My Opinions on English Learning Difficulties in Taiwan
(論臺灣英語學習困難之我見)

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Introduction

Due to the impact of globalization (Friedman, 2000), national boundaries are disappearing. English is one of the most powerful languages in the world. When English sweeps the world, no countries can avoid its powerful influences on politics, economics, culture, and education. Taiwan cannot escape this trend of globalization. English abilities are one of the most significant indices of the competitiveness of an industrial nation (Chang, 2003); thus it is the key to advancing Taiwan’s economic status in the future. In order to survive and prosper in the competitive global economic market, Taiwan’s government recognizes English as a necessary key to success and also has established some policies of English to increase English ability among its people.

Knowing that English is vital, my mother brought me to the USA to experience different cultures as well as to learn English in 2008. I have an opportunity to get to know American classmates. As a foreign student, I had difficulty learning English when I first arrived in the USA three years ago. I was slowly accustomed to the way of learning there. My listening and speaking abilities improved a lot during the stay there. After my mom finished her doctoral study, I came back to Taiwan to continue my education at Huei-Deng High School in Yilan. However, from my observation of Taiwan’s education system and the English learning of my friends and my cousins, the English education is quite different from that in the USA.

In Taiwan, English is taught as a school subject but not used as a medium of
instruction at school nor as a language for daily life within the country. English is neither used at home nor for social purposes. Therefore, in Taiwan, English is learned as a foreign language. It functions as a language tool to satisfy the need to communicate with other language speakers. Approximately 90% of Taiwanese students had attended private cram schools for learning English. In English cram schools, students with various levels of English proficiency are often combined in the same class. Most of the English classes in the formal elementary settings are different in students’ abilities and learning attitudes (Chen, 2002). Huge English performance gaps in the same classroom usually trouble English teachers and reduce their teaching effectiveness. Poor-performing students in the elementary school system often lose their self-confidence and become the object of derision from classmates (Chang, 2005).

This group of students with English deficiency is mainly from low income families (Chang, 2007). To them, English is just another boring academic subject and useless in their daily life. These misconceptions prevent themselves from the continuation of their English learning. After this group of students enter junior high school, their English performance is below that of other students due to lack of family financial support, lack of English resources available at home, and the lack of opportunities in tutoring from cram schools having better qualified English teachers (Chang, 2005). Again, due to lack of competition, low requirements, poor performance, and low motivation in their English study, the majority of these students
eventually attended senior high schools in the Technological and Vocational Education (TVE) system. Therefore, students in the TVE system generally perform poorly in English because of coming from lower socioeconomic families (Chang, 2007).

Students’ English Learning Difficulties

These students belonged to a special group whose teachers did not expect too much of them when they first began English learning, resulting in low motivation and low English performance (Chang, 2007). After entering high school and college, these same students continued to hold wrong ideas about English learning. They regarded English as simply a school subject for testing, learning it with low self-confidence and low self-esteem. Moreover, educational resources allotted by the Taiwan’s Ministry of Education to the schools in the vocational education system compared to those of the general educational system were not enough (Chang, 2007). All in all, the combination of family background, limited educational resources, and low English language ability results in their greater difficulties in increasing their English level. My cousins are in one of the situations I mentioned here.

As a high school student now and a college student-to-be in two years, I have some ideas on how to improve low-performing students’ English learning in the following three aspects. They are providing remedial English classes, increasing learning motivation and raising teachers’ expectation of their students.
Remedial English Classes

Providing remedial classes are necessary for low-performing students. The question is “how” to make some change once English teachers know “what” should be changed. Levin and Calcagno (2008) pointed out nine components for designing successful remedial classes for underprepared students. These components are as follows:

- motivation: building on interest and providing both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation for students;
- substance: building skills by using concrete and tangible approaches;
- inquiry: developing students’ inquiry and research skills;
- independence: developing creative and critical thinking skills;
- different approaches: using various approaches suitable for students’ needs such as collaboration and teamwork, technology, tutoring, and independent investigation;
- high standards: setting high standards and expectations;
- problem solving: viewing learning as a way of determining what needs to be learned and how to develop as a successful strategy;
- consecutiveness: emphasizing the links among different subjects and experiences, and showing how they can contribute to learning;
- supportive context: recognizing that learning is a social activity that really helps students with healthy social interaction, encouragement, and support.
Truly advancing student English language level takes time and effort. I think it is beneficial to have considered these key points while designing English remedial classes.

**Increasing Learning Motivation**

Increasing motivation is another thing to consider student English learning problems. Behavioral psychologists such as Skinner and Watson emphasize the importance of rewards and punishments in motivating students. Their theory of external motivation is sometimes called the *carrot and stick* theory, including praise, good grades, certificates, good career and etc. This theory indicates that students are best motivated by *extrinsic* sources of motivation, similar to a horse pursuing a carrot (Noddings, 2006). To increase learning effects, the Behaviorist Approach encourages teachers to utilize both extrinsic and intrinsic motivation or rewards and punishments to entice or force students to learn. Noddings claims that intrinsic and extrinsic motivations should be used in combination to maximize learning effects.

Stubbornly maintaining one approach to motivating students seems impossible. Both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation theories were important.

**Raising Teacher Expectations of Their Students**

Teachers’ expectations of student success and their communication of these expectations make all the difference in student English learning. The idea of communicating high expectations on student achievements began with Rosenthal and Jacobson’s (1968) study. This effect was called the *self-fulfilling prophecy effect* or the *Pygmalion Effect*. Some experts
in this field find that self-fulfilling prophecy effects are stronger for students with a lower socioeconomic status than for students with a higher socioeconomic status. Another group of scholars reported much stronger self-fulfilling prophecy effects for low-achieving students than for high-achieving students. Yatvin (2009) indicated that what teachers could give to their students that really mattered today was unmistakable signals of their faith in them: smiles, nods of approval, more opportunities to ask and answer questions, and a kindly tone of voice.

Summary

English is indispensible tool when Taiwan wants to compete with other countries. I understand better its importance after I was in the USA. I can persuade myself that I am only a high school student. What I need to focus now is to study harder, to get higher scores at school, to pass the college entrance examination, and eventually to be admitted into an awesome national university. However, I choose to express my own opinions on English learning difficulties after observing my relatives and friends in Taiwan. I hope the Ministry of Education can provide more resources. Teachers can heighten students’ learning motivation and develop more effective English learning programs and activities to help improve students’ English learning. The purpose of elevating English can be achieved soon.
References


