

The Advantages and the Problems of Multimedia-aided English Reading Instruction

Liming Han

Human Resource Department, Dezhou University, Dezhou, China, 253023

Email: 2306579@163.com

Abstract—Reading plays an important role in the process of language learning. In the modern society, teachers can apply the multimedia technology to assist the reading instruction. On the basis of the research of scholars in this or relevant field, this paper firstly centers on the advantages of multimedia-aided English reading instruction by comparison to the traditional instruction. And then the paper states the problems of the multimedia-aided English reading instruction in China to promote the application of multimedia aids to English reading instruction.

Index Terms—multimedia, advantage, English reading instruction

I. INTRODUCTION

The emergence of the multimedia technology and the Internet has largely expanded the scope of CAI(Computer-Assisted Instruction), especially in the field of language learning, thus arousing the interest of more and more researchers and instructors. When CAI is applied for the language learning, CALL emerges. CALL is short for Computer-Assisted Language Learning which is the search for and study of applications of computers in language learning defined by Michael Levy. CALL is an important program that has been studied by the teaching staff in the last few years, which can be described as such model: teacher + learner + computer (or Internet + courseware). CALL is mainly based on two important technologies—the multimedia computers and the Internet and it is based on constructivism learning theory, which holds the view that knowledge is acquired not by teaching but by constructing meaning on condition that learners make use of useful learning materials with the help of teachers or partners. From a broad sense, CALL is a new teaching methodology adopting computers as the media. Multimedia is a buzzword today in the field of the computer. Multimedia means to combine a variety of media—text, graphics, sound, animations, video and other visual information into a computer to make up a new application system. “Multi” refers to multisensory function, multi-facilities and multi-field application. “Media” refers to the intermediary instrument between human and the real world. In a narrow sense, it means all aids may be used by teachers and students to attain certain educational objectives. What makes multimedia even more powerful is the Internet, which can link the information together all around the world and create a more authentic learning environment, easily integrates reading, writing, speaking and listening materials.

II. THE ADVANTAGE OF THE MULTIMEDIA-AIDED ENGLISH READING INSTRUCTION

In the traditional teaching, reading instruction skills and strategies are still poor and undeveloped. The speech-dominated education employs a teacher-centered, book-centered, grammar-translation method and focuses more emphasis on rote memory than other practicable skills. Teachers who are feeling like spoon feeding their students generally receive higher appreciation than teachers who are not. The teachers always give up the stimulating interaction activities such as games, role-plays, talk-based communicative activities in class and they are skeptical of the use of games as learning tools, especially in the senior high school because the students should face the college entrance examination. To make things worse, there are students who may go so far as to distinguish “good teachers” from “bad ones” solely by how many pages they can cover in their notebooks and how many his or her students get a place in the famous university or college.

Multimedia teaching mode gains many advantages. If the teachers make well use of the advantages of the multimedia technology and the Internet resources and work out courseware, they can deal with the reading course more interestingly and the students are more active by comparison to the traditional teaching climate. According to Mo Jinguo’s survey(2002), the student would get better mark: in the multimedia class, their mark is 81.15 on average, while 79.78 in the non-multimedia class.

The advantages of multimedia-aided English reading instruction will be illustrated from the following aspects.

A. To Arouse Students’ Reading Interest and to Enhance Their Motivation

As a result of the spoon-feeding teaching method, teachers are seen as the providers of knowledge and the students dutifully but passively assimilate the teachers’ words of wisdom, working their way boringly through the textbook,

reading the text word by word and too much focusing on detail information and structural analysis. Many students are tired of this type of traditional English classes and no longer have enthusiasm or motivation for study.

Compared with the traditional English teaching, multimedia is good for arousing students' reading interest and motivating students to study English. Multimedia assists the teacher to integrate the pictures, music and video into the courseware and make the content more colorful. In the multimedia-aided reading classroom, the teacher transforms the static text into dynamic one. For example, when teaching about the Olympic Games, the teacher plays a short scene of the Olympic Games match during the pre-reading activities, which will stimulate the student's audio and visual senses and their attention is greatly attracted immediately, and then asks students to read the text. If the time and condition is permitted, the teacher can also play some short films about the athletes mentioned by the text. During the post-reading, students can hand in their assignments by sending email to the teacher at their time and pace and they can also ask for advice or discuss problems of the text with their teachers or classmates. Most of students admit that they get much fun from this new style of teaching and learning by means of computer. Thus a good learning circle will certainly come into being.

B. To Effect Learners' Autonomy

Chinese students tend to consider their teachers the main source of their knowledge. Although they dislike the so-called spoon-feeding teaching, they have been accustomed to it. They seldom use their initiative to solve the problems.

On one hand, the ever-increasing necessity for teaching students how to become independent and autonomous learners has brought new perspectives to the teaching professions and change traditional ideas about teacher's roles. Autonomy does not mean without teacher's guide but is a matter of degree. Students can be asked to do lots of activities via the multimedia but the resources are so wide in the multimedia. So before students start the activity, the teachers should give instructions clearly and concisely so that students know what to do and how to search the suitable information from the multimedia. Subsequently, the learners can actively put their previous experience into the new information working together with their partners by searching, reasoning and analyzing according to their own strategies so that they deal with the problems successfully. In the multimedia environment, learners do not confine themselves to the textbooks and relevant reference books; instead, they must explore the abundance of online information.

On the other hand, multimedia teaching modes include assisting self-study mode, which is helpful to turn a passive learner into an active one through stimulating the initiatives in learners. Giving immediate feedback is an important aspect of computer-aided reading instruction, since it allows students to evaluate their answers while the questions are fresh in their minds. It helps prevent them from repeating the same mistakes before they get feedbacks from their teacher. Computer can analyze the problems of each student, and the analysis help the teacher instruct students properly.

C. To Promote an Advanced Interactive Model of Reading

Interaction is widely used nowadays. According to the New Oxford Dictionary of English, "interaction" refers to the "mutual or reciprocal action or influence". In the interactive mode, interaction includes student-teacher, student-student, student-computer and student-author interaction.

The former three interactive types are becoming plentiful in the multimedia environment. Teacher-student interaction is an integral part of language classroom teaching for it builds up rapport between the teacher and students. In the student-student interactive activities, group work is one widely adopted and of great importance. From the beginning of the language study, classrooms should be interactive. When the teachers design the teaching plan, they should keep in mind that one of the multimedia basic natures is interaction, so they will add some interaction elements into the class, for instance, when teaching the lesson New Zealand, the teacher can design a crossword puzzle and break up the map of the New Zealand into pieces on the computer. While reading, the teacher can divide the students into several groups according to their interest or other factors, and then ask students to fulfill the blank of the crossword puzzle by clicking the keys to remember the new words, and ask them to match the broken map correctly by clicking and drawing with the mouse through group discussion. And at the same time, the computer can evaluate the result immediately. If a piece of map is drawn to the proper position, the screen will show "Congratulations", while to the incorrect position, the screen will show "Sorry, try again", and then the teacher should give some advice to them to match the map correctly. In this way, the interactive mode will yield the positive relationship among the teacher, students and the computer and provide the optimum classroom environment.

D. To Increase Students' Awareness in Culture Differences and Promote Transcultural Communication

Reading materials include verbal knowledge and nonverbal knowledge. In this paper, nonverbal knowledge refers to the background knowledge. It is difficult to decide which is more important, verbal knowledge or nonverbal. They all attribute to the English reading comprehension. This part just wants to stress the role of background knowledge in the reading activity. According to Anderson and Pearson's "Schema theory" that what a reader owns in his head has a great effect on his reading comprehension, learners' background knowledge plays an important role in the comprehension of a text. The reading materials are mainly about persons and things in English-speaking countries, including background

knowledge of culture, history, customs, politics, religion and places of interest etc. A successful reading depends not only on the readers' language proficiency, but also on his or her mastery of background knowledge. Some researchers on background knowledge in reading suggest that a high degree of background knowledge can overcome linguistic deficiencies in that it helps the reader retrieve information to contribute to his comprehension. Multimedia has obvious advantages over other media. Multimedia technology seems more suitable to prepare students by helping them build background knowledge on the topic prior to reading, through appropriate pre-reading activities. Using multimedia can rapidly demonstrate background knowledge related to the texts and help the students construct relevant schema. It is generally agreed that what helps in culture acquisition are visual aids. Nowadays, students have easier access to visual aids such as films video, tapes and radios in the multimedia room. On watching and listening, the teacher asks students to pay attention to the different cultures. These will forcefully make the students sense that they are entering another culture. During the pre-reading, if teacher can play VCD about the text, the students' attention will be attracted and they will certainly take interest in what they are going to read. For example, when teaching the lesson New Zealand, the teacher can play some documentary about this nation, such as its anthem, geography, history and its people, all of which can contribute to the students to get familiar with New Zealand which gains a lot of features and customs in the southern sphere. If the software includes this idiomatic background knowledge, not only will it greatly enhance students' interest and enlarge their knowledge but also it can foster students' inter-cultural communicative ability and ability to fit in with society. After watching the documentaries, students have been impressed by the visual information, and then they are asked to perform in the front of the classroom according to the documentaries. One day, if the students have chance to go aboard or meet a foreigner coming from this country, they can communicate well with each other without embarrassment. In this way, the teaching effect will be more satisfactory. Consequently, when students have developed awareness of language, in the same way, they should be encouraged to develop a parallel awareness of culture. Knowing the target culture, students can have a better understanding of foreign countries and learn to "discard the dross and select the essence".

III. PROBLEMS OF THE CURRENT MULTIMEDIA-AIDED ENGLISH READING INSTRUCTION

After analyzing the above advantages of the multimedia-aided English reading instruction, someone will think that the multimedia is omnipotent. They will advocate that all the school should equip the multimedia computers and link them to the Internet. This is an inevitable trend in the future based on the modern technology development, but currently, multimedia-aided English reading instruction still faces some problems. Students and teachers should be well aware of them while learning and teaching.

A. *Lack of Facilities*

A multimedia classroom should be equipped with the computer, video machine, screen, high project and stereo, all of which cost almost 100 thousands that is not a small amount for some schools in China. And the situation is various in different provinces. Yu tang made a survey among 380 English teachers of 177 schools in Beijing in 2000, indicating that 215 teachers said that their schools were equipped with computers accounting for 56.8%. But in Anhui province, according to Pan Linxin's survey, of 177 schools, only 12.4% owned their multimedia classrooms; what is more, only one school could link to the Internet.⁸ The above figures show that a lot of schools just own only a few multimedia classrooms, but without the high quality ones, meanwhile, the limited amounts are usually overloaded day and night, thus sometimes, these equipments can not meet the teaching need and it costs much to maintain them. Considering its practicability, many schools often choose the large classroom to fix the multimedia so that it can accommodate more than 100 students. Such classroom is not suitable for English learning because they can not create an active climate for student to learn effectively, but in a small class, the teacher has more time to spend on each student and students have more opportunities to participate in class activities and ask questions. And it is more difficult to popularize the modern expensive language laboratory which can provide each student a computer and can make the individual learning and Internet collaborative learning more conveniently. The multimedia-aided instruction often lacks sufficient facilities. In the future, if this problem can be solved successfully, multimedia will be more popular for the teachers and the students.

B. *Lack of Well-Trained Teachers*

With the popularization of modern teaching methods in the information age, it is more challenging for teachers now that the expectations are more complex and teachers face higher requirements. In other words, teaching is no longer a one-to-many model and the role of teachers has evolved, moving from a traditional teaching role to facilitators when learners take advantage of the true potential of multimedia computers and the Internet as learning tools. But now in China, there is lack of such teachers who are not only good at English teaching but also good at mastering the computer technology. One survey shows that 19% teachers often use multimedia, 35% teachers use multimedia sometimes and 90% teachers say that the multimedia plays an important role in assisting English reading. But 60% teachers think it is more difficult to employ the multimedia and around 70% English teachers do not join any computer training.⁹ So the teacher should be trained to master the latest multimedia technology, especially for many senior teachers because most of them have been used to the teaching model and did not master the instruction technology. Even the teacher with high English proficiency can not achieve the expected result because their incorrect operation will interrupt the lesson

process. If they do not catch up with the pace of the technology, one day, they will be deleted by the society. From this point, each English teacher should be ready to master the modern advanced machine—the computer and to learn how to make courseware by software such as: PowerPoint, Flash, Authorware etc.

C. The Wrong Concept

Although multimedia is moderately effective, the human component in assisting readers is vital. It is generally believed that when teachers stay with their students for many years, they are better able to understand each other and yield positive results for both teachers and students. Nowadays, with adequate training and support, utilization of modern teaching methods can make teaching efficient and do part of work instead of teachers. But sometimes teachers just sit in front of the computer to deliver the lesson, especially in the large classroom, it is impossible for the teacher to ask each student to answer questions or deliver a presentation. In order to testify the fact, the author makes a questionnaire in his college. It shows that over 83% students said their teachers just delivered the lessons like the above described way, only a few teachers would ask students to do interactive activities. And according to Ma Junbo's survey(2003), the factors that affect the use of multimedia include lack of English teachers with good computer proficiency (22%), lack of relevant methodology (25%), lack of software (27%) and lack of hardware (23%).The former three factors are human elements accounting for three quarters. So people should keep in mind that the computer is just a tool to assist the teaching process and it is wrong for some people to hold the view that “machine” can take the place of human beings.

IV. CONCLUSION

The utilization of multimedia and Internet in the reading instruction provides tools and rich environments for foreign language learners and is becoming wider and more efficient. Such an instruction reform is the good way to carry out quality-oriented education which concentrates on learners' developing in an all-round way and stresses that learners are subjects of learning. Since problems still exist in the current multimedia-aided English reading instructions, the study of how to utilize computers to assist language instruction is well worth studying.

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Liming Han was born in Dezhou, China, in 1966. She received B.A from China Petroleum University(East China).Now she is working in the Human Resource Department, Dezhou University. Her research interests include linguistics and comparative literature.