

An Analysis of the Teaching Methodology Used for the Teaching of English in a China Secondary School

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Abstract: The teaching activity was in a junior school in China, where English was taught as a foreign language between the age of 12 and 15 as a section of their compulsory courses. Most of the students were from a small county in the southeast of Hubei Province of China and were monolingual with Chinese as their L1.

Keyword: Junior school; English; Teaching method

Background information

1. The classes.

Learners had to learn English from entry into Secondary school to the Senior High School Entrance Examination. There are three academic years in high school, and each year consists of 2 semesters, which lasted for about 20 weeks.

2. The teacher and material

The coursebook, Project English, was used for the study of the whole course. There were 6 books in total which distributed to each semester. Every book has 5 units with audio. At the end of the book is new vocabulary and phrases in each unit. Coursebooks and the blackboard were the main forms of teaching.

3. Analysis of Practice

The second-year course is test-oriented and much more difficult than the first-year course. Several teaching methodologies are used including The Grammar-Translation Method, Communicative Language Teaching (including PPP and TBLT) and The Audiolingual Method. This essay will talk about these four methodologies. And focusing on the grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation parts. Each part of the paper will first describe the teaching process, and then analyze it from a methodological perspective.

3.1 Vocabulary part

At first, the English teacher would require students to preview the new vocabulary of the next class. Before class, the new vocabulary would be written on the blackboard by the instructor. In the class, some students were asked some related questions designed by teachers. And answers were exactly the new words and phrases that students previewed. After that, the teacher required students in a group of four to choose words on the blackboard. Then let them make up a short dialogue and share with the class. At the end of this process, the instructor would correct some errors they made during the dialogue.

Analyzing this segment, it is an obvious weak Communicative Language Teaching. Howatt(1984:279)claims that the weaker version has become more or less standard practice in the past decade, emphasizing the importance of providing learners with chances to communicate in English... and incorporating such activities into an extensive language teaching program. The PPP lesson model has three phases, 'Presentation (introduce new teaching materials in context), Practice (the controlled practice of the materials), and production (a free practice stage for learners)'. (Willis and Willis 1996). Before class, the teacher presented and wrote the target language on the blackboard in a kind of visual way which is known as the first P(presentation). At the class, using oral exercises or drills to let learners grasp the correct words and structures. This is the second P(practice). The third P which is called production, learners produce their dialogues and there is more than one answer. After the presentation part, teacher should give brief feedback and list some useful structures they used. Through this activity, students have a good command of communication and feel free exposure to others (Howatt,1984 cited in Richards and Rogers, 2014).

3.2 Teaching segment

After teaching the new words in the word list, the teacher would require students to highlight these words in the passage in the front part of the coursebook. After that, to use these new words, the instructor would give a topic for students to discuss, such as sports, hobbies, and families. During the discussion, the teacher walked around in the classroom to listen to students' ideas. After the discussion, the instructor asked some groups to share what they have talked about. In the end, the instructor would give some feedback to their answers and correct the inappropriate parts.

In this teaching segment, ‘a strong version of communicative language teaching (Hawatt,1984 cited in Richards and Rogers,2014) has been used.’ ‘Some of its proponents (eg., Willis 1996; Willis and Willis 2007) present Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) as a logical development of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)’. The communicative task can be divided into three parts: Pre-task, Task cycle, Language Focus, and feedback. In the first part, the instructor gives time for students to get familiar with new vocabulary; After that, the teacher sets up a task and then steps back. Students finish the task in pairs or groups. Then the learner report back to the whole class. Finally, the teacher digs out some language feathers, highlights relevant parts and gives feedback.

The teacher’s role is “organizers before the mission”, “given clear instructions to guide the group’s information.” Teachers are also facilitators who support students interactively while performing tasks (Van den Branden,2006). What is more, in the feedback section, teacher’s role is the supervisor. By asking for clarification and confirmation questions or providing feedback, teachers can “push” students to produce more complex outputs.

3.3 Grammar part

Having been learning the vocabulary in the context, the teacher would focus on the structure of the sentences in the passage. At first, she would translate each sentence and explain grammar rules in this passage. Then, to let learners memorize the grammar rules easily, the instructor made up some grammar tongue twisters, songs, and poems for students to recite. After that, the teacher would let students use newly learned structures or phrases to make up new sentences. At the end of these processes, there were around ten minutes for students to recite all new vocabulary and structures.

In this teaching segment, the methodology of the Grammar-Translation Method (GTM) is used. This method was popular in Europe from the 1840s to the 1940s and is still widely used in some fields (Richards and Rogers,2014). Firstly, sentence translation is regarded as the fundamental unit in GTM, and most of the courses are mainly to ‘translate sentences from mother tongue into the target language and vice versa’(Howatt,1984:131); Then memorizing grammar rules is considered much more important than language learning especially in the morphology and syntax of the foreign language(Richards and Rogers,2014);Finally, Grammar practiced through translation exercises to improve the understanding of the Grammar.

3.4 Pronunciation Part

In the class, to improve the pronunciation and fluency of students’ English, the teacher would play the learned dialogue on the tape for students. And they repeated after the tape. In the meantime, the instructor paid attention to the errors and correct them immediately. If the sentence was too long, several pauses were needed for students to follow and difficult sentences would be repeated several times. After reading several times, students were divided into two parts to practice the dialogue. After class, several students with good pronunciation would be chosen and lead the rest students to read words, phrases and the whole passage.

In evaluating sources sessions, it is a typical Audiolingual Method. Language is taught by systematically focusing on speech and intensive oral training on main sentence patterns. Mode exercises are essential classroom skills (Richards and Rogers,2014). In the beginning, a model dialogue is needed for students to follow in different ways. Then through a lot of drills, students would master the key structures and the accuracy of pronunciation. Furthermore, practice is also carried out in various forms.

Evaluation

As for the methodology of presentation-practice-production (PPP), during the class, many of classmates got used to using the structure which had been learned before and it is kind of habits for us. Willis (1990) mentioned that the task of designing learners to use target structures is not easy, because learners can always rely on their strategic capabilities to bypass it. Furthermore, I felt confused when I met some similar structures that I was taught before. Willis (1990) explains that teaching fixed rules in grammar will make students confused when they encounter more complex grammar which will not match the prototypes that teachers show in class. However, due to the clear structure of the teaching process, the detailed sequence in the class is easy for learners to follow and also for the novice teacher. (Richards & Rodgers, 2001, p. 246).

With the limited knowledge of the L2, using new words to discuss the topic was regarded as a difficult task for a learner. TBLT may face some practical problems such as the limitation in second language proficiency of students (Ellis,2018). Nevertheless, TBL activities forced students to communicate in L2, which developed a habit of using English in class. Unlike the audiolingual method that relies on repetition and drills, the communicative approach can make students suspense the results of classroom exercises, which will vary depending on their reactions and responses. (Curso del idioma ingles,2008)

As a traditional methodology, GTM almost occupied my English classes. As far as I am concerned, it is the fastest way to understand the meaning of the whole passage and language features in the passage. Learners also feel relaxed in class because of permission for using L1. However, I felt unmotivated when facing these endless grammar rules and long word list. It is frustrating to remember endless lists of unusable grammar structures and words (Richards and Rogers,2014). While I think my teacher did well in this aspect, to keep learners motivated, she used interesting ways to illustrate the grammar. For example, when teaching a singular form of the present tense, she found a poem for us: ‘stop says the red light; go says the green; wait says the yellow light; waiting in-between’, which was easy to remember because of the rhythm’.

Every time reading after teachers, I just watched my book and repeated, and sometimes I did not pay attention to new words not to mention remembering them. Brooks(1964) points out that only when learners get familiar with pronunciation, layout and structures do they concentrate on increasing his vocabulary. Students were just reading mechanically and did not pay attention to the words and structures. Nonetheless, using dialogues and drills are effective in foreign language teaching as they guide students to generate speech.

References:

[1] Brooks, N.H., (1964). *Language and language learning : theory and practice* 2nd ed., New York: Harcourt, Brace & World.