

Major obstacles limiting the development of bilingual education in Chinese college

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Abstract: Bilingual education is introduced in many Chinese colleges today. A number of studies on bilingual education have been done, but few has significant outcome. From a completely new perspective, the author suggests that there are several major obstacles limiting the development of the new trend, i.e., the limited competent faculty, limited appropriate course materials and limited secondary language proficiency students. Recommendations are given to the problems identified.

Key words: bilingual education; Chinese college; major obstacles

1. Introduction

The worldwide practice of bilingual education has been over several decades. There are various reasons of having such a practice, among those, the most obvious one is to develop a way for successful cultural merge and borrowing.

During the practice, there are great numbers of researches and analysis have been done, and different approaches and theories have been developed.

As the State Transitional Bilingual Instruction Program (USA) defined in its annual reports, “Bilingual education is the use of two languages in instruction, English and one other. The non-English language is a bridge, a language that the child understands and can be used while English skills are being acquired”.

There are sufficient evidence to prove that bilingual education performs a good role in bridging mother tongue (L1) knowledge and skills to second language (L2), and to some extent develops both of the languages. As Lopez and Tashakkori (2004) said in their article, “The interdependence hypothesis, which stated that there is a transfer of knowledge, skills and process across language and that the development of primary language literacy skills facilitates the acquisition of academic skills in the second language”. Most of the scholars hold similar attitudes towards the positive role of bilingual education, e.g., Thomas and Collier (1998; 1997), Greene (1998), August and Shanahan (2006), Krashen (2006), and Cummins (2000; 2007a), etc.

2. Bilingual education in Chinese college

There is a growing demand in China’s colleges and universities to provide bilingual education in various fields, especially in sciences, engineering and business. These 2 languages are Chinese (L1) and a foreign one (L2), mostly English.

There are many reasons for such a demand. The major ones are to connect China’s development with the

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world speed, to develop Chinese students with bilingual language skills for effective worldwide communication, and to let the students acquire reasonable skills in their job hunting.

There are many bilingual education practices in Chinese colleges today, e.g., the adoption of authentic English textbooks, the use of L2 as a major medium in class, exercises and examinations to be accomplished in L2, etc.

Several major types of bilingual education programs have been practiced in Chinese colleges:

(1) In submersion programs, heavy proportions of L2 are introduced. Students receive most or all of the instructions in L2 only. The teachers providing submersion programs are general monolingual, may have very limited knowledge about students' L1 and home cultures, who are usually called by local students as "foreign teachers". Students are generally left in the L2-only class to "sink or swim".

(2) Immersion programs provide most instructions in L2. Immersion teachers are bilingual but speak L2 most of the time, students are however allowed to use their L1 during the class.

(3) In a TBE (Transitional Bilingual Education) program, both L1 and L2 are used. L1 is used more than L2 at the beginning, and is gradually reduced and paced out as students' L2 develops. TBE teachers must be bilingual, too.

DU and George (2008) called the majority of the Chinese college bilingual education approaches as CBI (Content Based Instructions), most of the instructions are going through L1, the use of L2 content text in CBI is limited to an in-depth understanding of some content-related concepts and information.

FENG (2005) also suggested that the Chinese collegiate bilingual instruction seems to be a mixture of immersion, sheltered studies and transitional approach. And "there are not any models that are perfect enough for the Chinese to copy".

Although most of the approaches at some degree perform the roles as bilingual education should do, few approaches are, however, practical enough to generate significant outcomes. During the years of development, studies of the earlier undertakers have been borrowed from the western world. Similar practices and researches of those western bilingual discoveries also have conducted a lot in Chinese colleges, but the general focus was limited to the arguments of a particular program or technique.

In a comparison of existing bilingual techniques, Hamilton (2006) stated conclusively in his finding that it is not the proportion of language used in instruction but the quality of instruction matters to the outcome of a bilingual program.

For Chinese colleges, to reach a significant bilingual education outcome, the top priority should be given to the identification of the current educational quality rather than the arguing of a particular method.

3. Major obstacles

3.1 Limited competent faculties

For whatever the approaches a college undertakes, it needs qualified teachers to implement the programs. And a competent teacher for bilingual education must be a bilingual himself/herself, an expert of his/her own field, and specialized in language education. For any of the 3 requirements unfulfilled, the bilingual education would not be ideal. It is therefore becoming a great challenge for teachers who want to be qualified. And it also brings the colleges difficulties in carrying out reliable bilingual educations. Colleges rush into bilingual education may put unidentified or less qualified faculties into the position. And due to that, there is not a commonly recognized teaching quality standard available, the consequence of bilingual education is hard to be identified as positive.

3.2 Limited applicable course materials

Adequate course materials are the necessity of having quality bilingual education programs. Authentic books directly imported or copied from the original source are heavily borrowed in college bilingual education. They are good references for in-depth study, but are not ideal resources for limited L2 proficiency students to get knowledge from. College research suggested that over 90% of the students can hardly get direct knowledge from an authentic textbook. Many students cannot locate relevant topics from a textbook, hardly anyone can get through understanding of the language, and most of them wish to have L2 textbooks that are relevant to their reading abilities.

3.3 Limited English proficiency students

Academic English proficiency is vital for a student to be capable of receiving bilingual education. An average Chinese college student would receive more than 10 years of English education before getting into college. But a nationwide less than 25% pass rate of the national CET-4 test suggests that most of the college graduates are not qualified for academic education in English, not even to mention the freshmen. Students involved in a bilingual education program are curious at the first several classes but many of them soon lose their interest due to the pouring of large amount of L2 contents which are hard to understand.

The sociolinguistic environment on campus is also not ideal for the development of L2 languages. Communications in L2 for social purpose are rarely found either inside or outside of the college. College libraries are generally limited in size and do not provide sufficient L2 supplementary reading materials. Once a student leaves classroom, L2 influence ceases its function.

Hakuta, Butler and Witt (2000) discovered in their research that academic English proficiency takes between 4 to 7 years to develop in an English-speaking environment. Collier (1988) also revealed the fact that students at the age of 8-12 are the most advantaged acquirers of school skills in the L2. These facts mean that most of the Chinese college students have lost their best bet in obtaining L2 proficiency, and they would not have sufficient time to build up a solid one before graduation.

4. Recommendations

4.1 Locate and prepare qualified faculties

Bilingual education is neither content instruction in L1 nor language training in L2. It is the combination of the both, or probably more than that. A competent teacher for bilingual education should be a bilingual himself/herself, an expert in his/her own field, and specialized in language education. The nature of bilingual offers the teachers opportunities for better understanding students' culture and needs, and opportunities for variable ways of communication between 2 parties. Being expert in the relative field enables the teachers to carry out the teaching content. And language-teaching techniques are essential for transferring knowledge through a language that is different from students' own.

It is ideal to directly recruit personnel who have those 3 qualities. The educational body should define what a competent bilingual educator is and make solid motivation policies on locating and recruiting those personnel. Under a less ideal situation, identification on weakness of a particular personal who supposed to do the bilingual job should be made, and adequate trainings designated to overcome the identified weakness should be provided. A less qualified staff should not be put into the position until sufficient training is undertaken.

Appraisal system targeted at the bilingual educational quality should also be developed. Teaching experience,

course preparation works, student performance and social feedbacks should be included in the appraisal. Information on the effect and result of the education should be collected on a regular basis, adjustments to the educational strategies and techniques can be identified from the appraisal data, and actions should be taken once the decision is made.

4.2 Encourage the writing of appropriate textbooks

The preparation of course materials lies within a teacher's responsibility. Bilingual education teachers find it difficult to transfer direct knowledge to the students from an authentic textbook—They need a book easier for students to read. The result of limited appropriate student bilingual textbook is, however, not the simply outcome of limited competent faculty. Teachers engaged in bilingual education would soon discover that the producing an appropriate students-use-textbook demands much greater efforts than making up a mother-tongue one. A great amount of translations, summaries and especially the works of simplifying the language are involved in the whole progress. And teamwork, the best way of sharing experience, workloads and outcomes, can hardly be an option.

The current Chinese education system offers better emphasis on short-term researches and discoveries. There is not sufficient focus on the development of long-term subjects, e.g., the development of a fully prepared and well designed textbook. Motivation and supports from the society and educational body therefore call for attention. Teachers' efforts of publishing bilingual textbooks should be given greater emphasis. Encouraging policies and regulations should be developed for this particular purpose.

4.3 Prepare college students for bilingual education

Before the introduction of a bilingual program, students should have their L2 academic writing, listening and oral abilities testified and classified. In the efforts of ensuring the content of bilingual education could be properly understood by the students, L2 trainings for academic purpose should be provided according to the different student levels.

Research by Majoribanks (2006) showed that there is an interrelationship between cognitive dispositions and expectations, learning environment, affective outcomes associated with school experience and students' educational attainment.

Pérez and Torres-Guzmán (2002) suggested in their study that the social environment of the classroom creates opportunities for students to engage in collaborative activities, integrating their interests and experiences with higher-order thinking and giving them opportunities to practice language associated with higher-order thinking skills through listening, speaking, reading and writing activities.

Therefore, students' emotional preparation and the learning environment are also important for students' success in the program. Besides providing qualified teachers and appropriate course materials, colleges need to have studies on teaching techniques related to student encouragement and group involvements, trying to help students define their expectations, build their interests towards the program and link students' higher-order thinking skills through their participation during the practice.

5. Conclusion

It is certain that there are many obstacles blocking the way of bilingual education development in Chinese colleges. To achieve desired performance, it requires the educational body to correctly define the problem and find out relevant solutions. Future studies on the quality of bilingual education in Chinese colleges can be meaningful only when competent faculties are identified, appreciate student course materials are produced and

students are both technically and emotionally prepared for the bilingual program.

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