

UNDERSTANDING FOREIGN LANGUAGE EDUCATION AT BFSU

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Abstract

The paper shows that the students at Beijing Foreign studies University (BFSU) are from various parts of the country with uneven exposure to and different training in English. They have to go through a period of adjustment: learning new materials, new ways of language learning as well as of unlearning certain learning habits gotten from their high schools. It is pointed out that language learning does not only mean mastering linguistic rules or structures but also understanding culture of the target language. In order to do this many things are required: motivation, willingness to do rote learning and monotonous drills of basic structures, perseverance in practising newly acquired language skills, and psychological strength without feeling intimidated by error corrections by teachers or laughter by peers.

As for teachers, they should try to create a supportive language learning environment rather than trying to correct one or two errors. Activities to promote communication or language interaction among students are considered essential.

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Brief introduction to BFSU and China's English learning context

Let me start with a very brief account of the background of BFSU and the general English learning context in China. BFSU was first established in 1943 as the first foreign language teaching and learning institution under the Communist Party of China (CPC). In those days CPC and its program had attracted more and more international attention and it was faced with an increasing need to gain understanding and support from the international community. Since then the school has collected a group of people with both language proficiency and a political commitment for the cause of the CPC, including a couple of progressive English-speaking people from Britain and Canada. The school started with English and Russian teaching and gradually developed into what is now a university of liberal arts teaching 31 languages with 7 disciplines. Over the last 60 years, BFSU has developed a unique tradition of foreign language education and has produced many outstanding diplomats and foreign language users. This paper examines the important components of BFSU's tradition with an intention to clarify what is to be preserved, improved or discarded in the drastically changing society.

Another fact to be kept in mind before my discussion is China's English language learning context. As many of you must have learned, China is the largest developing country in the world with 1.3 billion people. The successful implementation of the policy of reform and opening up to the outside world since 1978 has created a huge market for people with English language proficiency. Consequently, English is a required course

in many elementary schools and all high schools and universities. It is a pronounced goal of the Ministry of Education to make English language courses available to 3rd grade pupils in all major cities in the next three years. However, as English is taught and learnt as a foreign language rather than a second language in China, many people, men and women, young and old, have experienced tremendous frustrations and setbacks in their English language learning. At the university level, students are classified as English-majors and non-English majors. The majority of the students learn English as a required course in addition to their own majors while only a small proportion learn English as their major. Although the government has adopted different language proficiency requirements for English majors and non-English majors, all students have to pass their national language proficiency tests before they can graduate from university with bachelor degrees. The BFSU experiences under discussion refer to our experiences with the development of language proficiency among students who are English majors.

The important components that contribute to the proper development of students' language proficiency at BFSU include setting students on the right track at the beginning stage, making language learning a means for the development of the whole person throughout the learning process, and combining a formative assessment in the learning process with a summative assessment to achieve positive backwash effect on students' learning outcome.

A good beginning is half done - Setting the students on the right track

Unlike students learning Thai language at

BFSU, all English majors have had some English learning experiences upon entering the university. They have all passed the national matriculation examination with satisfactory scores. They are generally considered to be better language learners than the average. But by BFSU standards they may not be up to the expectations of good language learners yet, since they often carry some baggage from the previous learning experiences that is not really conducive to proper language competence development. Therefore, having a good understanding of the students and setting them on the right track for further development in language proficiency becomes an important task for teachers of beginners in the program.

A profile of our freshman students

As university education is still quite elite in China, students who have passed the entrance examinations for universities are generally considered very successful students in China. They are all very smart and hard-working students indeed. When they enter university, they are filled with confidence and expectations for their future. Meanwhile, they carry with them a lot of baggage from their previous educational experiences, such as problematic strategies or misunderstanding about the language and about language learning. For instance, passing university entrance examinations is an overwhelming goal for almost all high school students in China. Their six years of high school study is basically examination-driven and English is treated as one of the seven major subjects to be grasped by students for the best test results. Consequently, high school students have had sufficient exposure to all kinds of grammatical and structural phenomenon of the language, but have had

little chance to develop their oral and written competence, and have even less of an interest in and appreciation for the language proper or the culture and values it carries. While many students might have developed good test-taking skills in high school, they have adopted many poor learning strategies. They judge a person's language learning competence by sizing up his/her vocabulary and, consequently, one of their most frequently practiced strategies at school is to memorize new words when their minds are in their optimal condition.

In addition, students from various parts of the country have had uneven exposure and training in different skills and, therefore, have different needs in learning at BFSU. Some students from foreign language schools have developed near-native like pronunciations, while others have never seen a native English speaker before coming to BFSU. As a result, understanding our students' needs while setting them on the right track for language study, becomes the most important task of what we called "the corrective course" for beginners.

What is to be rectified in the "corrective course?"

Pronunciation

Students normally start their English language program with an intensive corrective course on pronunciation, which lasts for a semester for most of the students, with the second semester focusing on those students who fail to pass the screening test due to a few persistent and faulty sounds. Standard English pronunciation is regarded as an essential condition for future language skill development. As has been found in their senior years, students' competence in

listening and oral interpreting can be seriously hindered by faulty pronunciation which was not properly rectified at the beginning of the program. For those students who have come into the program without many pronunciation problems, more sophisticated training in public speaking and debate have been provided and so, these students have been expected to reach a higher standard in pronunciation capability.

Proper understanding of the language and language study

It is a common understanding among teachers that in the first two years of their English teaching students are not only to lay a solid foundation for their language proficiency in listening, speaking, reading and writing, but more importantly, to develop a proper understanding of the language and the language learning process so that they will learn to become autonomous learners in the future.

Many students treat English language study as one of the many subjects dealt with in high school, and they focus their attention on the grammatical structure of the language rather than on language use. Students trained in this way tend to believe that if they work hard enough, trying to memorize the texts and rules, they will become successful learners. Like learning any other subjects, the students often bury themselves in books or work on the exercises in the textbooks alone. At BFSU, students are expected to use as much of the language they have learnt in class as they can after class. We require students to find their own speaking partners from the early years of their language learning and learn to work on their class assignments with others. They are found to be

uncomfortable working with others on assignments. As a result, teachers, while trying to help the students develop a better understanding of the language and language study, should work on cultivating the students' ability to work and interact with others in the target language.

Students are used to having language input through reading under the traditional approach, but they learn at BFSU that more language input comes in via listening. Speaking is much more emphasized as a means for interaction among students in the first two years of their study. By working together with peers on class projects or texts, students are involved with a lot more opportunities to interact with people using the target language. The idea that language is a means of communication is thus put into practice through our teachers' design of class activities and homework.

Learning strategies

Students develop their learning strategies over a period of six years in high school, and it is, therefore, almost impossible to change their learning strategies over a short period of time. Since research findings have shown that learning strategies are highly correlated with students' belief about the language and their attitude towards language study (Zhou and Cao, 2004), the cultivation of good learning strategies should be accompanied by the development of a good learning attitude and motivation. Many learning strategies developed in high school learning have proved to be ineffective at the university setting since, in the first two years of BFSU study, students are encouraged to talk in English and think in English rather than only

looking up in the dictionary every new word in their readings. As a result, all students entering BFSU have to go through a painful period of learning and unlearning. Students should be made aware of their own needs for learning and problems for unlearning. Learning refers to not only learning new materials, but also acquiring a new understanding and approach to language as well as the general language learning process under the guidance of their teachers. Unlearning refers to guiding the students to give up some of the habits they formed in high school study, such as working on one's own and relying heavily on dictionaries for reading. What is important in this period is the awareness by the students of their needs to both learning and unlearning, which will serve to set the students on the right track for further study.

Factors involved in language teaching and learning

Teaching freshman students involves a lot of effort on the part of the teachers, mostly as a result of the multiple factors involved in the language learning process.

Understanding English language teaching and learning

English language teaching at BFSU has witnessed the influence of many schools of linguistics studies in the world, from the early grammar translation period up to the 1960s, to the Behaviorist approach manifested in the teaching of pattern drills in the 1970s; from the Communicative approach in the 1980s to the Social Constructivist approach in the 1990s. It is very hard to determine what is THE methodology that BFSU follows because one can find teachers conducting classes

using various approaches based on need and circumstance. An approach of Eclecticism (Brown, 17), making choices among different approaches and adapting each to the needs of the students, might be a more appropriate description of BFSU's teaching methodology.

Traditionally, English language, as any other foreign language, is treated as a subject matter with a complete structure and system of its own. People believed that with a good grasp of the language system and its structures, they would learn the language well. As a result, much effort was made to understand the language itself. The language system was dismantled and examined piece by piece in the order of sounds, morphemes, words, syntax, semantics and pragmatics by linguists as well as practitioners. Students were tested again and again on their competence for grammatical or structural analysis of the sentences and on their translation skills between the source and the target language. In a word, language was learned as a form of knowledge and students seemed to have little trouble telling the minute differences between words. However, they were often found to be "deaf and dumb" in a natural communicating context. Consequently, English language teaching and learning in China's institutions of higher learning received serious criticism from all sectors of the society.

The setbacks in foreign language teaching and learning have caused many teachers to reflect on what went wrong with Chinese English language teaching. Many have realized that learning about a language is quite different from learning the language. While the traditional grammar translation approach was under attack, efforts were being made by practitioners to see how an

understanding of the language could be transferred into effective use of it. There appeared in the West numerous new approaches to English language teaching, such as the Humanistic approach, the Total Physical Response approach, the Natural Emersion approach, to name only a few. The pendulum has swung back and forth over the years without an ideal landing point. However, it has to be pointed out that the study of language teaching has never been able to escape the framework of studies of Linguistics and Applied Linguistics. Although it appears very natural, as Linguistics is considered the science of a language, it nevertheless seriously underestimates the complexity of language teaching and learning.

Foreign language teaching is a cross disciplinary adventure

It has been proved, both at BFSU or elsewhere, that a great linguist might not necessarily be a good language teacher. Likewise, a good language teacher does not have to be an expert on morphemes and syntax. On the part of the learners, a very smart student can find foreign language learning a headache and a good language learner can be well trapped in an easy mathematical problem. So, what is involved in foreign language teaching and learning and what makes a successful foreign language learner become worthy inquired.

A close look at the language learning process offers some basic conditions for effective learning. A person has to: 1) be well motivated, willing to make efforts in rote learning and monotonous drills in acquiring basic sentence structures of the target language; 2) be interested in the language and the target culture to make

sustained efforts for learning; 3) be actively engaged in communicating with others, willing to practice newly acquired language skills 4) be psychologically strong, without being intimidated by error corrections of the teacher or laughter by peers; 5) have a basic command of the language structure in order to make sense of the sentences being presented in the target language; and many more. It shows that language learning is by no means only a mastery of the linguistic rules or structures. It involves many other factors, such as motivation, interest, psychological support, linguistic competence, and perseverance, each of which can play a more decisive role in the learning process than linguistic competence does. That is why we say as teachers of English, we are not dealing with only the linguistics competence of the students, but with all those aforementioned factors in our teaching. It is our teachers' responsibility to create a positive learning environment in which all the factors at work in the language learning process are considered. Only in such a learning environment can students enjoy language learning and learn effectively. That is why I hold a strong belief that foreign language teaching is a science of a cross-disciplinary nature and a work of art as well.

Language learning is social by nature

Another important factor to be mentioned is that language teaching and learning is social by nature. That is to say, language is best learned through interactions with others. As a result, language learning is not only a matter of learning from/with others, but also learning in the process of interactions among four important factors, namely teachers, learners, tasks and context,

in which the teacher plays a mediating role to keep the four factors in equilibrium (Williams and Burden, 43). In order to provide the students with a positive language learning environment, class size at BFSU is limited to 24 students, which makes active class interactions among students in the target language comfortable and accessible to every student. A lot of group/pair work is designed by the teachers for the purpose of learning and students are grouped/paired together using English as means of communication on daily basis.

A good language learning context is an essential factor for all language learners. A keen awareness of our TEFL limitations will result in a shift in the teacher's role in the classroom. It is more important for a teacher in the class to create a supportive language learning environment than to correct one or two errors of the students. With this understanding, the English program at BFSU encourages students to organize a speech contest in the first year, a drama contest and a debate club in the second year and a public speaking contest in the third year, which effectively motivate the students in their language learning and enrich their life on campus. These activities have not only promoted learning of the language but also a great interest in and appreciation for the target language and culture. Such that, one visitor to BFSU campus observed that some students betrayed their majors by their manners, styles or outfits. This may, in a way, show how languages are taught with interest and culture.

The educational nature of language learning and teaching

English language learning is very popular in China nowadays. However, it carries a

strong instrumental, and therefore, pragmatic nature. High school students learn English in order to pass the entrance examination for university; university students learn English to apply for scholarships abroad or pass the required national English proficiency tests; university graduates learn English to get promotion or better job opportunities. Such a strong instrumental motivation in English learning does not only lead to an increasingly pragmatic attitude towards language learning but also affect the learner's receptivity in learning. Students, without realizing it, focus their attention only on words and phrases that are likely to be tested, thus leaving what is more important and structural in the target language and culture unnoticed, which will eventually result in a poor language learning outcome. Such an instrumental orientation to English language learning seems to be irresistible at present, but it does not mean that we teachers cannot do anything about it.

Teachers should be fully aware of the educational nature of language teaching and learning. It is known to many of us that one cannot teach the language without introducing the ideas it carries or the culture it embodies. Therefore, learning the language is at the same time learning the minds, the arguments, the thought processes and the value judgments of the speakers. As teachers it is our undeniable responsibility to help students develop a critical attitude towards what is being presented in the target language, as well as a good appreciation for both the home and target cultures.

Language learning provides students with opportunities to develop their competence in information collection and processing. The exercises to sort out information and present what has been learned in the target language

serve to enhance students' cognitive competence and public speaking ability.

Language learning serves to develop students' social and leadership skills. As mentioned earlier, language is best learnt through interaction. Therefore, it takes a lot of cooperative and leadership skills for students to accomplish their class assignments. Their ability to work with others is developed in the process of language learning.

It is clear from the previous discussion that learning a foreign language does not only provide a student with an ability to speak in a different language, it serves to develop the student's mind, cultural awareness, logical thinking, a critical attitude towards the home and target cultures, and a general competence in cooperative learning and leadership. In a technical and money-oriented society, the educational significance of foreign language learning has been largely and unfortunately overwhelmed by the practical and instrumental needs of students as well as teachers. Therefore, it is an urgent task for all teachers of the English language to resume their responsibility as educators rather than teachers, to treat their teaching of English as a profession rather than as a job, and to regard their language teaching as part of the process to develop students as whole persons rather than merely providing a career-enhancement tool.

In order to preserve the good language teaching tradition at BFSU, where experienced teachers in their 60s and early 70s have mostly retired in the last two years, a group of teachers have been working in the last two years on a whole set of teaching materials to provide procedures for all skills training, namely

listening, speaking, reading, writing, and oral interpreting. They intend to incorporate their years of experience, insights and beliefs about language teaching and learning in creating these materials so that young teachers at BFSU will learn about and keep what is known as the "BFSU tradition."

The issue of assessment

The majority of Chinese English language learners are victims of the current testing system in China where assessment of the students' competence or even their future development is basically determined by one summative test, such as the National Matriculation Examination, the National Proficiency Tests Band 4, 6 and Band 8. These examinations have resulted in serious negative backlash effects in English language learning in China. However, thanks to our own assessment system, which consists of weekly quizzes combined with mid-term and finals, students at BFSU have not suffered as much pressure from the examinations as their fellow students in other universities do. Formative assessment plays an important part in their learning. It serves to inform teachers of the students' learning needs and reveal the weak links in their language acquisition process. The items development often follows the principle of promoting good language learning strategies among the students and driving home the language points to be grasped by the students after each unit. As a result, students in the School of English and International Studies at BFSU are reported to have gained the best learning outcomes for years by the Committee of National English Proficiency Tests.

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