

The Necessity of Intensifying English Vocabulary Teaching in the Remote Minority Area College English Teaching

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Abstract:

Vocabulary learning is very important in English study especially for the beginners. This paper discusses the present situation of English teaching in Inner Mongolia, the English level of the Inner Mongolian students, and the necessity of intensifying English vocabulary teaching and learning in the remote minority area college English teaching.

Key words: remote minority areas vocabulary learning trilingual adult beginners

Introduction

As we all know, words of a language are just like bricks of a high building. Despite quite small pieces, they are vital to the great structure. Those who have experience in learning a foreign language must know that at the beginning or in the end, vocabulary is always one of the biggest problems in language learning. It is possible for almost many foreign language learners after a certain period of learning time, to pronounce many words sufficiently correctly and to know at least some of the basic structures and grammatical rules of the language. Yet it may be more difficult for them to possess a range of vocabulary, which is wide enough to satisfy their needs in communication. It is a common fact that foreign language learners always encounter new words, which hinder their reading comprehension. A limited vocabulary can prevent learners from developing ideas or arguments effectively in writing. So the importance of vocabulary learning is never too far to be emphasized, especially for the students who are beginners, such as the students in Inner Mongolia.

The present situation

Inner Mongolia is one of the largest in the 55 minority nationality groups in China. It belongs to what we call “the remote minority area” (most of which are along China’s 12,000 plus kilometer long boundary), it has historically been far behind in education as

compared to the “Inland” of our country, and the poor economic conditions of those areas, which has limited both education and economic development. Based on the 2000 census, of the 23 million people in Inner Mongolia there were 3.9 million Mongolians (17 percent). The majority of them inhabit far remote mountainous regions and pastoral areas. Their households are scattered and inaccessible, which makes going to school a great difficulty. There are about 20 institutions of higher education in the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region. Most of them are in Huhhot, the capital, and the nearby industrial city of Baotou, both of which are centrally located. Inner Mongolia Normal University is the oldest of all (founded in 1952). There are about 9,000 students in the university, about half of which are Mongolians who come from the cities mentioned above, where teaching conditions are very poor, and there is a lack of good English training in middle schools. Quite a few of them have been able to enter the university because of the preferential treatment given minority groups from the government, so as to encourage cross the board development. The passing score for minority students on the national examination is generally adjusted downward by 20 or more points, with some institutions dropping the score by up to 200 points from the 480 passing level. It is the general phenomenon that most Mongolians are considered “beginners” in English when they arrive at university. One key reason may be that they receive comparatively less exposure to English education in the schools when contrasted with the overall Han population. Data will follow indicative of this.

The necessity

According to China’s National College English Syllabus, a university student should have mastered 1800 words upon entering college and another 2400 words when reaching the Band 4 level, a standard any university student must reach. So in college English study, students are encouraged to enlarge their vocabulary by reading more and trying to guess the meaning of new words they come across by using the information in a passage. Certainly this is a good way for students to speed up the reading and learn more new words, since they need not take trouble to turn to a dictionary. But in the college level English teaching in our Inner Mongolia Normal University (IMNU), this method has failed to work in most cases. The reason is quite clear that most of the Mongolian students do not have the vocabulary required upon entering the university.

Number of Years	8 years	6 years	3 years	2 years	1 year	0
Number of students	0	2	5	6	12	26
Percentage		3.92%	9.80%	11.76%	23.52%	50.98%

Table 1: The 51 Mongolian students' level of English upon entering college in Year 2000

Number of Years	8 years	6 years	3 years	2 years	1 year	0
Number of students	5	48	0	0	0	0
Percentage	9.43%	90.56%				

Table 2: The 53 Han Chinese students' level of English upon entering college in Year 2000

Table 1 reveals that more than half of the Mongolian students have not studied English. While Table 2 indicates that all of the Han Chinese students have studied English, and some have studied for 8 years.

So the Mongolian students are beginners, compared with the Han Chinese students, which means that it is very urgent for them to enlarge vocabulary and master a certain number of English words as quickly as possible so as to catch up with the others. Therefore, one of the most important tasks for the educators in college level English teaching in the remote minority areas is how to help students to learn and memorize more words. Only when they have mastered a certain number of English words can they begin to learn to speak and write in English and can they reach the advanced level and lay a good foundation for their future use. But actually for many years only very few of them can pass the B and 4 Examination in the university. For example, in the year 2000 only two out of 50 students have passed the examination. Because of not having a sound English basis, the tragedy is that most of them have forgotten what they have learned after graduation.

The students

In regards to vocabulary teaching for Mongolian students, some special features should be taken into consideration: First, Mongolian students are the students whose have already reached or are beyond eighteen years old. In this sense, they belong to the adult beginners. Second, most of them are enrolled in IMNU with Linguistic background of Mongolian language being the mother tongue and the Mandarin being the second language, but with their target language being English. Hence, Mongolian students should be identified as L3 rather than L2 adult learners. Another feature is that most of the teachers who teach them are the teachers whose native language is Chinese, which means they cannot use Mongolian as instructional and explanatory language in the class. So how to teach them English well or what is the best way to teach Mongolian students has long been an issue of study for the teachers in the remote minority areas.

The teaching methods

From many years of observation, I think vocabulary teaching for these kinds of learners can be performed in two ways: one is out-class learning and another is in-class teaching. Out-class learning is a task assigned after class to memorize words in groups, which means a certain number of words should be read and memorized in each given period of time in order to speedily memorize a lot of words from the words list. For example, 1800 words required in the primary stage should be divided into groups according to the categories to be learned and memorized in several given periods of time. In-classroom teaching is the time when we show them the meaning of the words they memorized and how to use the words. In the vocabulary teaching, a kind of feeling of a real need to learn the words should be created for the students. Students' seeing the words, reading them, and memorizing them after class, should be also attached to showing the meaning of the words and using the words in real communication. The pattern of learning vocabulary in this stage is as follows.

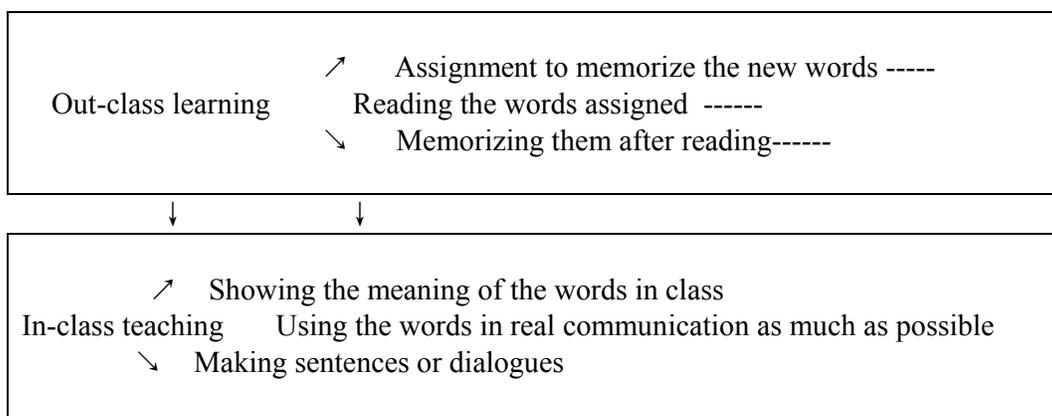


Table 3: The pattern of learning vocabulary

In class teaching, all kinds of teaching aids should be used most of the time to

show the meaning of the words, such as pictures, projectors or any things they need in class, which has the advantage of avoiding the complicated transferring data process from Han Chinese to Mongolian, and then, from Mongolian to English when Chinese is used as instructional and explanatory language by Chinese teachers.

When the students are in the intermediate stage, compared with beginners, one great advantage the former may have is that they have learned a certain number of English words, which can then be used by the teacher for defining new vocabulary. And then students should hear only English from their teacher and be given more opportunities to try to communicate in English. When moving up to the advanced stage, as the reading materials become increasingly difficult, students should be especially taught how to use a dictionary and look up the unknown words or how to guess the meaning of the words from the context themselves. At this stage, they should learn to be independent, responsible for their own learning, not depending on the teacher to spend an entire class period explaining vocabulary—writing words and their meanings on the blackboard. However, no matter what methods we use, words should be learned realistically, independently and consistently.

Conclusion

As we can see, intensifying English vocabulary teaching in the remote minority area college, is quite necessary according to the characteristics of the Mongolian students' formal English education, but it is really a new and a broad issue in ELT. To deliver an effective teaching performance is quite a challenging mission. There is still much that can be worked on. Here I just cast a brick to attract jades --- a few immature remarks hoping others may come up with valuable opinions on it. In order to train personnel of minority backgrounds as not only to meet the demand of regional development, but to also gain information and technologies from other parts of the country, I sincerely hope that those teachers who are interested in it devote research to the more practical principles of vocabulary teaching.

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Biographical data

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