

Cultivation of Foreign Language Talents Viewed from the Perspective of Educational Ecology*

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Abstract—From the perspective of educational ecology, this study systematically and comprehensively analyzes the ecological imbalance existing in the process of the cultivation of foreign language talents. By taking the outer dynamic balance between individual development and the external environment and the inner balance of the development of the individual as guiding principles and by employing the basic laws in ecology, this study puts forward some suggestions to establish a positive, interactive and ecological cultivation mode for international foreign talents, embodying the ecological philosophy of people-orientation and sustainable development.

Index Terms—ecological perspective, foreign language talents, ecological balance

I. INTRODUCTION

With the growing trend of globalization and internationalization, cultivation of foreign language especially English talents is getting increasingly significant for a country to participate in international affairs and cooperate with business partners from all over the world. Since 2002, the new round of College English Teaching Reform has been carried out in China and made gratifying achievements, but still some problem have been left unsettled. Viewed from an ecological point of view, all these problems can be boiled down to the ecological imbalance in the talent cultivation process. This paper adopts a perspective of educational ecology and tries to analyze the causes of ecological imbalance in foreign language education, and to figure out the solutions to these problems.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. *What Is Educational Ecology?*

Ecology is the scientific study of the interrelationship and interaction between organisms and their environment. Educational ecology, first proposed by Ashby, E. (1966), is the combination of education and ecology and it seeks to interpret education with ecological fundamentals. The connection between language acquisition and ecology lies in that both stress the context or situation of individual activities. Students, like organisms, adapt their language use according to the environment, situation and interpersonal dynamics((Hawkins, 2004; Orellana & Bowman, 2003; Paris, 2010).To put foreign language education under the guidance of ecology is to situate language learning in contexts of individual mental processes as well as the social and cultural and historical contexts (Berkeley Language Center, 2004). Ecological perspective seeks to identify how ecological settings relate to English language learning. It orients at the all-around development of each individual and emphasizes the internal balance of individual development and interrelationship between personal development and the external environment, which is in accordance with the concept of people-centered and sustainable development.

B. *A Review of the Previous Studies and Their Limitations*

In the past few decades, the study of educational ecology has witnessed a shift from the theoretical exploration to practical application, from the macro-study of the interrelationship between education, politics and economy to the micro study of its application to pedagogy and classroom teaching (Deng&Du, 2009). In the early 21st century, ecological ideas were introduced to foreign language education and ushered in heated discussion on the cultivation of ecological and individualistic foreign language talents.

A detailed analysis of the previous studies shows that most of them focus on one sub-ecosystem such as curriculum design (e.g. Han & Dong, 2011; Xiao, 2010), ecological classroom (e.g. Sommer, 1967; Doyle, 1977, Jacobs, 1989), ecological teaching methods (e.g. An, 2009; Chen, 2010) etc. Studies to put foreign language education into a complete, dynamic, systematic and balanced ecosystem are quite rare. Foreign language education, as a organic, complex and unified ecosystem(Cremin,1976), covers the setting of cultivation goal, curriculum design, teaching content, teaching methods, evaluation system and teacher development, with each factor interconnected with others and finally form a complex and unified whole. No factor in the ecological system can be studied in isolation. In view of this, this paper

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aims to put foreign language education into the ecological framework based on a complete, dynamic, systematic and balanced viewpoint, and examine how environment influences the development of foreign language talents.

III. METHODOLOGY

Exploration of the social needs for foreign language talents is mainly based on the news report, and examination of the classroom sub-ecosystem and the internal balance development of each individual is based on a questionnaire designed by this author.

A. *Participants*

Six hundred college students aged between 19 to 22 from 3 universities participated in this questionnaire survey, and finally 592 valid questionnaires were collected.

B. *Instrument*

Social specifications for foreign language talents were analyzed by referring to the latest reports from newspapers and authoritative websites to explore whether there is imbalance between the social need and the cultivation mode in universities.

A questionnaire (see Appendix) was adopted to comprehensively examine the foreign language teaching and the inner balance individuals achieved in foreign language education. Besides background information, the questionnaire contained 5 aspects of foreign language education with 5 questions for each aspect: teaching attitude, teaching method, teaching content, teaching evaluation and after-class English learning.

C. *Procedures*

Reports about the need of foreign language talents were collected to find out the social needs for foreign language talents.

Questionnaires were distributed randomly on campus and students were asked to finish it in the face of the researcher. A small gift was rewarded for their cooperation. Altogether 600 students filled in the questionnaires, but some were found to be invalid as they made all the same choices to all the questions, and thus was excluded. Finally, 592 questionnaires were left in the final analysis.

D. *Analysis*

Social need for foreign language talents is mainly analyzed qualitatively and the result of the questionnaire is mainly analyzed quantitatively, expressed in terms of percentage.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. *Imbalance between the Cultivation Goal and the Social Needs*

According to the news reports about the social needs for foreign language talents, versatile or compound foreign talents are in urgent need and the shortage of them has become a bottleneck in many industries. Renming website claimed the need for talents familiar with foreign trade has surpassed 790,000 in China and with the popularity of internet, personnel expert in international e-commerce also suffer from severe shortage and it is estimated that 6 million more such talents are needed to cater to the development of international trade on line. Besides, the lacking of high-level specialized translators and interpreters has greatly hindered the process of "Introducing Chinese culture to the world".

When some foreign language talents are urgently needed, some English majors are suffering from unemployment. According to a survey conducted by Mycos (2010), 30 percent unemployment bracket come from some majors like English, accounting, law and computer etc. The high unemployment rate of English talents and the proportion of talent gap form a great contrast, which shows that the cultivation of English talents in Colleges and universities lags far behind the social needs and there is a serious mismatch between the personnel training and the social demand.

A glance at the orientation of foreign language education in China shed some light on our understanding of this phenomenon. For a long time, foreign language education has aimed to cultivate personnel to carry out research or academic work in diplomatic and teaching and research department, where language is learned for the sake of language itself. Quite a number of foreign language personnel trained in this way only know about the language, but can not use the language in real communication. Lu (2011) conducted a survey with 60 undergraduates in Qinghua University who have finished their college English learning and finds that 60% of them could not understand academic lectures in English and 81.6% had no confidence to have academic exchange in spoken English and 83.3% were not sure to be able to write essays in English.

If this objective were still true when the Republic of China was founded, such an orientation has been totally out of date when time steps into the 21st century, when talents of various specifications are in bad need. In this globalized and internationalized era, foreign language talents are not only required to be proficient with the language itself, international laws, rules and regulations, foreign cultures and other professional knowledge are also vitally important

for graduates to be competent in their jobs. Need analysis should be conducted to maintain a dynamic balance between the personnel training and social need.

B. Inconsistency between the Curriculum Design and Students' Starting Point, Cognition, Need and Interest

Like organisms, learners have their upper and lower limit for their tolerance of the environment (Shelford, 1913) and deficiency and excess of any factor will bring in negative effect. In foreign language education, according to the survey conducted by this author, about 80% college students admit they have a big English class with about 100 students and thus less opportunity for them to participate in class activities, and 25.8% students claim what their English teachers presented in class is either too difficult or too easy for them, which may be closely linked to another fact that graded teaching is still not carried out in College English course in some universities as revealed by 32% students in this survey. Facing with such a big class, it is almost impossible for teachers to know the aptitude of each student, and thus unable to assign tasks in accordance to students' proficiency level and offer pertinent suggestions for each student, no matter how devoted they could be to teaching.

In teaching method, great reliance on multi-media is found to be a solution to a big class, but too much reliance on multi-media has also invited some complaint from the students because of indigestion for what teachers have presented.

As for the content of teaching material, 71% students prefer the authentic textbooks in English, and 85% approved of the combination of language teaching with their major or professional knowledge and 73% regarded it necessary for their English to keep pace with the latest information and applicable in real life. However, current textbooks, focusing more on language skill than on real content, are out of line with students' cognitive levels. It is said Chinese English textbook for college students have almost the same requirements in cognition as those for the seniors in primary school in western countries. Mechanical training with little interest and practical value, greatly reduced students' motivation, not to mention creativity and analytical thinking.

In fact, according to this survey, 41.6% students showed dissatisfaction in their English learning in college. How to manage the teaching within students' tolerance limits and satisfy the needs of students of different levels is still a challenge for Chinese English teachers.

C. Flowerpot Effect Resulted from the Closeness of Classroom Teaching

Flowerpot is a man made environment, where plants or flowers may grow well with the agreeable temperature and moisture controlled by human beings. But once they leave the flowerpot to live in the natural environment, their adaptation would be found to have greatly declined (Wu & Zhu, 2000:168). Language is learned not for the sake of language itself; it should serve the purpose of communication in real situations. Too much emphasis on linguistic features may undermine students' development of pragmatic competence. Students performing very well in class or in CET-4 or CET-6 (College English Test, Band 4 or 6) may turn out to be inadequate in real communication with foreigners.

According to this survey, the most frequent activities English teachers conduct in class are explaining the text, analyzing grammatical structures and doing the exercise after the text, of which explaining the text is the most time-consuming but least effective way for students. Activities aiming to train students' skills are not stressed and independent thinking and analyzing are not properly encouraged in class. Contexts are not created for students to have the communication in the real sense. Instead, too much emphasis on linguistic features and language drills bored students and discouraged their enthusiasm in English learning. Worse still, in this teacher-centered class, students feel less challenged and assume a less positive role in class, thus laziness is encouraged.

After class learning should have been an effective supplement to class teaching. In fact, 65% students would choose English movies, songs and some website etc. with the hope to improve their proficiency, but due to the lack of instruction in learning strategies from the teacher and inadequacy in autonomous learning ability, 45% claimed the effect of after-learning is rather low.

Classroom teaching neglecting students' involvement and lacking the supplementary after-class learning is like a flowerpot, where students may feel comfortable to deal with the exercise in textbook and the language drills, but once exposed to the real situation, they may find themselves quite inadequate to carry out a smooth and successful communication.

D. Inner Ecological Imbalance of Individuals in Foreign Language Education

Inner balance of organisms or individual is the basis for them to interact with the outside environment, which is achieved through various factors like affective, cognitive, psychology etc. A rapport relationship with the teachers and peers would reduce students' anxiety in performing communication tasks. A well-balanced knowledge structure would enhance students' confidence in real communication. Correct world and life value and optimistic attitude towards life would guide them in the maze of pluralist cultural communication. From the survey, however, 41% of students could not establish a close relationship with their teachers and even 23% thought their teacher could not know them. As for whether they would feel confident to carry out some tasks in English after graduation, 63% showed great anxiety. Some claimed they could not have many opportunities to practice their language and thus less motivation is behind their learning and still others claimed that inadequate number of courses to combine English with other subjects is available, thus hindering students' practical use of English in real communication.

E. The Qualification of English Teachers – A Potential Limiting Factor in Educational Ecosystem

Limiting factors refer to any potential factor that may limit or affect the over-all growth and development of students, of which the qualification of English teachers should not be ignored. In China, English is learned as a foreign language, detached from the target language and culture and depending heavily on teacher's teaching in class. Therefore, if the teachers' knowledge structure is unbalanced or their teaching ideas are outdated and teaching methods very inappropriate, the teaching effect will greatly suffer. Through this study, it is pitifully found that some language teachers would make some errors due to their ignorance in some special areas. Statistics also shows that English teachers in college lack the motive to do research or update their teaching theory (Chen, 2003) and pluralistic knowledge structure of English teachers still leaves much to be desired.

V. CONSTRUCTION OF ECOLOGICAL CULTIVATION MODE OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE TALENTS

Ecological balance is "a state of dynamic equilibrium within a community of organisms in which gene, species and ecosystem diversity remain relatively stable, subject to gradual changes through natural succession" (Arthur 1973:13). In view of the ecological imbalance in foreign language talent cultivation, a balanced, dynamic and systematic perspective should be proposed in the cultivation mode of foreign language personnel.

Ecology stresses the adaptability of organisms to the surroundings and in the following part environmental factors will be examined and the external balance between the individual and environment and internal balance that learners should maintain within themselves will be proposed.

A. Keep a Dynamic Balance between Social Needs and Qualifications of Foreign Language Talents

According to the principle of multiple symbiosis and mutual competition, ecological foreign language talents training should consider the macro social needs, determine diversification in the training goal, and avoid the single personnel training specifications and the competition among homogeneous foreign language talents.

A shift from elite education to mass education in China requires the hierarchy and multiplicity in foreign language talent training. Besides academic talents, foreign language education should give top priority to the cultivation of talents proficient in business, tourism, law and finances etc. Cross-cultural awareness should be highly raised and major knowledge should be expanded so as to adapt to the international stage and become competitive in international business. To avoid the competition caused by homogeneity of foreign language talents, colleges and universities should cultivate talents with characteristics, by giving full play to the geographical advantages, (such as Qingdao, Weihai and other places can strengthen their training of Japanese and Korean talents with the close tie established with South Korea and Japan) and the discipline advantage (such as colleges and universities of Finance and economics, can avail themselves of the professional advantages of finance and economics in cultivation of foreign language talents) etc. Talents of different levels would be needed for different positions, so vocational colleges and universities may set different specifications in their training and be responsible for the division of the labor.

An ecosystem should be open to the exchange of energy and information outside to survive. Foreign language teaching in colleges and universities should understand the social needs, and keep pace with the times in the curriculum and teaching contents. In order to make the students realize the social demand for foreign language talents, the school can develop social practice bases for foreign language talents to accumulate their experience in practical use of their learning.

Evaluation system should also be pluralistic. Whether a graduate is qualified or not is not only judged by how well they can perform in school, his/her company or clients may have more to say. Schools should conduct tracking survey to know how well graduates adapt to their working environment and how proficiently they can handle the problems in real situations so as to adjust the teaching in school in time.

B. Maintain the Ecological Balance in Classroom

The main source of learning for students of EFL is classroom, which forms a relatively self-contained micro-ecosystem, covering the physical environment, teaching objectives, teaching content, teaching method and evaluation and teaching and learning climate etc.

Appropriate class size, rapport relationship between students and teachers, interactive style of learning tasks, cognitively matched teaching material, flexibility and diversity of teaching method, pluralistic evaluation and proper expansion of extracurricular activities after class all benefit the effectiveness of foreign language teaching and contribute to the virtuous circle of the micro-ecosystem of classroom.

C. Concern about the Internal Balance of Individuals

Young (1998) stresses individuality in foreign language teaching and highlight the multi-intelligence development of each individual. The cognitive state, individual need and the balanced development of individual knowledge structure should be born in mind so as to attain the all-round development of foreign language talents.

In accordance of the law of tolerance (Shelford, 1913), the implementation of graded teaching is highly recommended to cater to the different needs of students with different proficiency. Balanced development of learners' knowledge structure should also be highlighted to improve their adaptability in practical application, so the barriers

between subjects and disciplines should be broken down in curriculum design, and talents with mixed abilities are greatly welcome in market.

In addition to a solid foundation in cultural knowledge and major knowledge, correct world outlook and values are also necessary for foreign language talents to rationally interpret foreign culture and scientifically inherit the traditional values in the cultural collision between the west and east. A strong inner world and high adaptability to the society also contribute to the individual stability and all-around development.

D. Strengthen Teacher Development

China is typical TEFL environment for English learning. Under such a background, the quality of foreign language teachers themselves even than other environmental factors is more likely to influence the learner's success. To cultivate international foreign language talents, first of all, we need international foreign language teachers. Foreign language teachers should constantly update their ideas and knowledge structure through attending lectures, participating in international conferences, short-term training, acting as visiting scholars to learn from other universities etc. in the integration of knowledge structure, language teachers and major teachers should learn from each other to make up for what they are weak.

VI. CONCLUSION

The ecological perspective, according to Leo Van Lier (2004), is neither a theory nor a method, but a way of thinking. To put all ecological factors of foreign language talent cultivation into a big ecosystem is conducive for us to plan every aspect of personnel training from a dynamic, balanced, systematic and complete viewpoint. Talents cultivated in this way tend to maintain the internal balance of individual development and the external balance between individuals and the environment and would have stronger adaptability and competence.

APPENDIX. QUESTIONNAIRE

同学:

你好! 为了解你对教学效果的评价和意见, 帮助教师改进教学, 请你根据实际情况如实客观地填写以下问卷。(可以多选)。感谢你的大力支持!

个人基本情况

1. 我所在学校 ()
2. 我的学院() 年级 () 专业 ()
3. 年龄: () 性别 ()
4. 你所在的大学英语课堂班级人数 ()
5. 你所在的学校是否实行分级教学 ()

教学态度

1. 平时英语课堂教学中教师的主要目的是以学生的全面发展为主。
A 完全同意 B 同意 C 一般 D 不同意 E 完全不同意
2. 平时教师在组织教学方面精心设计教学环节, 课堂时间安排科学、利用充分。
A 完全同意 B 同意 C 一般 D 不同意 E 完全不同意
3. 平时教师在教学准备方面以教材知识为主, 兼顾教学内容、学生状况和教学方法。
A 完全同意 B 同意 C 一般 D 不同意 E 完全不同意
4. 老师能够根据学生的具体学习能力分不同层次布置课后练习。
A 完全同意 B 同意 C 一般 D 不同意 E 完全不同意
5. 老师对所布置的作业总是能及时有效地检查和批阅。
A 完全同意 B 同意 C 一般 D 不同意 E 完全不同意

教学方法

6. 平时教师在教学方法的选择方面积极采用现代教学理念, 虚心征求学生意见, 不断改进教学。
A 完全同意 B 同意 C 一般 D 不同意 E 完全不同意
7. 你认为平时教师在教学方法的使用方面能够做到以学生为中心, 因材施教。
A 完全同意 B 同意 C 一般 D 不同意 E 完全不同意
8. 你认为平时教师在教学手段方面存在过分依赖多媒体、网络等现代教育技术手段的现象。
A 完全同意 B 同意 C 一般 D 不同意 E 完全不同意
9. 老师在课堂上使用的英语的比例大概占(), 中文占(), 你希望老师使用英文的比例占(), 中文占()。
A. 20% B. 40% C. 60% D. 80% E. 100%
10. 在英语课堂上, 主要的课堂活动有(), 这些活动的量从多到少的顺序是(), 您认为最有效的方

式是(), 最需要改进的是()。

- A. 解释课文 B. 讲解语法 C. 口语练习 D. 听力练习 E. 翻译练习
F. 看电影 G. 写作文 H. 自学课文 I. 做课后题 K. 小测

除了以上几项, 还有:

教学内容

11. 目前英语学习过程中的教材应该使用英文引进的原版教材。
A 完全同意 B 同意 C 一般 D 不同意 E 完全不同意
12. 前英语学习教材的内容应该与学生所学专业相结合。
A 完全同意 B 同意 C 一般 D 不同意 E 完全不同意
13. 教师在教学内容选择方面应该讲授知识丰富, 创设情境, 反映最新信息, 把所学知识与实际生活相结合。
A 完全同意 B 同意 C 一般 D 不同意 E 完全不同意
14. 在课堂教学中, 老师对学生学习策略、分析和解决问题能力的培养非常注重, 而且方法得当。
A 完全同意 B 同意 C 一般 D 不同意 E 完全不同意
15. 课堂上, 老师出现知识性错误的频率为()
A. 特别频繁 B. 经常出现 C. 偶尔出现 D. 从未出现

教学效果

16. 你认为你的大学英语课堂教学效果()
A. 很高 B. 较高 C. 一般 D. 较低 E. 很低
17. 以这样的学习方式, 你对毕业后从事与外语相关的工作的信心()。
A. 很高 B. 较高 C. 一般 D. 较低 E. 很低
18. 您对自己的外语水平如何评价?
听说能力 A. 很高 B. 较高 C. 一般 D. 较差 E. 很差
阅读能力 A. 很高 B. 较高 C. 一般 D. 较差 E. 很差
书面表达能力 A. 很高 B. 较高 C. 一般 D. 较差 E. 很差
口、笔头翻译能力 A. 很高 B. 较高 C. 一般 D. 较差 E. 很差
文化知识能力 A. 很高 B. 较高 C. 一般 D. 较差 E. 很差
专业相关知识能力 A. 很高 B. 较高 C. 一般 D. 较差 E. 很差
19. 你觉得在校学习和校外培训哪个效果更好? 原因
20. 目前大学英语教学存在的主要问题是教与学的目的相脱节。
A 完全同意 B 同意 C 一般 D 不同意 E 完全不同意

课外英语学习状况

21. 你是否会在课外学习英语? 如果是, 你通常会采取什么方式? ()
A. 听英文歌曲 B. 看英文电影 C. 上网浏览英文网站
D. 跟外国人聊天 E. 到英语角练口语 F. 到自主学习中心训练
G. 去英语系旁听 H. 跟学校的外教交流
I. 除了以上几项, 还有: 早读、
22. 上述课外英语学习能否得到老师有针对性的指导和监督?
A. 是 B. 否
23. 你认为上述课外学习的效果如何?
A. 很高 B. 较高 C. 一般 D. 较低 E. 很低
24. 你课后平均每周花在英语学上(含预习、复习及其他听说读写训练)的时间() 小时。
A <7 B. 7 C. 14 D. >14
25. 你参加哪些类型的英语水平测试?
A. CET4 / 6 B. BEC C. TOEFL D. IELTS E 其他 (请给出名称: _____)

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