning motivation. Stimulating the students’ interest in the classroom teaching process is a kind of strategy to motivate students to learn. But the cultivation of interest in learning motivation tends to be ignored nowadays (Mi Meng, 2010).

Educator Skinner once said: ‘The teaching effect basically relies on the students’ learning attitude’. And one’s interest may regulate one’s emotion, if there is a strong interest in learning, students will show great enthusiasm. Einstein also said: “Interest is the best teacher.” Interest in learning is the intrinsic motivation of students, and it promotes students to explore a strong desire for knowledge.

Students’ learning interest can create active intention, which will lead to learning success. And the pleasure of success will further stimulate the new interest in learning, and enter into a virtuous circle track. At appropriate time, a positive and stable learning interest is beneficial to the students’ learning motivation.

V. The Usage of the Reward Principle in Classroom Teaching

From the perspective of behaviorism, human beings are universally driven to act, or behave, by the anticipation of reward, tangible or intangible, short term or long term, that will ensue as a result of the behavior.

Jerome Bruner (1962), praising the “autonomy of self-reward”, claimed that one of the most effective ways to help both children and adults to think and learn is to free them from the control of rewards and punishments. One of the principal weaknesses of extrinsically driven behavior is its addictive nature. Once captivated, as it were, by the lure of an immediate prize or praise, our dependency on those tangible rewards increases, even to the point that their withdrawal can then extinguish the desire to learn.

A. Rational Utilization of Verbal Praise

Someone puts forward a question in the questionnaire, “What should the teachers do when the students offer a wrong answer?” According to the result, 63.75% attendants choose to praise the redeeming feature of the answer first, and then point out the incorrect parts. And only 4.49% attendants choose “serious criticism” towards the students’ mistakes (Yang Suqin, 2004). The data above reflect that the students may agree more with the teachers’ recognition of their sparkling points rather than their mistakes. Of course, the praise strategy should be applied properly in accordance with the age and characteristics of the students. The teachers should take individual difference into consideration. By offering praise, the teachers can encourage students to develop self-confidence, creative-thinking and the courage to ask questions, and then arouse their interest in learning.

B. Reasonable Use of External Reward

The usage of external reward can attract students’ attention, especially for pre-school or elementary school children. Here external reward refers to material rewards, such as some candies, pencils, erasers, etc. For young students, their motivation in learning more relied on their
interest, and their interest at this stage is dominated by external stimuli. Therefore, since the students’ cognitive driving force is not enough to stimulate and maintain interest in learning, external rewards can evoke their interest effectively. But improper use of material rewards may also bring about some unexpected negative effects.

Classroom techniques have a much greater chance for success if they are self-rewarding in the perception of the learner. The learners perform the fun because it is fun, interesting, useful or challenging.

VI. CONCLUSION

Teacher education provides for the appraisal of ideas in order to make them more practically effective, because an understanding of abstract principles and their relationships allows for adaptability in their realization. It follows that such an educational perspective on teacher preparation does not deny the importance of practical technique. But techniques are not goals in themselves, as they are in a training perspective; they are means for making ideas operational and subject to modification in the light of evaluation.

The way techniques are to be considered in teacher education, not as procedures to conform to but to exploit, bears on the question of use of existing teaching materials in the preparation of teachers. These teaching materials are techniques made manifest by the specific choice of language, designed and arranged as a series of tasks or exercises for immediate implementation.

The specific teaching techniques mentioned above do not always seem to be operational; it should be carried out in the contexts of particular classrooms. Many elements need to be considered in the process of implementing these techniques, such as students’ levels, teaching materials, the craft of classroom management, the use of routine procedures, teachers’ knowledge, etc.

REFERENCES


