

THE ACHIEVEMENT OF LANGUAGE STUDENTS IN DISTANCE LEARNING IN HONG KONG

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Background

In October, 1998, the Open University of Hong Kong (OUHK) offered a series of distance learning courses in languages, namely: English for Effective Communication, Use of Chinese and a Putonghua Fundamental Course. My paper focuses on the progress of language proficiency made by a group of Putonghua students' during the period of October 1998 to February 1999. At the moment when this paper was written, the results of the first assessment were obtained. Since the course has not finished, the final result can only be obtained in February, 1999. But it is hoped that in March, when this paper is presented in the Forum, a more detailed report is displayed.

There are many articles discussing the advantages of distance learning and this paper will not go into details of these. My focus is on a particular language course offered by OUHK.

Most language learning courses are run on a face-to-face mode, which requires the frequent presence of both teacher and students in the classroom. Classroom interaction between the teacher and students, and group activities among the students are often the issues in language learning and teaching. However, the Putonghua Fundamental Course is the first of its kind to be offered in distance learning with credits awarded. There are only a total of fourteen hours of tutorial and three hours of language laboratory practice in the whole course, compared to more than eighty to a hundred contact hours in other institutions. When the course was first promoted, it had drawn a lot of criticism from the profession of language teaching. The main concern is the lack of classroom interaction. Some teachers criticize that such mode of learning would slow down or even hamper the acquisition of the language, and thus results in low proficiency. This paper reports the progress in Putonghua proficiency made by a group of adult students in OUHK over a period of five months.

Classroom interaction

There are many factors contributing to being a successful language learner, e.g. motivation, language attitude, acculturation, learning strategies, peer group support on the part of the students, and teaching methodology, input, initiation etc. from the teachers. In language teaching and learning, the importance of teacher-students and students-students interactions is proposed. There are different patterns of classroom interaction, such as: group work, closed-ended questioning, individual work, choral responses, collaboration, student initiates—teacher answers, full-class interaction, teacher talk, self-access, open-ended teacher questioning, etc.

In the view of many researchers and education practitioners, conversation and instructional exchanges between teachers and students, or group interaction among the students themselves provide the best opportunities for the learners to exercise the target language skills, to test out their hypotheses about the target language, and to obtain useful feedback (Ellis 1980, 1985; Long 1981). Classroom interaction is viewed as significant because it is argued that (1) only through interaction can the learners decompose the target language structures and derive meaning from classroom events, (2) interaction gives learners the opportunities to incorporate target language structures into their own speech, (3) communication has been jointly constructed by the teachers and learners, and among learners themselves. Classroom events are more meaningful for the learners. (Chaudron 1988:10).

Many research were carried out in the past three decades on classroom interaction and group work among students. In a research project on the importance of negotiated interaction in achieving

comprehension in second language conducted by Pica (1991), she found that some students at the lower development comprehension levels benefited most from direct participation in the negotiation process. Mckay's (1994) research on the analysis of classroom interaction in four Year 9 French classes in Queensland, Australia, found out that meaning-focused classroom interaction, as one of the various features on interaction in the classroom, correlated with the abilities in speaking, reading and writing.

However, other research findings contradicted the belief that classroom interaction is a significant factor contributing to the success of language acquisition. Leung (1993) conducted an empirical study on classroom interaction between teachers and pupils of English as a second language. The findings suggest that although there were plenty of teacher-pupil interactions, it was not always the type that would promote second language acquisition. Ellis et al's (1994) study also show empirical evidence refuting the claim that opportunities to negotiate meaning through interaction help comprehension. Students of English in two Japanese English schools were examined for the effects of modified interaction on comprehension and vocabulary acquisition. The test results indicate that interaction facilitated comprehension and vocabulary retention, but the test results of subjects who actively participated in interaction showed no difference from those of subjects who were simply exposed to such interaction.

With these contradictory results and controversies in the importance of interaction in language learning, this study on the progress made by a group of adult learners of Putonghua as a second language is purported here. Since the course was run in a distance learning mode, the availability of classroom interaction is very limited. It has brought to the attention of many language teachers that the success of language acquisition by this group of students may affect the mode of language teaching and learning in future courses offered by other institutions.

The Putonghua Course

In all the institutions in Hong Kong, Putonghua fundamental courses are offered in a face-to-face form that last for six months to a year. They have, undoubtedly, strengths in their courses. However, bearing in mind the students' time, money and flexibility, distance education has its own advantages. This Putonghua Fundamental Course has a mixed-mode: apart from the self-study part, there are a total of seventeen contact hours. As Mcgrath (1995) points out that mixed-mode programme/course has certain advantages, "in particular the fact that trainees are likely to emerge with a better balance of basic knowledge and skills"(Mcgrath 1995:74).

The content of the course is divided into five units. Each focuses on one or two aspects of the phonological structure of Putonghua. Listening and speaking activities are built into each unit. Each unit spans about three to four weeks, with a total of nineteen weeks. Each unit is accompanied by printed materials and a tape. The course is open to all adults whose native tongue is Cantonese or other Chinese dialects, and who have no knowledge or very little knowledge of Putonghua. There are altogether seven tutorials and two language laboratory practice, totaling seventeen hours.

Method

1. Performance assessment

Learning a language is defined by some proponents of communicative curricula "as learning how to communicate as a member of a socio-cultural group" (Breen & Candlin 1980:91). Hence, it is amply acknowledged that learning a language is not merely a matter of recalling beads of items but rather of coming to grips with the ideational, interpersonal and textual knowledge which is realized through effective communication in the target language. Students' language proficiency is considered to be the realization of communicative competence as well as performance in relevant situations.

Assessment based on performance was administered in this course. Such kind of assessment requires students to produce complex responses integrating various skills and knowledge and to apply their target language skills to life-like situation. Different elicitation tasks were employed in this study.

2. Purpose

The purpose of this study is to measure the progress made in language acquisition by a group of adult learners in a Putonghua fundamental course offered by OUHK. The present study addresses the following research questions:

- a) Is there a significant progress made by a group of Putonghua students with limited availability of classroom interaction?
- b) Which group of students, the high-performance group, or the medium-performance group, or the low-performance group, will show significant progress in the course?

3. Assessment samples

These included the four assignments handed in by the students during the course of study and an examination at the end of the course.

Each assignment consists of three parts: the phonological knowledge of Putonghua, the listening and speaking skills. Nine students from each of the eleven tutorial group (with a total of ninety students) were chosen and their work was monitored closely. They were chosen according to the language performance in their first assignment. Three from each performance group, i.e.: good, middle and poor, were chosen, thus having nine from each tutorial group. There were 40 males and 49 females. They were all adult learners.

The phonological part tested their knowledge on the sound structure of each syllable in Putonghua, and the other simple phonological knowledge of Putonghua. The listening part tests their ability in identifying syllables of similar tone, sounds, and their comprehension ability. The oral part was recorded by the students on audio tapes. This consisted of the reading of either a short dialogue or a text, and the elaboration of a given topic.

At the end of the course, there was an examination consisted of three parts: written part on the competency of the language, the listening skills and the oral performance. The oral part was slightly different. The students were asked to read some sentences transcribed in Hanyu Pinyin (a phonetic system derived in learning Putonghua), some words, a read-aloud passage, and elaboration of a given topic, and a modified oral proficiency interview. This interview, which lasted approximately three minutes, was employed to elicit the subjects' most spontaneous speech. The test on reading aloud a passage was more constrained, but this technique was considered appropriate for "assessing the mechanical skills of language production." (Underhill 1987:77)

These assignments and the examination were designed in a way to elicit the students' conscious knowledge of the language and a variety of speech products in order to tap a wide range of the students' L2 oral language abilities.

4. Scores

Marks were given to the correct answers given by the students in the part of phonological knowledge. The marking scheme was very straight forward. Since the assignments were done at home, the students had ample time to check up the structure of each syllable.

The marking scheme of Part 2 on listening was also very simple. The students were asked to listen to exercises recorded on tapes. They had to identify the tones of words, the syllabic structure of words, and to finish questions testing their comprehensive ability.

However, in the last part on oral performance, the students were marked according to:

(a) Read aloud

- (i) pronunciation
- (ii) fluency and clarity
- (iii) students' ability to melodize the script to make reading meaningful

(b) Elaboration of a given topic

- (i) pronunciation
- (ii) fluency and clarity

- (iii) length of speech
 - (iv) vocabulary
 - (v) appropriateness of the language used with the topic
 - (vi) adequacy of information in student's elaboration of a topic
- (c) Interview
- (i) pronunciation
 - (ii) fluency and clarity
 - (iii) length of student's responses
 - (iv) vocabulary
 - (v) appropriateness of the language used with the topic
 - (vi) student's understanding of interviewer
 - (vii) student's attempts to get the meaning across
 - (viii) ability to converse on diverse topics
 - (ix) giving detail unassisted

(Scales of rating adapted from Chalhoub-Deville 1993:59)

Results

When this paper was written in November, the first assignment had just be assessed. The subjects were identified and scored awarded. But the second assessment was carried out in December, so no progress could be recorded and compared. The study was carried into February, 1999. During the Forum, a more detail report is presented and some implications can be drawn for the future development of distance education for language learning.

Putonghua is now the national language of the People's Republic of China. It is known as Mandarin in the past. Most Hong Kong people speak a Chinese dialect, namely: Cantonese, in Hong Kong. After the change of sovereignty of Hong Kong, and the gradual economic development of China, a lot of local people now attend the Putonghua language course. Putonghua and Cantonese are not mutually intelligible even though they are considered dialects of the Chinese language. A lot of time in the classes is devoted to the training of word pronunciation, followed by finding the differences in vocabulary and expressions.

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