Critical Evaluation of English as a Second Language Teaching in an International Senior High School in Guangdong Province

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Abstract: In today's world, more and more children begin to learn multiple languages because there are various dialects and languages around them. Therefore, how their first languages or dialects impact the process of learning English as a second language is worth discussing. This study aims to illustrate the role of different mother tongue dialects in second language acquisition and explore the implications for languages, society and education. Taking an international high school in Guangdong Province as an example because of its mixed language environment, this paper summarizes the influence of multilingualism on second language acquisition and its impact on empirical studies in language education through the critical analysis of students' multiple dialects and their role in English learning.

Key words: English learning; second language acquisition; multilingualism; dialects

1. Introduction

The pluralistic language-using in Guangdong Province provides a dynamic learning environment for learners to use English. Therefore, it is worth exploring how these different dialects affect the English learning and what influence it has on learners. Based on multilingual turn, this paper analyzes the English learning and its use in an international high school in Guangdong Province, where learners have already mastered more than one dialect. After that, this paper discusses whether multilingual environment can promote English learning from different angles. Although scholars hold different views on this issue, the positive impact of first languages on second language plays an important role in second language acquisition.

2. Analysis of Multilingualism in the Chosen Context

The chosen context is an international senior high school in Guangdong Province, where I have worked as an intern assistant for six months. Students are about 15-18 years old and already have some knowledge about English, most of whom are local residents of Guangdong and others come from nearby provinces. Because it is an international high school, many teachers are English native speakers. Therefore, students will not have monolingual phenomenon in the process of learning. On the one hand, students have to communicate with teachers in English. On the other hand, there are many dialects in China especially in Guangdong Province. Students have already known different dialects before they come to school, including Mandarin, Cantonese, Hakka dialect, Min dialect and Yuebei dialect. The complexity of language use makes students become bilingual or even multilingual learners, which impacts students' English acquisition.

One feature of the chosen context is the need to use English in communication. In this school, English is a communication tool for social practice, because students need to communicate with teachers in English in reality. Thus for students in this context, the influence and exchange of learners' unstable repertoire between English and first languages is more obvious compared with other types of high schools in Guangdong Province because the former regards English as the need of communication while the later learns English according to linguistic features.

Another unique feature of this international high school is diversity of languages. Different dialects provide learners with different ways to understand the language. More possible ways of language acquisition can be achieved when more languages are learned (Todeva & Cenoz, 2009). Therefore, in this specific context, students are more likely to learn English as a social practice.

3. Theoretical Framework

Multilingualism is not putting separated languages together but using multiple semiotic resources in a dynamic approach. Variable language systems can affect each other's changes over time. Therefore, language learning is not linear or mechanical but complex and chaotic. It involves interrelationship between individual neurobiological world and social activity: from the micro-level of social interaction, the meso-level of sociocultural institutions and communities to the macro-level of ideological structures (Douglas Fir Group, 2016).

First, from the micro-level, with the knowledge of various dialects and a second language, learners can be aware of multiple identities going beyond the study of languages. They choose different languages depending on who they speak to. They speak English with native English teachers while speak their hometown dialects with their parents and classmates from the same place. For classmates from other provinces, they use Mandarin or Cantonese, which can be understood by most people in Guangdong Province. Therefore, the social interaction will affect the choice of language in the chosen context.

Second, from the meso-level, sociocultural communities and institutions also impact language use. Guangdong Province is adjacent to three other provinces and close to the sea. The geographical situation brings a great number of population shift in Guangdong together with diverse cultures and nations. Under this condition, the use of mixed languages is common in schools, families, communities and the larger society. These practices can be understood as literacy of community, which offers access to economic, social and political power (Barton, 2017). Community, family and school communication plays an important role in teaching, learning, interacting and acquiring literacy in school and larger society in a multi-level way.

Third, from the macro-level, with the unique features of the international high school, learners have developed the awareness and proficiency of multilingualism, which cannot be found in monolingual context. With the increase of exposure to different language variants, multilingualism awareness increases (Jessner, 2014). Students in this context have a higher level of multilingualism awareness because they use more than one language in daily interaction and communication. Moreover, they have developed the ability of critical literacy, which relates literacy with power, identity and self-empowerment. It plays a significant role for learner to interpret the world through literacy and become a confident pluriliterate global citizen. In multilingual environment, with the awareness of self identity in social activity and ideological construction, language learners can better develop the "innovative and sustainable lifeworld solutions" (Douglas Fir Group, 2016).

4. The Issue of Multilingualism in the Chosen Context

There are opinions that bilingualism means being able to achieve native-like fluency in the use of a second language. For international senior high school students, it is not easy to achieve native-like proficiency in English because they are in

a high intensity of dialects, which may cause some influences on English acquisition. The totally different syntax and word order between various dialects have a negative impact on translanguaging between first languages and the second language.

However, Grosjean argues that bilingualism is not using two languages equally well but the use of two (or more) languages in daily communication. In this view, learners mainly focus on using the language rather than mastering it. Moreover, students in multilingual environment can also develop abilities that monolingual learners lack. Bialystok et al. (2004) suggest that bilingualism has advantages on protecting cognition in mind. Therefore, the mixed languages environment around students in international high school offers them a complex, multiple but sustainable language structure in mind and helps learners use these languages dynamically in a broader society context.

The multiple identities of multilingual learners have new challenges to literacy educators. English teaching is a flexible process including both linguistic knowledge and communication tools, which means that teachers should consider not only knowledge but also communication skills. It is teachers' responsibility to create a sustainable learning environment and promote learners' global citizenship to use various languages in communication. The scaffolding of curriculum gives learners opportunities to aware ownership of the meaning-making process (Norton & Toohey, 2004). In a school where students are multilingual speakers, the scaffolding of curriculum is not the job of teachers, but a shared environment created by teachers and students. In this environment, learners can be creative in more than one language and have confidence to experience problem-solving and meaning-making.

5. Analysis of Multilingualism in Future Practice

Nowadays, as online teaching is accepted and used by more and more people, it may reduce learners' awareness of multilingualism because they take courses at home rather than in a real multilingual environment. The barrier to online learning includes limited access to resources, time, technical skills, technical difficulties, motivation and social interaction (Muilenburg and Berge, 2005). These barriers do have impacts on learning and using English for the international high school students. The shift from multilingual environment at school to monolingual learning environment at home creates new challenges for teachers. Learners are in the world where globalization "has penetrated all aspects of L2 learners' lifeworlds" (Douglas Fir Group, 2016). Therefore, language educators have the responsibility to make students aware of their language practice outside the online teaching within their communities and reflect on it.

6. Conclusion

The multilingual repertoire builds the awareness of using languages as a social practice, which is more than a linguistic system. Therefore, both learners and language educators can work towards understanding the complexity of languages by understanding multiple language use phenomenon and multiple identities and using these experience in the class.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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