



What 'Crazy English' can tell us? Inspiration and Motivation from Li Yang

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Abstract

Issues regarding English language learning such as pronunciation, motivation and learning strategies are raised. Li Yang, an example of successful learner is cited for learners who are less successful in China. Fundamental issues that need to be dealt with include pronunciation. Phonetics is an area where there has been little emphasis in foreign language learning in Chinese schools but good learners of English commonly exhibit good pronunciation.

Keywords: English learning, pronunciation, motivation.

1. Background information on English learning in China

According to Liu and Teng (2006) there are about 300 million people (professional and non-professional) learning English in China. This number equates to a quarter of the total population, of which learners in primary schools, secondary schools and university comprise up to 100 million. A similar estimate was made by Bolton (2003) who claimed that "the total number of English speakers in China has been estimated at over 200 millions, and rising fast" (p. 48).

Zhang (2003) claimed that "in the early 1980s, English became a compulsory subject throughout the secondary school and university level" (p.3). However, learning English as a foreign language has not been a success in China and it has been regarded as 'high investment but low efficiency.' Yang & Liu (2002) noted that "foreign language is the only course that covers from primary school to doctoral level in China" (p.37), which is consistent with its significance in the current Chinese educational system.

The cause of 'high investment and low inefficiency' in learning English varies and there are several possible explanations. For example: students are not interested in learning; there may be too many students in one classroom; some teachers are not qualified to teach English; and textbooks are either out-of-date for city students or too modern and too foreign for country students. A general understanding is that students are not interested in learning English and it would be appropriate to determine why this is so. Reasons might include: students are not interested in the course; learning strategies; lack of motivation; low ability; low language aptitude; age; attitudes; learning experiences; etc.

A close look may clarify the reasons. First, learning strategy is unlikely to help a learner if he/she is not motivated to learn and the learner needs to understand that effective learning strategies are derived from motivation. Secondly, language aptitude may be low; many less successful learners complain they do not have aptitude, so are not able to learn English, but this begs the questions as to how the mother language is learnt without any difficulties. Gardner and Lambert (1959) suggested that 'aptitude' did not explain why some learn well while others do not; instead they explored motivation for clues. Thirdly, 'age' might be a factor to consider but not necessarily in a setting like China where English is not a daily communication instrument. There is still hardly any concrete evidence showing 'age' is a significant factor influencing learning results in the context of English as a foreign language. Finally, there is 'motivation.' Learners should be motivated in one way or another to put action into practice and be determined to learn. This is the key factor that needs to be considered for the majority of English learners. All of the above factors may contribute to learning inefficiency or failure and therefore these issues are discussed widely in the literature.

Generally, most students in China are not interested in learning English and English is the least favoured course. Therefore, it is not surprising that English becomes a decisive course to distinguish between students when their scores are relevantly equal for other courses in Chinese and mathematics.

The low efficiency is probably connected with the lack of a language environment but environment could be created by individuals if learners themselves were to be motivated. Besides, the nature of English learning is tested by examination in China rather than in a real language setting. Jiang (1996, p.6) stated “considering the age of the middle school students and insufficient experience, students usually don’t have clear purpose to learn English. They merely regard English as a subject required to be tested in higher school enrolment, they always find difficulties as well as boring in vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation.” A communication approach in learning is often out of the question. Therefore, Chinese students are supposed to have their own strength in learning because most language learners are instrumentally motivated and instrumental learners are more successful in learning English as a foreign language (Yuan 2005, Yang, 2004).

2. Status of English in China

Over the past 20 years, the emphasis on the importance of English has never been greater and there is priority for English in the school curriculum. For example, students at university learn it for a Band 4 or Band 6 Certificate in order to obtain a better job because “most good jobs in China demand knowledge of English” (Wampold, 1993, p.11). English is a compulsory course from junior secondary school to the second year of university. On an individual basis, students learn for instrumental purposes; learning to gain a reward and practical return. The understanding of the instrumentality of learning English is nation-wide. English is used as a tool to gain technology and for the individual to obtain material benefits. This, in fact, should encourage language learners to learn better.

According to Ross (1992), English is the key to wealth, prosperity and scientific developments and been chosen to assist China in its modernization programs. Learning of foreign language is an inseparable part of the Chinese modernization. “English nowadays assumes an important position in the school curriculum as well as in people's daily lives in the People's Republic of China” (Yang, 2004, p.73). As a required subject from primary to postgraduate school, it has a special position in Chinese education (Cheng, 2002). “English is the preferred language of world trade and commerce, science and technology and international relations” (Ford, 1988, p.4) and “foreign language is seen as an essential tool in developing and changing the core of the country’s economic system” (Burnaby & Sun, 1989, p.221).

3. Inspiration and motivation from Li Yang

It is argued that most good English learners have good pronunciation and this is especially true in the Chinese context. This is because Chinese people emphasise the expression and ‘mute’ English has been criticised. It has been thought that if a student is not able to pronounce a word correctly, it is difficult to read a sentence and to communicate with others. They use the language in a context where some teachers are not perfect and dare not speak in English. Therefore, pronunciation teaching and learning has been a focus at the initial stage in learning and teachers of English generally agree that good pronunciation helps students learn.

Geographically speaking, China is isolated from English speaking communities. Therefore, English learners are more influenced either intrinsically or via the successful learners around them. As a successful language learner, *Li Yang*, a well-known celebrity has inspired millions of English learners coming from different walks of life, but the majority of them were students. The *Li Yang* phenomenon is eye-catching and his success sheds some light on the current ‘high investment but low efficiency’ situation in English learning by students in China. Using variety of learning strategies to tackle difficulties and problems in the course of learning English, Li provides a good example. He transformed himself from a low achieving student to an example for millions of students in China.

Key features of the successful learning strategies promoted by *Li Yang* are as follow:

- 1) learning should occur for a purpose;
- 2) learners should be confident that they can achieve their learning goals;
- 3) English is a language, not a course, and the language should be used; and
- 4) there should be a belief that ‘everybody can do it’ thereby breaking the perceived nexus between ‘intelligence and ability to speak English.’

In promoting the learning of English, *Li Yang* encourages groups of learners to develop confidence by chanting that they wish to learn to speak perfect English.

4. Pronunciation, confidence and learning strategies

According to *Li Yang* ‘Cracking Pronunciation’ brings benefits to oral English and listening and it often is the source of chain reactions. It is not surprising to see so many English learners stuck in phonetics and often this part is overlooked. Students do not understand its importance if language teachers do not give a full explanation why this part should be

mastered. *Li Yang* through 'Cracking Pronunciation' suggested a person with pronunciation difficulties, would face difficulty in proceeding because if it is hard to pronounce new words and expressions, it will be even more difficult to memorise them.

A similar understanding also was expressed by Liang (1996). He considered "if students haven't laid a concrete foundation for phonetics, this will directly affect learning words, drills and grammar; if students have problems with words, then they can not organize proper sentences; if they can not construct a simple sentence, then they can't construct a compound sentence; if their listening is poor, then they can not speak good English and this causes insufficient reading then writing difficulties" (p.8). Hu (1996, p.5) noted that "from Zhang Sizhong (Note 1) 16-words teaching methodology, it first tackles with the basis areas such as phonetics, grammar and vocabulary;" probably providing an explanation as to how the methodology helped so many learners. Apparently, Zhang Sizhong understood the significance of the areas and regarded them as priorities on the agenda of English learning.

These researchers emphasized the importance of phonetics and apparently in the current Chinese context it is significant for learning success even though some English textbooks and teachers try to use the communicative approach to teach and lead students to their ways. The communicative approach has not been successful over the past 20 years because Chinese students have their own characteristics and learning by using the language is probably restricted in limited language-access contexts. For the majority of learners, it is critical to start from phonetics where they learn how to pronounce words and how they are constructed before they can take other concrete steps.

In considering the correlation between academic performance and phonetics, Wang and Li (1996, p.6) noted that "English phonetics training and developing interest in the course should be the prime target." Good pronunciation helps students develop confidence. Once students have made some progress in pronunciation, and are able to pronounce words by themselves. There is a good start for both teachers and students. This is because without teachers, students could not begin serious learning. In learning, Hou (1997, p.11) stressed that "teachers should encourage students, do not use 'your pronunciation is no good, you do not speak well' as a tool to discourage students' incentives." This suggests a role for the teacher in phonetics learning.

Wang (2004) conducted a study in which he interviewed groups of 'good pronunciation students' and 'poor pronunciation students.' He found that those students who were interested in learning English were also high-achieving students with good pronunciation. Consequently, he noted that "in year 8, success in learning of English and good pronunciation is apparently obvious, good learners were those with good pronunciation and good self-concept" (p.62). He further emphasized that "pronunciation is only a small portion in foreign language learning, but it affects our assessment on how well our overall ability, it further affects students' academic performance in learning" (p.56). Therefore, Hu (2002) claimed that "teachers need to emphasize the phonetics training for students."

Zhang (2000) also agreed with the characteristics of good English learners. He stated that "today, we still regard 'good pronunciation' as criteria of good English learners" (p.77). Good pronunciation generally is regarded as a trait of high achieving students and this suggests good pronunciation facilitates the English learning process, such as words/texts reading, and it is unrealistic for students to make progress if they are unable to pronounce what they have learned correctly. Therefore, good pronunciation has been regarded as an indicator for high achieving English learners and it is not surprising that students who are interested in English also have good pronunciation.

Xu (1999, p.109) stated "Chinese students can not learn a foreign language well if they don't learn phonetics. Phonetics should be the priority if one wants to learn English, like *pinyin* [phonetics for Chinese characters] when we first learn Chinese." This understanding is consistent with *Li Yang's* 'Crazy English' which highlights the inner side of 'mute English' because Chinese learners generally are learning 'deaf and mute English.' Namely, learners do not use the language to communicate with others. Often they take it for granted that they understand their meaning of words by themselves, but when others talk in English, Chinese learners of English often are confused, not knowing what others are talking about. Then there is a gap between what an individual pronounces and what others say. Students may have no problems understanding their Chinese English teacher but do not know how native English speakers sound when they talk.

In the process of learning phonetics and pronunciation, the teacher's role is particularly important if students are to achieve a better outcome. Rivers (1964, p.92) noted "foreign language learning classrooms are a fertile ground for frustration, anxiety, embarrassment and humiliation." This is consistent with the language teacher making a difference for students' learning. A smile, a nod and a word of encouragement helps students build confidence and develop an interest in the course.

Ironically, good pronunciation is probably not a component for many good language learners in other cultures where communication is more imperative or an area which has been overlooked. Chinese learners of English may have encountered people from Singapore, Malaysia, India and many other parts of the world who speak hardly-recognisable English by Chinese standards due to pronunciation.

Conclusion

In the context of learning English in China, pronunciation and phonetics have been weak and these issues are raised to gain the attention of language learners and researchers.

Good English learners often have good pronunciation and low achieving students are always weak in this area. Having good pronunciation helps develop interest while chain reactions occur for low achieving students because they often fail the threshold of pronunciation which is a requirement in the curriculum in the Chinese school. In other words, pronunciation and phonetics are the areas which need to be stressed to avoid the 'high investment and low efficiency' situation in English learning. Effort invested in phonetics and pronunciation will improve the devastating learning situation in China and it also will rescue those who start-then-fail in phonetics learning,

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Notes

Note 1. Zhang Sizhong is an English teacher at a middle school in China whose '16 words' on learning English strategy help many students to tackle problems and finally achieve high outcomes.