

English Language Teaching from the Perspective of Mediate Learning Experience

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This paper is intended to discuss what English teachers can do to promote English learning, and seek out a method to compensate for the weaknesses we have in English language teaching, from the perspective of Feuerstein's Theory of Mediated Learning Experience (MLE). From the research of Feuerstein's theory, we can find it challenges some traditional thoughts and has brought some innovative ideas to education. It considers the role of the mediator a key factor in effective learning and puts forward the tool for dynamic assessment. The quality of the MLE interaction is best described by a series of twelve parameters, which one would hope to find in the adult/child learning interaction, and which contribute to cognitive enhancement and development. I will take three parameters of MLE—Intentionality and reciprocity, Transcendence, Mediation of meaning—which are of great significance to language teaching, to discuss the educational context in China, and to elaborate the implications of Feuerstein's mediation theory on EFL teaching.

Keywords: intentionality and reciprocity, transcendence, mediation of meaning

Introduction

English language teaching has been a focus in China. Especially in recent years, a lot of criticism and suggestions have been put forward on the present English teaching situation. For example, the English course is still low in efficiency and costs a lot in spite of so many years' teaching reform. These criticisms are really worth us as English language teachers thinking about deeply.

Quite a few experts have carried out research on the problem. Some think that the problem is attributable to the stagnation of the syllabus and course materials, as well as the prevalence of test-orientated education. Some argue that the problem lies in the fact that there lacks an English language environment in China. As an English teacher for more than 15 years, I reflect upon my experiences and conclude some facts having great impacts on English teaching and learning which cannot be ignored. They are:

(1) The Teaching Classes are Large and Heterogeneous.

With increasing emphasis being put on the importance of education in China more and more schools expand the enrollment of students, there appears such a crisis that most language classes are surprisingly large. Ideally, language classes should have no more than a dozen people or so: large enough to provide diversity and student interaction and small enough to give students plenty of opportunity to participate and to get individual attention.

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However, in reality classes of 50 to 60 are common in China. If classes are large, they are almost invariably heterogeneous. However, little attention has been paid to how to deal with large heterogeneous classes.

(2) The fact that English is a foreign language, not a second language, in China is often ignored.

So what are the differences between them? Firstly, there is a fundamental difference in the language context. Second language learners usually have a natural language context, with numerous native speakers around. They have contacts with one another to more or less degrees. Moreover, the language may be the official language with lots of advertisements, news and official documents providing the second language learners with a natural and authentic language environment. But foreign language learners do not have such a language context.

Secondly, from the viewpoint of language input, second language learners can have quite ideal comprehensible input including foreigner talk, teacher talk and peer talk. But to foreign language learners, it is impossible to have ideal language input such as foreigner talk. The quantity and quality of teacher talk in foreign language classes are not so satisfactory as that in second language ones. The peer talk is also limited.

Intentionality and Reciprocity

Intentionality and reciprocity are the main conditions for the interaction of mediated learning experiences. When a teacher has an intention, such as wanting the students to learn some phrases, s/he can look for the best way to carry out the intention. S/he can change any of the three parts for optimum achievements, which are the stimuli, and the way the stimuli are presented; the students, and the way the students are motivated to interact; and the teacher (the mediator), and the way the teacher is presenting him/herself.

In China, much emphasis has been put on the teaching methods. Every educational reform begins with the reform of teaching methods, for it is a traditional belief that there are no students that cannot be taught well, but teachers who cannot teach well. Although it is an extreme viewpoint to a certain degree, it does show how teaching methods are valued. With the development of technology, it is strongly advocated to make full use of computer technology so as to enrich teaching methodology for maximum achievement. This coincides with this aspect of Feuerstein's theory. The same case is with the EFL teaching.

For example, when I began to present a new lesson in EFL, I would vary my ways of teaching with the different contents. But the most important point is to clarify my aim of the lesson, then carry out the activities designed for reaching the aim. I usually do in the following ways, which I think are much helpful.

I would present the new contents with a variety of ways, especially adopting multi-media method, such as computer courseware. With the development of computer technology, it is convenient to create different vivid situations with various colors, pictures, and word types for presentation, which proved very useful. I would lead in to the new contents with interesting topics to the students; using brainstorming to elicit the students' responses; I would also ask smart questions and give encouraging remarks to catch the students' interest and give them a feeling of achievement.

Related to *intentionality* is the criterion of *reciprocity*. This involves "creating within the individual [learner] the feelings and knowledge of what your goals are, feeling part of it". The learner then becomes the "vicarious mediator" when the teacher is not present, instructing themselves and acting as a source of their own structural change (Howie, 2003, p. 16). In my opinion, reciprocity also means both the mediator and the learner share the same goal. The teacher (the mediator) cannot take it for granted that he knows or decides the students' thinking

with dominant manner, because only the students themselves know about their own thinking. The mediator is more like a coordinator. Reflecting upon my own English teaching experiences, I am reassured that my insisting on the importance of classroom interaction is underpinned by this theory.

Most of my colleagues always complain that the students are hopeless and unteachable. I have taught it for hundreds of times, but they (students) still don't understand. The reason why they complained is they did not understand what the students were thinking about, and they did not know well about the students' situations. Furthermore, they always assume that there is a direct relationship between input and intake, that is, what is presented can be mastered directly and will, as a result of that mastery, become part of the learner's usable repertoire. But there is no such direct relationship between input and intake in learning, especially in foreign language learning. If language learning did work in this way, we would reasonably expect learners to acquire language as a series of successive structures and so to build up the language system in an orderly progression, moving from mastery of one sentence form to mastery of the next and so on, until the language was acquired in all its complexity. But this does not happen. So how to provide optimal comprehensible input to the students, reinforce the classroom interaction and hence facilitate foreign language development is a key point in foreign language teaching.

For a Chinese student, as I have mentioned above because the fact is that English is a foreign language, the time to use English is mostly in the classroom, the classroom interaction is more significant. Classroom interaction has three main aspects: input, interaction and output. Input refers to the language used by the teacher, output refers to the language produced by learners and interaction refers to the interrelationship between input and output. Studies of the interaction between the native speaker (NS) and the non-native speakers (NNS) showed that when the input provided by the NS is incomprehensible to the NNS, they enter into a negotiation of meaning in which the NNS asks for clarification, repetition or confirmation, resulting in a modification of the structure of interaction (Tsui, 2001, p. 121). This negotiation is a useful input to the students and also a useful method for the students to use English.

Since classroom teaching is limited, not enough for a student to be able to learn English well, it is especially important for an EFL teacher to share the learning goal with the students in order for them to learn after class and it is equally important for an EFL teacher to teach their students the way of learning, that is, to learn how to learn.

Fereustein sees Mediated Learning Experience as representing the quality of a learning interaction, and not as limited to a fixed curriculum or content of learning. It is more about the *how* of the learning than the *what* (Howie, 2003, p. 6).

According to Robert Sternberg, the eminent Yale professor of cognitive psychology and a foremost writer on intelligence, the teaching of thinking requires the teacher to "intervene at the level of the mental process and teach individuals what processes to use, when, how to use them, and how to combine them into workable strategies for task solution" (Sternberg, 1984, p. 39).

To my understanding, learning is a cognitive process with specific purpose, plan and strategies and under the influence of existent knowledge and experience. Therefore to foster cognitive skills, learn how to solve problems with knowledge, learn thinking and learn how to learn is of great significance. Teaching is to reach the aim of not teaching. This is the thought of Chinese educationist Ye Shengtao who has put forward after over twenty years' research and practical experiences on education. This means all efficient teaching lies in that teachers teach how

to learn and students learn how to learn. The time for students to study in the school is limited, and what they have learned in the school is not enough. The rapid development of society, economics, technology and culture as well as various problems which may be encountered in working needs the ability to learn on the basis of original knowledge.

Therefore, I suggest the EFL teacher should guide students in the following ways:

(1) It is essential to guide students to grasp the learning nature. Although language seems so complex and variable, it still has some definite nature, which we can find out and help learning efficiently. Once the students have grasped the learning nature, they will be able to know the whole by seeing a dot'.

(2) It is important to foster the students to read independently. Learning is always related with reading. Reading extensively can help enlarge vocabulary and further understand the language structure and so on. So EFL teachers should guide students to learn how to choose suitable materials and how to read effectively.

(3) It is necessary to teach students how to accumulate information. The key point is to develop a good habit. The EFL teacher should let the students know the process of acquiring a skill is a process of accumulating.

(4) It is vital to guide students how to apply knowledge into skills. The aim of reading is to use. Reading without use is of no value. Only through using knowledge will you find your shortage and help further understand the original knowledge, hence stimulating the desire to learn more.

Transcendence

The second of the universal criteria is the mediation of *transcendence*, i.e. going beyond the goals of the interaction. (Feuerstein & Feuerstein, 1991, p. 20). This involves going beyond the particular task and applying the principles and skills learnt to other tasks and areas of learning (Howie, 2003, p. 16). To my understanding, transcendence means the learner not only knows how to do the particular task but also knows why it is so and can apply in other similar tasks.

However, the situation regarding this aspect in China is still far from satisfactory. It is still prevalent for higher educational institutions to select students according to the marks of the entrance examination. In order to enter the ideal university, students have to work hard on the books from the primary school, or even before that. There are severe competitions for entering a good junior high school, and then a good senior high school. The students are submerged in a sea of examinations. It is no wonder to have comments that the university students are high in marks and low in skills.

The aim of learning English is not limited to being able to read English materials but extended to using it. Therefore, it is very important for us in teaching to transform language knowledge into language skills. Firstly, we should remember that learning English usage or English knowledge is not the final aim of English teaching, but the communication is. We should design real-life activities to help students apply their learning to communication. Secondly, we should improve our teaching methods. Text-oriented sentence-level grammar analysis, language points study, and explanation of vocabulary, syntax and knowledge are not the main parts of language teaching. Instead, we should focus on the students' pragmatic competence, contextual knowledge, the competency of understanding others and expressing themselves in real-life language context. Thirdly, we should bear it in mind that teaching is student-centred, not teacher-centred.

In order for the transcendence to happen, we can design some classroom activities, such as role-play. Role-play is a kind of English classroom activity which simulates real-life situations. In this activity, students play the different roles in a certain context, which facilitates students to apply what they have learned in the book into situational communicative contexts. It can not only foster students' linguistic competency but also their communicative competency.

Considering the situation of large and heterogeneous classes, we can apply computer-assisted language learning. We should encourage learning by using computer tools to explore simulated worlds, to build presentations and websites that reflect on personally engaging and significant topics, and to undertake authentic communication with other learners around the world. It is understood that, as a tool for drill and practice in the four skills (reading, speaking, writing and listening), grammar and vocabulary, the computer has repeatedly demonstrated its usefulness as a patient and obedient taskmaster. Instant feedback to students can be provided for every answer, correct or incorrect. Besides, tutorial and drill on the computer can provide more than a teacher in the classroom. Waeschauer (1997) believes that because interaction and reflection are combined in a single medium through the use of computer mediated communication, the online interaction provides a good opportunity for learners to construct knowledge together "by expressing themselves in print and then assessing, evaluating, comparing and reflecting on their own views and those of others". With increasing availability and speed of computers and the expansion of the internet as a multimedia tool, it is necessary for us to deploy technology to its best advantage and ensure the teacher's roles become that of guide and mentor, encouraging students to take charge of their own learning, helping them to learn their own pace.

For a large and heterogeneous class, cooperative learning is also a useful strategy.

Vygotsky stresses the ability of the human to learn through the specific social interaction involved in imitation, by which children grow into the intellectual life of those around them (1978, p. 88). He states "Children can imitate a variety of actions that go well beyond the limits of their own capabilities. Using imitation, children are capable of doing much more in collective activity or under the guidance of adults" (1978, p. 88). This view underpins the current use of co-operative learning enhancement approaches. Vygotsky states what the child can do in co-operation he can do alone tomorrow (1986, p. 188). Contemporary constructivists such as Atkinson, 2002 and Breen, 1985 believe that knowledge is created by learners collaborating together rather than by being transmitted. Learners bring with them their own feelings, beliefs, attitudes, prior experiences and through collaboration are given the opportunity to confirm and reconstruct concepts that they have which are determined by how they interpret the new information and experience. Lotman (1988, cited Warschauer 1997) believes that interaction in chat rooms serves as a thinking device which is important for collaborative construction of knowledge.

I believe this applies to EFL teaching. In the English classroom, whatever strengths or weaknesses the students have, they shall be encouraged and provided with chances to communicate with their peers as much as possible. Therefore, pair work, group work, role play and discussions can be seen in an English classroom now, which have shown efficient in improving the students' ability of using English.

Mediation of Meaning

The third of the universal criteria is the mediation of meaning, which as Feuerstein states deals mainly with the energetic dimension of the interaction; it answers the questions of *why*, *what for*, and other questions related to the casual and teleological relationship reasons for something to happen or to be done. (1991, p. 24). As Howie. D.H interpreted that “meaning” is closely linked to internal or intrinsic motivation or need, giving the individual a sense of meaning, fulfillment and satisfaction, in contrast to an external or extrinsic need or motivation (2003, p. 17)

Nowadays, the most head-aching problem for teachers is students lack motivation toward academic activities. Indubitably, the absence of academic motivation can lead to feelings of frustration and discontentment and can encumber productivity and well-being. Indeed, the question of what motivates students to achieve is central to education and educational psychology. But it is also important to find what de-motivates the students to learn. When the task is not an integral component of a student’s life, or if, in effect, it is not important to the student, amotivation may result. Even if extrinsic in origin, when an undertaking is valued, it is internalized and thus executed out of willingness and adopted with a sense of volition. If there is no inner-acceptance of the activity, the student will not integrate the behavior as an expression of self. Thus, activities that are incongruent with self-expression are more difficult to maintain, and academic amotivation may be characteristic of school activities that are not expressions of one’s self or of one’s values.

Motivation is considered by many to be one of the main ingredients in determining the success of a second or foreign language program. Students are motivated in foreign language learning if they find classroom activities, tasks and materials interesting and the teacher supportive. Also as I have found in my teaching experiences, the students will choose to pay attention to, engage and persist in learning tasks only if they find them worth the trouble. Although motivation is quite a complex topic, and needs deep research, still what we can do is how to get the students motivated by getting them interested in what we are teaching to them, letting them feel achieved and giving them the feeling of competence.

It is common for a Chinese student to have only textbooks available for learning English. Those textbooks are usually homogeneous—rigidly aimed at one kind of learner, with no flexibility or no options from which the learner can make selection of the material he/she is interested in. Therefore, the teacher should try to mediate in the students *a sense of meaning*, awareness of the way in which the learning experience will have wider relevance to them beyond the immediate time and place and to make the homogeneous textbooks flexible so that they can attract students’ interest and get more participation.

Foreign language learning is different from children’s language acquisition. The latter is a natural social process and to study language is to learn a method of expressing feelings. But foreign language learning concerns many social psychological factors, sometimes even concerns personal respect and moral ethics. If the students like the culture of the foreign country, and are anxious to know about its history, culture and social knowledge, they will have the motivation to learn the language. On the contrary, if they have the feeling of despise and dislikes, it is impossible to learn the language well. Therefore, to study the students’ psychology is a new task for an EFL teacher in order to achieve good results.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Feuerstein's mediation theory has great significance to EFL learning and teaching. There is a big difference between a teacher as a mediator and a teacher as an information sender. Mediation helps students to obtain knowledge, skill and strategies required for self-developing, learning how to learn, solving problems, adapting to different cultural context and social changes as well as facing various challenges. In fact, while reflecting upon our own learning experiences, we can realize in what ways the EFL teacher have positive impact on us. Is it the teacher's rich subject knowledge or the teacher's super teaching skills? As an EFL teacher, s/he should have the ability of mastering teaching materials and more importantly, the ability of mastering the students, establish active teacher-student interactions and win the students' respect. The EFL teacher should teach the students to learn how to learn, set up their self-confidence and create a good learning environment, which are much more than simple knowledge spreading.

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