Thoughts on “Four Modernizations” of China’s Basic Foreign Language Education Reform From an Ecological Perspective in Philosophy of Language

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ABSTRACT

Cultivation of core competencies has been a hot issue in China’s basic FLE reform currently. Core competencies in English include all the language qualities and competencies conducive to students’ sustainable development and development of the society. To meet the demanding requirements of fostering core competencies in English, “Four Modernizations” are suggested metaphorically and technically to solve the key problems in cultivating core competencies ecologically. After exploring the feasibility and connotations of “Four Modernizations” from an ecological perspective in philosophy of language, this article puts forth some strategies to make basic foreign language education life-stylized, mathematized and logicized, communitized and ecologized in the hope of constructing linguistic-cultural ecology by means of modern information technology to transform FLE from exam-orientation to core-competency-orientation in a fun way.

1. Introduction

In the midst of last century, four modernizations were put forth as a strategic aim for China’s comprehensive development in terms of industry, agriculture, science and technology, and national defense, which has greatly promoted the development and prosperity of China. There is no doubt that China’s further development is based on its education, among which foreign language education (FLE) plays a crucial role. In addition, with the State Council’s stipulation of reform of Gaokao and Ministry of Education’s stipulation of deepening curriculum reform to guarantee cultivation of

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students’ core competencies for their lifelong development and social development, China’s FLE reform has been a hot issue in the sphere of quality education to lay an integral emphasis on students’ growth and teaching regularity rather than on the single English disciplinary regularity. How to foster students’ core competencies in English has been a tough task for teachers and educationalists to promote the aim transformation of FLE from “multidimensional” to “multiplural” to cultivate students’ competence of language communication, thinking and cognition, socio-cultural competence (Gong Yafu 2014, 2015). The author has been working on four projects and making efforts to combine the respective findings together, called “Four Modernizations” of FLE to meet the needs of cultivating students’ core competencies in English.

2. Literature Review

Before the stipulation of English Curriculum Standards in 2001, scholars didn’t pay enough attention to basic FLE. Only a few papers on basic FLE reform can be found. Gui Shichuan (1986, 2015) put forward that the key to FLE reform lay on the reform of teaching ideology, curricula and teaching materials. Gao Hongde (1999) paid attention to for whom to teach, what to teach, how to teach and by whom to teach in FLE reform. Qiao Yuquan (2004) stressed two aims in elementary school curriculum development, to popularize English and improve the teaching quality by arousing students’ interest. Some scholars studied the insights America’s Standards for FLL in the 21st Century and its curriculum reform cast on China’s FLE (Peng Weiqiang, 2002; Dong Xiaobo, 2006; Zhou Xia & Xie Linmin 2011), while others make efforts into FLE reform in China. Liu Limin (2010) put forth the essence of language acquisition, the feasibility of FLA from the interface of philosophy of language and FLE to implement localized school of FLE to propel FLE reform. After the New English Curriculum Standards was amended in 2011, scholars began to discuss the essence of foreign language education and core competencies in English (Sun Yan, 2014; Wang Jing, 2015; Wang Qiang, 2015; Cheng Xiaotang & Zhao Siqi, 2016; Shu Dingfang, 2017). The 2011 Edition of New English Curriculum Standards made eight teaching suggestions, among which practice-oriented language application competence, learning strategy-guided autonomy learning competence, culture-loaded cross-cultural communicative competence, resource-applying competence have not been sufficiently discussed and explored so far. If core competencies in English are prominent in language, learning, culture, and thinking aspects (Shu Dingfang, 2017), a lot of discussions are still needed to focus on how to achieve all the core competencies for primary and secondary school students. Especially in the teaching for primary and secondary school students, interest-caring enjoys priority, which should be of enough note for teachers and researchers.

3. Theoretical Framework of “Four Modernizations”

“Four Modernizations”, namely, life-stylization (2006), mathematization and logicization (2009), communitization (2012) and ecologization of FLE, are refined in four different projects based on a solid theoretical framework of philosophy of language and ecolinguistics, etc. In his Philosophical Investigations, Wittgenstein regarded
language practice as forms of life, stressing speech is a part of forms of life, which is the contextual condition for meaning of discourse production (Han Linhe, 2010). Thus, FLE is supposed to go into learners’ everyday life and immerse with it, breaking the limitations of time and space in learning.

Bakhtin’s philosophy of language (1998:387) holds the essence of language lies in communication, producing interaction between the interlocutor and the society, and where is dialogue, there is life of language. His philosophy of language consists of super-linguistic ideology, such as dialogue, meaning of discourse, structure and context. Especially, his ideology concerning sociality, interactivity, subjectivity, intersubjectivity and intertextuality are best illustrated in “Four Modernizations”.

Ecolinguistics expounds the relationship between language and its ecosystem (Haugen, 1972), taking the ecosystem as a resource, an interlocutor and instructor only if the learners are well-trained to acquire the affordance that the ecosystem provides, which ensures the learners to get the information in and out of expectation from the environment. Bronfenbrenner (1979) classified ecosystem into four dimensions in terms of intensity influencing children development: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem and microsystem. The first has a direct relation with children, including families, schools, etc., and the second covers two or more interactions between families and schools, schools and working places, etc. Though the third and fourth exert an indirect influence on children’s development, they can effect children’s interest and cognition, and cultural awareness. The four-dimensioned ecosystem enable FLE to be communitized to provide practice places for learners to serve in language practice.

Later Wittgenstein’s philosophy of Language asserts language is a game bearing family resemblances in forms of life. It’s characterized by practicality, thinking, sociality and diversity of language. “Four Modernizations” can meet all the above-mentioned features in need.

4. Sources and Connotations of “Four Modernizations”

“Four Modernizations” are concluded to reform current FLE in terms of ideology, learning strategies, ways of practice, degree of development, which are what the cultivation of core competencies in English requires. Life-stylization, mathematization and logicization, communitization and ecologization of FLE are all interest-caring, catering to cultivation of interest by all means. They are composed of advanced ideology, learning strategies, methods of practice, degree of development, so they are termed four modernizations metaphorically.

4.1 Life-stylization of FLE

In line of practicality of language, the author put forth life-stylization of FLE to arouse learners’ interest in the final production of her first project, Study on Strategies and Ways for the Plasticity of Children Foreign Language Acquisition (No. JWYZX2004123) funded by National Basic Foreign Language Teaching Research Center. In her book, Revelation of Chinese Children Foreign Language Education, life-stylization of FLE is proposed to break the limitations of time and space of classroom learning (Tang Hongjuan, 2006:125). Life-immersing ideology relates
learners’ learning English with their actual life and become an integral part of their life so that their interest can be greatly aroused, which conforms to Later Wittgenstein’s philosophy of language, claiming the essence of language learning is a game in forms of life. Life-stylization of FLE provides an ideology to stop separating language learning from learners’ life, bringing back language learning to what it ought to be.

4.2 Mathematization and Logicization of FLE

To arouse interest is the first step for FLE. Without good teaching or learning strategies, learners’ interest in English learning cannot be kept for a long time. Mathematization and Logicization of FLE is put forward to for learners to enjoy their interest in learning a foreign language by making good use of thinking of language in the author’s book out of her first state project, *Study on Synchronous Development of Children’s Foreign Language Competence and Mathematical Cognitive Ability* (No. 06XYY010) funded by National Planning Office of Philosophy and Social Science. Based on the relationship between foreign language competence and mathematical cognitive ability, Mathematization and Logicization of FLE aims to foster learners’ mathematical and logic learning strategies concerning vocabulary, grammar and oral communication to seek fun while bringing their initiative and into full play by means of detecting learning regularities readily on their own so that learners can develop both their art and science intelligences in a fun way, accordingly imbalance of art and science intelligences can be resolved (Tang Hongjuan, 2009, 2010).

4.3 Communitization of FLE

Places and ways for foreign language practice are what China’s FLE lack of, which badly harms for maintaining interest in conformity with sociality of language in language practice. Communitization of FLE has been suggested to solve this problem in the author’s project funded by Provincial Planning Office of Philosophy and Social Science, called *Study on Young Students’ Subjectival Role in Communitization of FLE* (No. SC10B053). Communitization of FLE means the merging of basic foreign language education and higher foreign language education into community education conditioned by letting young students play their subjectival roles in the community. Based on applying the compatibility and regionality of the resources of both community education and school foreign language education, it aims to develop the resources of community education to extend the curriculum resources of school foreign language education as young students themselves are taken as education resources creators rather than education resources consumers only. Based on the execution of young students’ subjectival role to construct the community linguistic-cultural ecology, it’s proposed service-learning should be taken as a strategy to extend the curriculum structure in the New English Curriculum System, and a request of the times to highlight English quality education in practicing comprehensive practice and activity curriculum. Making basic foreign language education and higher foreign language education into community education to achieve interaction of different kinds of foreign language education, Communitization of FLE facilitates exploring the Trinitarian foreign language reform model of school, society and family education, and helps to construct mechanism of

4.4 Ecologization of FLE

Apart from synchronous development of art and science intelligences, synchronous development of native language and foreign language should be paid the level heed to. Ecologization of FLE directs at balancing learners’ interest in both native language and foreign language learning by turning to diversity of language, which is closely related to the degree of learners’ development. Ecologization of FLE is based on Communitization of FLE. The former cares more about the viability, sustainability, and speed of development, while the latter caters to ways to practice. Ecologization of FLE is still being worked on in the author’s second National Philosophy and Social Science Fund Project, *Study on the Linguistic-Cultural Ecology for the West Children’s Strategic Development of Foreign Language Competence* (No.13BYY075). With China’s putting forth “Nationally Cultural Development Strategy”, to solve “mother tongue culture aphasia” in FLE is of vital importance. If learners want to develop language competence strategically, namely, both swiftly and sustainably, they need to balance their interest in learning their mother tongue and foreign languages, and Ecologization of FLE can serve this purpose. Ecologization of FLE takes local native language culture as one of the forms of input in learning a foreign language, and takes input of local native language culture as both an indispensable element in the linguistic-cultural ecology for FLL and a learning strategy to acquire affordance the ecology provides. Ecologization of FLE stressing local native language culture exerts a positive impact on efficiency and sustainability of children foreign language development for it enables children to acquire language and culture affordance maximally to develop viable language intelligence, and to achieve smooth cross-cultural communication.

5. Strategies to Be Four-modernization-oriented

“Four Modernizations” imply some strategies to drive for FLE reform in terms of ideology, learning strategies, ways of practice, degree of development, while attending to interest-caring including interest-arousing, interest-enjoying, interest-maintaining, and interest-balancing for learners.

5.1 Strategies to Be Life-stylized

FLE can be life-stylized on condition that good teaching strategies are practiced in and out of the classroom and immerse learners’ daily life. The author has worked out a four-word method for teaching children English as can be seen in Fig. 1.
This methodology focuses on four key words: self-studying, monitoring, quiz gaming, and sharing in three in-and-out-of-class phases. The first word, self-studying takes place before class, characterized by perception, imitation, presentation. Children are exposed to learning materials in advance on their own. They are supposed to perceive, imitate, and present the materials by themselves. Pre-class phase demands high autonomy of learning. The in-class phase is made up of monitoring and quiz gaming, which is supposed to motivate the performance of the pre-class phase. Monitoring is to check children’s understanding of their self-study, to supervise learning procedures and abilities, and to supplement what is closely related to the material systematically, while quiz gaming aims to provide fun games to consolidate what has been self-taught and supplemented so that children can produce something oral and written mechanically but happily in different kinds of interaction. The last phase happens after class, aiming at sharing what has been acquired by means of reproduction, communication and expansion. Sharing endorses learning projects, which requires interdisciplinary management to encourage cultivation of core competencies. Learning is for sharing through monitoring and quiz gaming, thus children’s interest can be greatly aroused in this teaching strategy.

5.2 Strategies to Be Mathematized and Logicized

Strategies to be mathematized and logicized mainly involve lexical, grammatical and oral communicative strategies and are good for thinking abilities such as, cognition, spatial imagination, induction and deduction, etc. Numerals, cartoons, pictures can be applied to cultivate fun learning strategies as can be seen in Fig. 2.
Horizontally, an ascending sequence of number of words presupposes a syntagmatic relationship either syntactically and textually, which can be a great fun after learners study the form and meaning of the ascending sequence and are encouraged to make sentences or paragraphs as follows:

S1: A young man and an old man are listening to the band playing bland music.
S2: Is this an interesting and popular band or a bland and unpopular one?

P1: When he was a young man, Hank worked on a band. And he looked cool for he was on a diet. He keeps eating bland food till he becomes an old man.
P2: A good teacher is more like a conductor than an actor. The classroom is his band, and he only needs to direct it. Anyway, he can’t wear bland expressions in working.

Vertically, eight paradigmatic relationships can be found to be minimal pairs, varying in either one vowel sound or one consonant sound. The eight pairs or groups of minimal pairs like \{an, at, as, am\}, \{and, end\}, \{and, ant\}, \{band, bend, bind, bond\}, \{band, land, sand, hand\}, \{bland, blend, blind, blond\}, \{bland, blend\}, \{bland, gland\} are conducive to finding out the regularities between sound and form to improve pronunciation and the efficiency of learning pleasantly by making comparisons and contrasts.

Besides, sequential pictures (see to Fig. 3), compositional pictures (see to Fig. 4), narrative pictures (see to Fig. 5) and the like can be applied tactically to train children’s logic thinking and spatial imagination by comparing numbers, narrating order of time, space, and event in an amusing way.

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Figure 3. Sequential Pics.

Figure 4. Compositional Pics.

Figure 5. Narrative Pics.
For example, seeing to Fig. 3, learners are motivated to speak out or write out the follow two groups of sentences concerning either size or space:
Size Group: The butterfly is the smallest. The rabbit is bigger than the butterfly. The monkey is bigger than the rabbit. The panda is bigger than the monkey. The elephant is bigger than the panda. The elephant is the biggest...
Space Group: The butterfly is in front of the rabbit. The rabbit is behind the butterfly. The monkey is behind the rabbit. The panda is behind the monkey. The elephant is behind the panda...

5.3 Strategies to Be Communitized

The best strategy to make FLE communitized is to bring young students’ subjectival role into full play by conducting service-learning. Service-learning integrates community service with course learning, which meets the development of children and that of the community. Under the background of New English Curriculum Reform, service-learning can not only be the content in the construction of the New English Curriculum System but also it can be the way to implement New English Curriculum Reform. Based on the execution of young students’ subjectival role to construct the community linguistic-cultural ecology, service-learning can be taken as a strategy to extend the curriculum structure in the New English Curriculum System, and a request of the times to highlight English quality education in practicing comprehensive practice and activity curriculum. Therefore, young students can make good use of the local curriculum resources like cultures and customs, together with their spare time and vacations to create family English learning environment, to tutor peers, to be tour guides, to construct community platforms to communicate, to volunteer in publicizing and interpreting local cultures to explore and expand school curriculum resources, and to make up the deficiencies of applying what have been learned at school.

5.4 Strategies to Be Ecologized

To make FLE ecologized, teachers and educationalists should take local native language culture as one of the ecological elements. In addition, modern educational information technology and new media ought to be paid enough attention to so that more tangible and intangible communities can be constructed for sharing in a new media linguistic-cultural ecology. Sharing is a way to optimize the process, method and content of both input and out in FLA and FLE. Sharing provides an optimal route of output like “present-share-communicate-serve” to maximize output and efficiency of learning. Share-driven learning projects via new media can transform students from takers and consumers of education resources to givers and creators of education resources. The best share-driven learning project is to share Chinese stories in English to balance young students’ interest in bilingual study, to ensure them to develop balancedly and sustainably. In addition, students’ sharing cultures of their hometown in English is suggested to attend to cultural awareness cultivation.
6. Conclusion

Philosophy of language and ecological system theory serve as the solid theoretical foundations for “Four Moderniztions”, which focus on the key problems that the currently heated-discussed core competencies are concerned with. “Four Moderniztions” are implemented on the basis of students’ subjectivity, together with practicality, sociality, interactivity, intersubjectivity and intertextuality, thinking, and diversity of language. They provide a brand new ideology, learning strategies, ways for language practice, and sustainable development for FLE in hope of arousing students’ interest, letting them enjoy their interest, maintaining their interest, more importantly, balancing their bilingual interest. “Four Moderniztions” are being tentatively attempted to solve lack of places and ways for language practice in constructing new media linguistic-cultural ecology. To be four-modernization-oriented is likely to promote the transformation of FLE from exam-orientation to core-competency-orientation.

REFERENCES


