

Zhang Zheng-dong

Innovation and development of foreign language teaching in China

©Higher Education Press and Springer-Verlag 2006

Abstract Foreign language teaching has been playing a dominant role in China's curriculum reform, especially in the present globalization of Chinese society and economy. However, the insufficient research into foreign language teaching and blindly adopting western theory demand China learn from its own experience and also develop western foreign language teaching theories that innovate and promote its education system and research.

Keywords foreign language teaching, foreign language teaching theory, foreign language teaching development, foreign language teaching innovation

Introduction

English teaching in China has developed at the turn of the century and English is widely offered in all elementary schools. Besides the popular saying that the investment is high but the effect is low in foreign language education, there is a slogan that the foreign language education should use the education methods of foreign countries. Therefore, the discussion of how to innovate and develop foreign language teaching and learning has theoretical and practical significance.

Translated from *Foreign Language Teaching & Research in Basic Education*, 2004 (10)

Zhang Zheng-dong (✉)

School of Foreign Languages, Southwest University, Chongqing 400715, China

E-mail: zhzhdong@sohu.com

Historical origin of innovation

History is a mirror of reality and is the origin of the formation of reality. Innovation of foreign language education and learning has its own historical origin. Foreign language education in China originated in 1862, some time after foreign language education was developed in Western Europe (Zhang 2000). Languages of Western Europe, specifically English, have achieved great development in different education curriculums all over the world especially after the Industrial Revolution. After the Second World War, teaching English as a target language has achieved a lot and applied linguistics whose content is mainly research on English/foreign language teaching occurred and developed quickly. Besides, language is the carrier of culture. English and other languages as target languages of foreign language teaching are circulating languages in western industrialized countries which carry emerging technology and culture that foreign language learners are pursuing. Therefore, in practice and research of foreign language teaching, a kind of “Euro-centrism” has been formed which takes western theories as the locus of innovation and assessment standard in teaching goals, teaching contents, teaching methods and teaching assessment (Li 1995). However, foreign language teaching is mainly foreign language teaching and learning in schools, and teaching environment and conditions in different countries, regions and schools restrict the effect of their foreign language teaching. Western theories are designed based on western schools, students, languages and teaching environment and it is impossible for us to use them without modification to guide foreign language teaching in our country. Therefore, when we reflect on history of foreign language in our country, we should understand advantages and disadvantages of foreign language teaching both in our country and in foreign countries based on the recognition of its fundamental Euro-centric qualities.

Foreign language teaching and learning in our country involves a great many people and covers a large scale, but there is no corresponding research on foreign language teaching and learning

Under the influence of Euro-centrism, when we are talking about foreign language teaching in our country, western theories are always the basis while Chinese own theories are scorned. So problems that western countries do not cover are seldom studied in China. For example, foreign languages can not easily be mastered, yet both people in western countries and China have limited research on how to ameliorate this fact. Actually there are no

countries or regions declaring their foreign language teaching has achieved satisfying results. So it is not appropriate to generalize the effect of foreign language teaching in our country as “high investment but little effect”; it is at most not ideal. Another example is that from primary school students to Ph.D. candidates, and even common residents are learning foreign language in China. However, while some people still resist foreign language learning, similar to the ultranationalist attitudes of the Kangxi and Qianlong periods in China’s history. We should believe that foreign language education in China has achieved some effect and accumulated valuable experiences but it still needs innovation and development. In this way, we can learn western theories and experiences from both positive and negative aspects instead of simply following western countries.

Foreign language teaching and learning in western countries involves fewer people and covers a limited scale, while there are advanced researches on foreign language teaching and learning and some related researches

Our counterparts in western countries always have continuous breakthroughs based on inheriting previous research results. For example, after Latin’s downgrade from “quasi-native language” to foreign language in Western Europe, three elements of languages were paid more attention to in language education: direct method, audiolingual method, and communicative method. These three elements emerged at the end of 18th century but they all have their own particular creative theories to attract scholars. However, research on foreign language/language education in western countries have some noticeable limitations. First, they regard their research results which based on schools, students, languages and environments in western countries as common rules that schools, students, environment and language teaching in non-western countries should abide by. Second, under the background of a market economy, each school has its own theories and aims to be specific so that common ground can not be found. It is totally different from our culture of great unification from Qin and Han Dynasty. If we learn from western theories ignoring this kind of difference, we can not have a whole deep understanding of foreign language teaching and learning.

Current situations of development

We are entering an era characterized by economic globalization, in which different languages and cultures will cooperate and complement each other

instead of their unification into one or two. English can not become the international language, but perhaps will play the role of the global language for some period of time, while many languages such as Chinese and Arabic can play the role of global language in a certain period of time in the future. This is the background of innovation and development. Therefore, we should remember firmly that foreign language teaching and learning always develops on the basis of native language teaching and learning. The target language of foreign language teaching and learning is always foreign language, and is not the primary language of most students, nor is it equal to the second language in its mastery. It is a language that not all citizens or students must master and they do not have to use them at the same level.

Based on the above background, some scholars have found that foreign language education and use some new methods that does not use one particular method, but keeps pace with the time by using different characteristics and practical methods of foreign language education.

Theoretical characteristics

The characteristic in all is overcoming disadvantages of marginalizing teachers and students in teaching because of the overemphasis of language as a learning tool in all previous foreign language education methods and putting forward teachers and students' creativity according to the environment. There are three points in specific.

Diversity

Diversity is an important characteristic of post-modernism era. Fast development of science and technology and the corresponding global cooperation caused by development of knowledge economy inevitably lead to diversity. As to foreign language teaching and learning, the number of people who accept foreign language education is getting larger and their learning goals are diverse as the increase of people's interaction with each other and of the ways they interact; education content must be diverse since there are various goals and information changes so quickly; specific teaching methods should be diverse since there are various teaching means and teaching circumstances. Therefore, there are three diversified situations in the practice of foreign language teaching. First, there is diversity of curriculum standards. The guidance of curriculum standard will transform from pushing a unified requirement to enhancing diversified development except for the management of multi-level curriculums. Second, teaching materials are diverse and there are continuous amendments and supplements. Third, the curriculums should follow a diverse theoretical framework. These

three diversified situations are results of creation in historical development, and our existing experiences and theories are one element of the diversity which can not be rejected. Diversified foreign language teaching needs its own surviving soil and the surviving soil for diversity of foreign language teaching in China is circumstances, contents and subjects of foreign language teaching.

Individuation

Individuation in teaching is the intensive realization and implementing strategies of individualization in teaching. From the historical perspective, the demand of individuation in teaching originally came from the reflection of class teaching system which was formed in 17th century and has two disadvantages, i.e. teachers' arbitrariness and teaching according to the average students' needs which reflects the "seller market" of economic life. At the end of 19th century, the "buyer market" of economic life became popular as the development of capitalism so that scholars including Dewey began to design and experiment individualized teaching theories and models aiming at eliminating the two disadvantages of classroom education. In the 20th century, theory of multiple intelligence occurred which provides more theoretical basis for individualized teaching. At the same time, "individualized products" were created in knowledge economy and the "buyer market" theory matured. Therefore, individuation in teaching merges into teaching of each subject.

As for foreign language teaching, direct method formed between the end of 19th century and the beginning of 20th century is the beginning of transformation to individuation in teaching because this method puts forward dividing teaching into stages, proposes oral teaching, internal and external visualized teaching, and advocates teaching based on situation, discourse and behaviors. In addition, extracurricular activities are carried out. Audio-lingual methods have improved greatly, and can be used without instructor supervision. Methods that favor emotion over the audio-lingual method, include visual audio method and communicative method, mainly put students as the subject and select materials according to students' needs and teach students foreign language through their activities, which further illustrates education as a "buyer market". In the new English curriculum standard in China, sustainable development of all students, construction of relaxed, democratic and harmonious teaching atmosphere, and emphasis of cultivation of student's independent learning capabilities are explicitly stated (MEPRC 2001). All of these correspond to the "spirit of the time". But at the same time we should realize that economic development route of capitalism has been doubted and market economy of socialism characterized as macro

regulation is tested by its success. Therefore, we should pay attention to function of regulation of teachers and “core materials” when constructing “buyer market” in the field of foreign language teaching and do not have to follow specifically western countries’ methods.

Research on foreign language/language teaching in western countries will become wider and wider apart from teaching practices

Western countries advocate experimental research, but the content is mainly testing the theoretical hypothesis which seldom aims at problems in practice, especially problems of foreign language teaching practices in our country. When western scholars talk about foreign language teaching in our country, they usually comment on and set standard for our foreign language teaching according to their criteria with the thought of “Euro-centrism” consciously or unconsciously. Till now some western scholars begin to research on foreign language teaching in eastern countries (Nunan 2003). Besides, theoretical basis and coverage area of foreign language teaching research are getting wider and wider while practical goals of foreign language teaching are getting narrower and narrower so that western researches on foreign language teaching will inevitably get further apart from practices, which we should notice when borrowing and referring to western theories and proposals.

Contradiction in practice

There are three contradictions that need to be dealt with in the process of enhancing development through innovation in practices of foreign language teaching corresponding to the above theoretical characteristics.

Contradiction of broadness and narrowness of teaching goals

Goals of foreign language teaching are not only foreign language but also information in terms of diversity theory and related theories of cognitive linguistics, psycholinguistics, functionalism and context theory. This requires students not only to master language as a tool of learning information, but also to obtain ability of dealing with information. On the other hand, learners have limited energy, time and activity area while there is large amount of information, so they hope that they can only achieve the goal they need most, which means teaching goals are getting narrower and narrower. This contradiction should be solved from policy of foreign language education to practices of classroom foreign language teaching. In a word, students’ sustainable development should be focused, and “can use them” and “can do something” cannot be used simply to set a teaching goal for all students to

achieve.

Contradiction between wide coverage of content and limited learning period

According to diversity theory and individuation theory, teaching content should not only satisfy needs of information communication, but also be suitable for students' personalities, which makes teaching materials diverse and unstable, and inevitably leads to hypertext teaching materials, i.e. applying curriculum resources such as internet resources and interaction activities besides textbooks. However, class periods are getting fewer and fewer. Nowadays primary school students have two class periods each week and middle school students have four (probably even less). To solve this problem we need an effective plan of reaching teaching goals.

Contradiction between individualized activities and cooperative activities in teaching process

Individualized teaching based on individualization learning can give students time and space to learn individually so that the advantages of multiple intelligence can be brought into play. But the display of multiple intelligence's advantages needs cooperation with other people and information exchange in diversified society, so cooperative learning needs to be respected in teaching such as discussion and interaction, etc. Therefore, contradiction between individualized learning and cooperative learning will inevitably occur. The current situation is that cooperative learning is emphasized which satisfies the need of experienced learning aiming at "learning how to interact with other people in communication with others" and cultivates students' adaptability to the information society to some extent. But superabundant cooperative learning activities may result in some disadvantages. Therefore, cooperative learning such as task-based teaching and learning is a kind of adoptable teaching process which is not the only one and the advanced one. On the contrary, individualized learning has more characteristics of mental work and is the typical form of "working hard" in Chinese tradition, so it should still be regarded as the basis of diversified activities in foreign language teaching and learning.

Two wings of innovation and development

In general, keeping pace with time through innovation and development is necessary and inevitable. We should treasure our positive experiences, consult achievements and proposals of western countries based on the basic concept that "teaching Chinese students to learn foreign languages in Chinese schools" and put forward effective measures of innovation and

development from both macro and micro perspectives. Several key parts will be illustrated in the following.

Macro perspective

We think that we should mainly research on policies of foreign language education. Our country is a large country of foreign language education, while we do not have a series of comprehensive and scientific policies of foreign language education. Therefore, perfecting policies of foreign language education is the premise of keeping pace with foreign language education. To do so, three aspects of work should be done.

Some unrealistic concepts should be abandoned

Three examples of unrealistic concepts will be illustrated here. First, “approaching to international standard”. Foreign language teaching and learning is a kind of cultural activity which has the characteristic of inheriting national culture and tradition. Our foreign language teaching’s approach to foreign language teaching in other countries is to abandon Chinese culture. What’s more, is there any country whose foreign language teaching has achieved satisfactory results and is worth our approaching? No. Second, some people still have ultranationalism feeling, similar to the Kangxi and Qianlong Dynasty, and resist foreign language learning. It is not true. Actually there are many people who pursue foreign language learning without knowing what prosperity is in period of Kangxi and Qianlong Dynasty. Third, thinking of mastering foreign language quickly through one kind of theory, model/design, or method/skill, and even using it freely just after learning it is unscientific and hard to realize. Foreign language is hard to master, especially in circumstances of lacking of foreign language context and a few class periods in our country. So learners should study hard to be successful.

People’s needs of using foreign language should be investigated

Among 1.3 billion Chinese people, how many need to use foreign language in a certain period of time? Why do they use foreign language? How do they use and to what degree do they use foreign language? All of these are the basis of making policies of foreign language education. If there is no precise statistics, scientific estimation should be made.

Instruction should be transformed into guidance

As to policy-making, “instruction in planned economy” should be transformed into “diversified guidance” serving for students’ sustainable development, just like the transformation of economic type.

Micro perspective

It refers to practices of foreign language teaching and learning mainly including putting forward innovation and development of foreign language teaching through teachers' active self-development. There are also three points which will be illustrated in the following.

Continuously absorbing and abstracting one's teaching ideas

Teaching ideas are the basis for all creative activities which are held by each teacher consciously or unconsciously as their guidance. Teachers each have their own teaching ideas which come from two sources. One is learning from and absorbing theories of foreign language teaching. The other comes from experiences including inherited experiences and self-explored experiences. Teaching ideas we absorb and abstract today still come from the above two ways, while teaching theories here are not limited in schools of teaching methods proposed by western countries and little knowledge learnt in the course of foreign language teaching methodology in normal universities, but extensive learning and consulting teaching ideas and proposals from both home and abroad based on which reflections are made to abstract inherited and one's own experiences, and ideas suitable for specific teaching circumstances are formed. What's more, continuous amendment and enrichment of ideas of foreign language teaching will be made as the development of external related theories and the change of circumstances of foreign language teaching. This is a hard and durative job that foreign language teachers in modern times should take consciously in order to develop foreign language teaching with innovation.

Generalizing students' needs

Foreign language learning is a life-long process. Students taught by any teacher can only achieve the goal in certain phases. However, this does not mean that foreign language teaching should be torn into pieces which can only lead to university's complaint towards senior high school, senior high school's complaint towards junior high, and junior high's complaint towards primary school, even teachers in higher grades complain about those in lower grades. The cause of this kind of inappropriate complaint is that teachers only pay attention to the grade they teach while ignoring the previous grade and the subsequent grade. Situations are different now. With the orientation of sustainable development of each student, foreign language teachers not only consider students' needs of learning foreign language the next year and after graduation, but also consider that requirements of curriculum standard, local region and local school can not be satisfied by each student and students who fulfill the requirements are not at the same

level. Under the background of double consideration, common needs and higher demands that are needed most in students' learning foreign language will be generalized.

Integrating inheriting and innovation

Foreign language teaching as a kind of cultural activity inevitably inherits the old tradition. Inheriting means that absorbing knowledge that human beings accumulate and beneficial for human beings' development. If innovation can be made without inheriting, illiteracies can be the group that has the richest creation. If we only inherit knowledge without innovation, achievements of science, technology and culture in modern time can not be accomplished since the goal of inheriting is to develop better. Therefore, there is interplay between inheriting and innovation.

As for foreign language teaching, for several hundred years, especially from foreign language teaching reform in Europe at the end of 19th century, dozens of schools of foreign language teaching all inherit explicitly or implicitly teaching knowledge of the language specialized in grammar since the confirmation of three elements of language in language teaching after the foundation of Latin's status of a kind of foreign language although most of them want to eliminate or dilute this kind of teaching knowledge of language, which is inheriting. But inheriting does not mean that knowledge is inherited without modification and all schools of foreign language teaching have their own contribution to how to teach grammar and which grammar should be taught.

To be more specific, there is no distinction of good results or bad results between traditional method and non-traditional method in terms of macro way of including ideas/opinions, models and skills in the field of foreign language teaching. Since each time the new popular method occurs, the previous methods are regarded as traditional methods. For example, direct method regards grammar translation method as a traditional method, audio-lingual method renders the direct method as a traditional method, and communicative method regards all previous methods as traditional methods. But these methods do not quit the historical stage and are used in different regions in various degrees. What's more, although Berlitz method which represents the purest and the most effective results of direct method develops more than 400 Berlitz School of Languages all over the world and trains many presidents, prime ministers and premiers to learn foreign language, it is not popularized in general schools. Comparative experiments between direct method and grammar translation method, audio-lingual method and direct method, and audio-lingual method and grammar translation method have been done in foreign countries, but the results can not tell which one is effective and which one is not. Last century, Japanese government invited

Palmer, master of the direct method, to instruct their foreign language teaching, but until the end of 20th century, grammar translation method still covered a high percentage of the whole country's foreign language teaching. There are many varieties of communicative method after its emergence, which indicates that the results are not as good as we imagined. Although task-based teaching approach experimented in India in 1980's by S. Prabhu has been popularized, its content and operation stay far away from the experiment's hypothesis, which indicates that it is not a method superior to any others and only speeds up learning through integrative imitation. Professor Wen Qiu-fang in China did an experimental research on the relationship between traditional and non-traditional learning methods on English performance (Wen 1986). Based on H. Sten's theory, she summarized the characteristics of the traditional method as a conscious learning of language from using the native language, while that of non-traditional method is unconscious learning of communicative contents without using the native language. Research subjects included 242 students, all about 20 years old and came from five different types of universities in Ningbo and Shanghai. Research instruments include sample students' test papers of Chinese and English in college entrance examination and national TEM-4 test papers. These test papers are all specifically designed by our country to scientifically assess student performance. There are altogether 15 variants and the results are analyzed in three aspects.

First, subject learners' attitude towards non-traditional methods is more active than that towards traditional methods.

Second, there is no distinction of good methods or bad methods between traditional and non-traditional learning methods and integration of these two can result in better effects.

Third, learners combining traditional and non-traditional methods use more management strategies than learners who only favor one type of method.

This research testifies that the two hypotheses based on western experts' comments on Chinese learning methods of English are untenable. The two hypotheses are: A. Chinese learners of English favor traditional methods in general; B. English performance of learners using traditional methods is not as good as that of learners using non-traditional methods.

According to this, we can grasp the mechanism of interplay of inheriting and innovation, and continuously construct and update our teaching methods. Just as the author's opinion in *Principles and Models of Three-dimensional Foreign Language Teaching Methods* that the dispute between traditional and non-traditional methods in western countries lies in their ignorance of teaching circumstances which restrict teaching effects, and methods which are suitable for specific teaching circumstances that are the most effective

(Zhang and Du 1995).

Conclusions

There are three arguments in this article.

First, foreign language teaching in our country should be developed with innovation, but we should understand formation and direction of “innovation and development” in perspective of “Euro-centrism”.

Second, there is an interplay and codependency between inheriting and innovation. Foreign language teaching in our country should absorb essence of our traditional theories and experiences when keeping pace with modern standards. Consulting other countries’ experiences is necessary, but we can not borrow them mechanically, or even try to “approach the international standard”.

Third, for the innovation and development of foreign language teaching in our country, scientific policies of foreign language education should be made in macro level, and in micro level, helpful theories and experiences should be used based on different circumstances of foreign language teaching and teaching methods should be continuously proposed, perfected and updated. The main carriers of the above two aspects are large number of teachers and researchers of foreign language teaching. Therefore, their sustainable development is the key of whether our foreign language teaching can keep pace or not.

References

- Li, Guan-yi (李观仪) (1995). *English Teaching Methodology with Chinese Characteristics* (具有中国特色的英语教学法). Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 25–37.
- Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China (MEPRC) (中华人民共和国教育部) (2001). *English Curriculum Standard for Senior High Schools in Full-time Compulsory Education (experimental draft)* (全日制义务教育普通高级中学英语课程标准) (实验稿). Beijing: Beijing Normal University Press, 2–3.
- Nunan, D. (2003). “The impact of English as a global language on educational policies and practices in the Asia-Pacific Region”, *TESOL Quarterly* (37), 4.
- Wen, Qiu-fang (文秋芳) (1986). “The relationship between tradition, traditional method and English performance” (传统和传统学习方法与英语成绩的关系), *Modern English* (1), 37–42.
- Zhang, Zheng-dong (张正东) (2000). *Theories and Schools of Foreign Language Teaching Methodology in China* (中国外语教学法的理论与流派). Beijing: Science Press, 54–57.
- Zhang, Zheng-dong (张正东) and Du, Pei-feng (杜培奉) (1995). *Principles and Models of Three-dimensional Foreign Language Teaching Methods* (外语立体化教学法的原理与模式). Chongqing: Chongqing Press, 72–80.