

A Comparative Study of English Education in China and Japan

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This is a comparative study of English education between China and Japan. The paper discusses elementary school education, secondary school education, learning motivation and environment, teaching methods, and classroom management and online education so as to clarify some of the similarities and differences in English education in China and Japan.

Keywords: China, Japan, comparative, study

1. Introduction

Most of English instructors in China choose to go to English speaking countries such as the US, Canada, Australia to do research. However, the coauthor of this paper, Fang, a college English instructor in China came to Japan to do research on English education in Japan, trying to find common features and differences between English education in China and Japan. “With regard to their educational contexts, Japan and China do share some common features, especially in terms of extremely exam-oriented nature of the educational system, and in both countries, English is one of the featured subjects in the university entrance exams” (Dornyei & Ushioda, 2001: 69). The paper will discuss elementary school education, secondary school education, learning motivation and environment, teaching methods through the observation of two college classes in Japan, and classroom management and online learning with the aim of elucidating some of the similarities and differences in English education in China and Japan.

1. English education in elementary school

As far as teaching English in elementary school is concerned, China and Japan differ at least in two aspects. Firstly, in China, English is taught from the first grade of elementary school, but in Japan English is taught from the fifth grade officially in elementary school. This difference may reflect in which country English is more valued. “Although recently, Japanese industries have started to require potential candidates to possess practical English abilities and many students are keen on raising their English proficiency test scores, it is not always the case that English proficiency is as strongly related to successful job-hunting in Japan as it is in China. Therefore, English is less valued by many learners of English in Japan than in China, where knowing English has become a must for anyone who wants to compete in the global marketplace” (Dornyei & Ushioda, 2001: 69). So children in China have access to English earlier than children in Japan. Zhang (2003) holds that the earlier children start to learn English the better, for he is of the opinion that younger children are good at imitation and memorization, which are good for cultivating speaking ability.

Secondly, in elementary school in Japan, English is taught mainly by native English teachers and homeroom teachers while in China English is usually taught by homeroom teachers. So although Japanese children start learning English a little late, they may receive better English education from the very beginning, especially in terms of pronunciation and listening. However, in Japanese, the katakana syllabary is mainly used to write foreign words; therefore, English pronunciation of many katakana words may be similar to Japanese pronunciation. If children are taught mainly by Japanese teachers, there is a possibility

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that their English pronunciation may be more like that of Japanese katakana. This phenomenon can be explained by the following statement. “It is easy for a Spanish-speaking teacher teaching Spanish-speaking students to become so used to their way of speaking that the teacher forgets or does not notice that students are deviating so much from standard pronunciation that they will be difficult to understand for people who are not used to their particular English.” (Lewis & Hill, 2002: 72).

2. English education in secondary school

In China, the most important examination is the College/University Entrance Examination which decides whether or not students can be recruited by a university or by what kind of university, a key one or common one, a national one or a private one. English is one of the most important subjects because its score accounts for 20 percent of the total score. Usually the Examination includes the following question types: listening, cloze tests, reading comprehension, proof reading and composition. No oral English test is required in the Examination. So secondary school teachers do not focus their attention on improving students’ oral English, and similarly students work hard at listening, reading and writing rather than speaking.

In Japan, secondary school students also study English mainly for passing university entrance examinations. “Japanese students of course perform best in English in the kinds of skills they have practiced at school—vocabulary recognition, word-by-word reading, translation of English grammatical structures into Japanese, and test-taking skills related to the university entrance examinations” (Wadden, 1992: 50-51). Therefore, just like Chinese secondary school students, Japanese counterparts are also good at examination-related skills rather than speaking. Both in China and in Japan, speaking has been rather neglected in secondary school.

3. Learning motivation and environment

Different students may have their own motivation to learn English, which can be partially regarded as intrinsic motivation. But in this chapter we will mainly talk about the extrinsic motivation and learning environment, which may have a great influence on learning effects.

3.1 Learning motivation

For secondary school students both in China and in Japan, the main purpose of their learning English is to get high scores in examinations. So even though students in secondary school in China may have other motivations to learn English, the main one is to get higher scores to survive the fierce competition faced by both students and English teachers.

After becoming students in universities in China, non-English majors know that they have to study English hard in order to at least pass the College English Test Band 4 (CET 4) organized by the Ministry of Education, without which they cannot graduate from university. After passing the examination of CET 4, students can choose to take the oral English test and the more advanced CET 6--there is no CET 5--, which may make them more competitive in job-hunting after their graduation. Since oral test will not have a decisive effect on their graduation, speaking is usually ignored by many students. “Public college English teaching aims at developing students’ reading ability. To a certain degree, communication skills in English such as listening and speaking are not given enough attention. The aim was suitable when people in China depended on English material to learn about foreign countries. Nowadays it is more important for students to improve their oral and listening ability” (Lin, 2002: 8-9). Special attention should be paid to improving listening and speaking skills.

On the other hand, many Chinese students have other extrinsic motivation to learn English rather than just to pass all kinds of examinations. Cai (2007), based on a survey conducted in 2005 in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and other five cities, found that more than eighty percent of the interviewees thought that communicative ability was very important for seeking a good job. With the development of economy, more and more students realize the importance of communicating with the world outside by using English in order

to live a better life. So those students aim at tests such as TOEFL, IELTS, and TOEIC.

In Japan, according to Burrow (2011), TOEIC is one of the popular English tests. But not all college students are required to take TOEIC, which makes its influence weakened. In many Japanese universities, however, special TOEIC courses are designed for students, which is beneficial for students who want to get good scores in this test. In China, as mentioned earlier, it is student's own business to take tests like TOEFL, IELTS, TOEIC, etc. Many Chinese students choose to study in private training schools in order to pass those English tests. In the future, just like Japanese students can choose some TOEIC courses, universities in China can also design TOEL, IELTS, or TOEIC classes for students to choose.

3.2 Learning environment

In Japan, students have more chances to speak with native English speakers or people who can speak English well face to face or by video conference. For example, two delegations from the United States and ten countries of Southeast Asia visited Mie University respectively and communicated with Japanese students face to face in 2013. Students were divided into different groups and talked about different topics such as food, environment and technology in English. This university also does well in holding video conferences with affiliated universities in the US and Spain, which is beneficial for all participating students. Those students can give their presentations and answer questions in English. In their presentations, students usually choose some interesting and fashionable topics about their country's culture, which will make the communication more enjoyable. There are also about 300 international students who are studying in this university and most of those students can speak good English. So it is relatively easy for Japanese students to find foreign English speakers and practice their oral English with them.

In Anhui Agriculture University (AAU) in China, where Fang teaches, so far there has not been any video conference with universities in other countries. It is also difficult to meet foreigners on campus. Only English majors have chances to be taught by native English instructors. In Mie University, non-English major students can also be taught by native English instructors.

In China, however, schools create other opportunities for students to use English. Students are encouraged to take part in the National English Contest for College Students and National English Speaking Competition. The former is a writing contest, while the latter is an oratorical contest. Those who do well in these contests are honored by their universities. So what Japan's universities have created for students is more chances to communicate with English speakers naturally, whereas Chinese universities partially motivate students to learn English through contests.

Chinese university students mainly practice their writing by composition rather than writing emails in English to foreigners or chatting with friends in other countries by using online resources. In China, in big modern cities, students have more chances to meet foreigners who are native English speakers or people who speak fluent English. But in small cities, students have fewer chances to meet foreigners. Even if they have chances to meet foreigners, many students feel reluctant to start a talk. The reason is that, as mentioned earlier, in their English learning process, speaking is not examined in most examinations. Many students do not experience oral English tests at all. No wonder they cannot gather enough courage to talk with foreigners. Teachers who don't usually use English to give their English lectures may partly be responsible for this situation. In most universities, as a rule, instructors are required to use English mainly unless Chinese is more effective when teaching English. Some instructors, however, are used to uttering sentences and immediately translating them into Chinese for fear that students cannot understand.

4. Teaching methods at Japanese colleges

Different teachers may use different teaching methods to teach English. In this section, we will describe two teaching methods based on our observation. We will also refer to what we can learn from them.

4.1 A communicative teaching method

It was our honor to be able to observe one of the communicative English classes given by Prof. A in one university in June, 2013. There were 29 freshmen in her class. They were not English majors. After the bell rang, she gave a brief introduction to what they should do in that class. The topic of that class was: How babies are named in Japan and in China, a good topic on which communicative activities were carried out. Since everyone is very familiar with their own name and knows well about the origin of their name, they can say much about this topic. At the same time, it is an interesting topic because students are curious about the stories behind a name. After the introduction of the class, Prof. A handed out a sheet of evaluation forms to every student and instructed the students how to fill it in briefly and clearly. Then eight students were invited to the platform to introduce their names one after another. What impressed us deeply was that as non-English major freshmen, it seemed that none of the eight students were reluctant to go to the front and face the audience although they could not use fluent English to give their presentations. Some of Fang's Chinese students are afraid of speaking English, especially in front of the all classmates. When those eight students were giving their presentations, the other students were required to listen to them carefully. After their presentations, five minutes were given to them for filling in the evaluation forms. The professor walked around the classroom and instructed students how to cut out the evaluation forms. When a student did not know how to say "scissors" in English, the professor pointed at a pair of scissors and pronounced the word. Making use of realia to teach new words help students learn them easily and quickly.

Then, based on the professor's instruction, the students had to find their partners and talk with each other in English. In fact, it is always desirable for teachers to use well-organized pair work and group work to increase student talking time. "To be well-organized the teacher must have given clear and explicit instructions and, while the pair work is taking place, the teacher should be moving around the room monitoring and if necessary guiding and correcting what individual pairs are doing." (Lewis & Hill, 2002: 46). Prof. A just did what Lewis and Hill mention here. In this stage, the students had little chance to talk about other things or talk in Japanese since on the one hand, they had been given clear tasks, and on the other hand, the professor's moving around had a controlling effect. After finishing one task, students had to look for another partner in order to accomplish the next task. Compared with having just one fixed partner to do pair work, such kind of pair work can better motivate students to speak because there exist more information gaps in it. Not only can the professor move around the classroom, students can also move around the classroom. What matters most is that students can talk freely with each other in a relaxed atmosphere created by their professor.

Thirty minutes later, the pair work was over. Finally Prof. A had a chance to say more. In order to introduce foreign culture to the class and let the students know more about how people in other countries name their babies, Fang was invited to the platform, and he briefly introduced the origin of his name and his family members' names. Then some students were invited to talk about themselves following Fang's presentation. If there are always two English teachers in the classroom, it is more effective for teachers to introduce new activities. "A lot of time is wasted if students do not know exactly what is expected of them. There is no better, or more explicit, way to introduce new activities than for the teacher to demonstrate, or ask a group of students to demonstrate". (Lewis & Hill, 2002: 51).

This class was characterized by students speaking more while the professor speaking less. Although Prof. A spoke less, when she spoke, she spoke clearly, concisely and vividly, which guaranteed that all the instructions were given effectively. Students were more willing to participate in the class activities positively.

In China, a lot of time is spent in teaching reading, grammar, translation, and listening, so usually fewer special communicative classes can be chosen by the students. Many things can be learned and popularized from the English class given by Prof. A. Firstly, in order to give a communicative English class, an instructor must be confident about what to do in class and be willing to leave enough time to students. Secondly, the instructor should learn to prepare and use other teaching tools besides textbooks. Thirdly, the instructor

must be very clear about how to evaluate students or how to let students evaluate each other. “A teacher evaluates not only his student’s accuracy, but also their fluency.” (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011: 13). Finally instructors can spare time in order to let students do pair work or group work, if they want to.

4.2 A Conventional teaching method

In July, 2013, Fang had an honor to observe an English class for 37 non-English majors given by Prof. B in another university. It was a traditional English class because the professor dominated the class from the very beginning of the class to the end although some students had chances to read their answers to exercises in their textbooks. Before the class, the students had been required to do the exercises about vocabulary and grammar. In the class, after a brief introduction, the professor firstly checked how students had done the exercises by inviting some students to read their answers. Then some important vocabulary and grammar items were picked out and explained in a detailed way mainly in Japanese. The professor did an excellent job in teaching vocabulary by analyzing the roots and affixes of words. He was also good at telling the differences between some similar expressions. In order to let students catch what he was teaching, he made reasonable use of the whiteboard and his writing was beautiful. He is a very kind teacher for he always smiled while giving his lecture. Maybe because he taught almost in the same way in the class and only a few of students were invited to speak, the atmosphere of the class was not active and it seemed that students were not willing to participate in class activities. The professor was working very hard in the front while many students just listened quietly, some searched the Internet by using their mobile phones, and some just slept in class.

Most of the students who were invited to read their answers were not willing to read loudly even with the professor’s encouragement, which showed that they were not confident in their English.

Since the professor dominated the class from the beginning to the end and vocabulary and grammar were greatly emphasized, we can infer that the teacher was using the Grammar-Translating Method to teach English. “The Grammar-Translation Method is not new. It has had different names, but it has been used by language teachers for many years.” (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011: 13). In AAU, some instructors also use this method to teach English. But one of the big problems of this method is that the instructor mainly uses his or her native language to teach English, which will make students have fewer chances to practice their listening and speaking. So in the future Fang will use this method together with other teaching methods rather than using it exclusively when he returns to China.

5. Classroom management and online learning

There are also some differences in classroom setting between universities in China and in Japan. We will also discuss how to teach English by using the Internet.

5.1 Classroom setting

Influenced by both final examinations and CETs, college English education in China is basically teacher-centered focusing on listening, reading, and writing. Usually, for example in AAU, English is taught twice a week for non-English majors, and each class has ninety minutes. Lectures are given in a traditional classroom which can hold at least 60 students because there are about fifty or sixty students in each class. For the sake of convenient management, seats in such classes are usually fixed and unmovable. Instructors who teach such classes tend to dominate the class for the following different reasons. Firstly, as many important points should be taught in each unit of the textbook in ninety minutes, less time is left for pair work or group work. Secondly, in secondary school, students are used to teachers’ domination of the class, so if suddenly they are required to contribute more to class activities in pair work or group work at university, they may feel uncomfortable.

In Japan, the desks and chairs in many classrooms can be moved freely. So instructors can arrange the desks and chairs flexibly according to the needs of the class.

5.2 How to treat sleeping students

“Sleeping in class is another behavior not uncommon in the university classroom” (Wadden, 1992: 116). This phenomenon exists in college English class both in China and in Japan. In China, more students tend to sleep in listening class. They sleep when they cannot understand the listening material. In Japan, more students tend to sleep in English class in the afternoon than in the morning, which must be partly due to the short break at noon. In China, students have enough time (120 minutes) to have lunch and a nap. But in Japan, usually there is only one hour for lunch. After having lunch, students have to get ready for classes in the afternoon. So it is understandable why many Japanese students sleep in the afternoon. But the main reason is that some students are not interested in learning English both in Japan and in China. “Realistically, it is highly unlikely that everybody can be motivated to learn everything and even generally motivated students are not equally keen on every subject matter” (Dornyei, 2001: 25). So it may be inevitable that some students sleep in English class. Facing this problem, different teachers may use different measures to wake up the sleeping students. “Having the student’s partner waken the student, lightly tapping his or her shoulder yourself, standing next to the student while addressing the class, or even letting the person sleep may be the best response depending upon the situation.” (Wadden, 1992: 116). Teachers may differ in the ways of waking up students who sleep in class, but at least teachers should wake them up. As we know, sleeping can be infectious; if those sleeping students are ignored, more students may want to sleep in class. In China, there are usually about fifty to sixty students in an English class; in such big classrooms, teachers face more troubles in dealing with this problem than in Japan.

5.3 Online learning classroom

In China, teaching English with the assistance of the computer is becoming more and more popular. Take AAU for example, more than 10 online English learning classrooms have been established and operated. Each online room can hold about 50 students. Mie University has similar online rooms, and students use them inside and outside class. In AAU, online English learning portion is treated equally as the other portions such as intensive reading and listening. All the students have to be in the online room on time and study based on the instructor’s instruction at least for 9 hours in the 45-hour integrative course per term. Each term has 15 weeks and there are two terms annually. A lot of resources, including the materials for intensive reading and listening, can be used by the students. But instructors have to decide what students should do in class. They can let students read aloud with the computer, learn main grammar points, take a test, discuss with their English teachers online and improve their pronunciation, etc. After making it clear what students should do, teachers can walk around the room and instruct students individually. Instructors can know how long students have studied and what they have done by checking students’ learning records. It is also easy for the instructor to correct students’ tests. Students are also encouraged to learn as much as possible in their free time by using their personal computer in the dormitory or at home.

6. Conclusion

In elementary school, the main difference lies in when English begins to be taught in China and Japan. In secondary school, both in China and in Japan, English education is exam-oriented. As far as learning motivation is concerned, Chinese university students are mainly motivated to study English by taking exams or participating in contests while Japanese university students have more chances to use English orally. As for English teaching methods, from our observation in Japan and Fang’s experience in China, it can be said that a communicative teaching method is used less in China due to the size of large English classes; a conventional teaching method is more popular in China. Because of the disadvantages of this method, the use of this method together with other methods is strongly recommended in the future. As for classroom management, universities in China should make the seats movable rather than fixed for the sake of convenient management. The Internet may be more helpful in improving the efficiency of English learning if students are more willing to spend more time in online learning.

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