The Ideal English Practices for Chinese Kindergartner in Teachers' Perspectives

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Abstract: Recently, there is an extensive body of literature investigating instructional practices for preschool-level English-Language-Learners (ELLs) in China. However, not many of them took into consideration early childhood teachers' perspectives on the English-teaching practices that are widely implemented in the country, as well as their visions of "ideal" English-teaching practices that may or may not be already implemented in real classrooms. This qualitative study aims to understand Chinese kindergarten teachers' opinions about the widely used pedagogical practices for ELLs, their ideas about what "ideal" English-teaching practices should be like, and their suggestions for filling the ideal-actual gap. Thirty teachers working at three Shanghai bilingual kindergartens will be surveyed and interviewed. The study is expected to yield the following findings: 1) Teachers prefer solo-teaching than co-teaching for a more efficient lesson planning process; 2) Teachers believe that ideal English-learning activities are ongoing, consistent, and routinized; 3) Teachers render ideal English-teaching practices to be authentic and immersive. The study results have important implications for curriculum designers, kindergarten English teachers and organizations that provide trainings for pre-and-in-service early childhood educators.

Keywords: English-Language-Learners (ELLs), Chinese kindergarteners, English globalization, teachers' perspectives, ideal-actual gap

1. Introduction

An extensive body of literature has explored how English language skills develop in Chinese children and what pedagogical practices foster or hinder this learning process. Whether research is targeted at specific groups of students or focused on a certain grade level, a more immersive and interactive English learning environment featuring the provision of a wide range of real-world contexts in which children gradually acquire linguistic competence, was proved by many researchers as one of the most effective English teaching practices[1-3]. At the same time, researchers expressed concerns about the most widely endorsed teaching practices focusing on translating written or spoken literary pieces

from English to the learners' native tongue. They believed that these practices rely heavily on spoon-feeding and drill and skill and thus make student English learning less self-driven[1,4].

However, a dearth of literature focuses on teachers' perspectives on the ideal teaching practices in supporting young children's English learning, nor is there any research endeavor made to explore the ideal-actual gap in the English teaching strategies and the challenges preventing teachers from making changes. This work believes that adding teachers' voices to this line of pedagogical inquiry is a worthy attempt for the following reasons. First, teacher beliefs about language learning play a major role in shaping the language learning environment. According to Ellis [5], a multitude of internal and external factors have contributed to the formulation of different teacher beliefs about what language is, how difficult it is to learn a foreign language, the nature of language learning, and the importance of personal factors in facilitating or inhibiting language learning. These beliefs serve as a metacognitive guidance in shaping teachers' language teaching practices and can ultimately determine the nature of classroom atmosphere as well as the opportunities that learners are afforded[6]. Second, teachers are the most direct influencers of student learning who know their students and classrooms better than any researchers. The recurring issues regarding language learning that they have discovered from practices illuminate future theoretical and research directions. Thus, their perspectives on language learning and their critical reflections on the perceived theory-practice gap in language teaching practices should be considered a valuable data source in any educational research that strives to improve teaching performance and student outcomes.

2. Proposed Study

The proposed study question of this research is: through the views of Chinese kindergarten teachers, what should an ideal teaching practice for English learning be like? Based on the past research, this study hypothesize that teachers who participate in the research will have an agreement that teaching practices can influence kindergartners' English learning ability. The teaching practices in the experiment are: teaching models (different types of teachers in class), teaching approaches (different activities in classes), classroom norms (the behavior expected of kids), and routines (a well-organized procedure established in the classroom). Since teachers can manipulate these factors directly in class, this research can gain direct feedback from teachers about their opinions towards these teaching practices. Alternatively, suppose the feedback from the teachers shows a disagreement with each other about these teaching practices. In that case, it may be that different teaching practices will not affect the kids' English learning outcomes in teachers' opinion.

Moreover, this work predicts that the solo-teaching teaching model is better than the co-teaching one in a kindergarten classroom. Since this research will be in the Chinese kindergarten, there could be a higher chance that the Chinese teachers will translate the English teacher's word. In this way, it could be less effective for children to learn.

The proposed method of the research will be looking at the teaching practices in the following four parts: teaching models, teaching approaches, classroom norms, and routines according to different kindergarten teachers in China through the qualitative study.

3. Methods

A qualitative study will be conducted to reveal teacher opinions about the ideal English teaching practices in Chinese urban kindergartens, their current practices, and the gap between the two. Survey and semi-structured interview will be used as data collection methods.

3.1. Participants

30 teachers working at three Shanghai bilingual kindergartens will be recruited for this study. They are all under 40 years old and possess at least five years of young children teaching experience.

3.2. Materials

Online questionnaires will be used to collect the basic information of teachers, their opinions about the ideal English teaching practices, their current practices, and the perceived ideal-actual gap. The questionnaire is divided into three parts. The first part acquires demographic information of the teachers, including gender, age, native language, teaching language, years of teaching, etc. The second part asks teachers to evaluate the effectiveness of various English teaching practices. Multiple choices, Likert scale, and ranking questions serve as the main question types of this section. A sample question is provided below:

* *Which teaching approaches do you think could significantly improve students' L2 learning?(multiple choices)*

☐ *project-based* ☐*dictation* ☐*small group* ☐*code-switching*
☐ *story-telling* ☐*hands-on experiences* ☐ *field trips*
☐ *parent-teacher partnership/parent engagement*

The third part of the questionnaire uses short answer questions to investigate the current English teaching practices adopted in teachers' classrooms, the reasons why they choose such practices, and the gap they perceive between the ideal and current practices. A sample question is provided below:

* *Which classroom norm (child-centered or teacher-centered speech) are you using in teaching at the moment? Why do you use this norm? Is this practice the best or ideal for young children's English learning? If not, what is the actual-ideal gap?*

After the teachers fill out the questionnaires, semi-structured interviews will be conducted that allows them to elaborate on the second and third parts of the questionnaire. The interview is comprised mainly of open-ended questions, with two examples of which provided below:

* *According to the questionnaire, your current and ideal teaching model is combination of solo- and co-teaching, why? Is there any supporting evidence in your teaching?*

* *I noticed one of your teaching routines is watching English cartoons, do you think is this really beneficial for the students' ESL? If not, how to improve or adjust this routine? What are the challenges that you are facing?*

3.3. Procedures

Firstly, online questionnaires will be distributed to the teacher participants. After completion, they will be invited to attend one-on-one semi-structured interviews, which are available in both in-person and online formats. All interviews will be recorded for data analysis.

4.   Result & Discussion

Based on the pilot study results, kindergarten teachers prefer the solo-teaching model than co-teaching, for the reason that in the latter model, the parity between the two teachers can hardly be achieved. A kindergarten classroom in which the co-teaching strategy is implemented can end up having a teacher assuming most of the teaching responsibilities while the other teacher only providing English translation and having no additional content added to the classroom. According to the teacher with whom conducted the pilot study, this model is not going to work in an early childhood setting as students won't pay much attention to the teacher translator. It implies that while co-teaching has become a trend in classrooms of different countries, its effectiveness compared to the solo-teaching model in teaching kindergarten children a foreign language should be further examined.

In terms of classroom routines and expectations, teachers attach importance to the ongoing, consistent, and routinized activities that support children's English learning. In alignment with previous research findings, teachers who participated in the pilot study believed that repetitive linguistic exercises, though delivered in small chunks, benefit English learning by exposing students to English words, phrases, and sentence structures before they can internalize them and develop automaticity[7]. If the anticipation holds true in the actual study, it carries critical implications that linguistic routines could result in both intentional and incidental language gains that would be otherwise have been possible through conventional English instruction.

As for the ideal teaching practices, teachers display a tendency toward authentic English learning opportunities. They focus more on providing students with school-type tasks that mirror real life activities in which students apply the language principles to produce grammatically correct sentences to fulfill communicative needs. It implies that when students are immersed in an authentic language context, their separately taught English skills can be integrated to produce meanings that serve real communicative purposes.

5.   Conclusion

In the study, the measures of instruction used were derived from teachers' self-report data. The limitation of the data collection may not give us insight into the detailed characteristics of teaching. It provides only a single meaning to analyze attitudes and practices. Moreover, self-report data may have low reliability and validity because of social desirability bias[8]. Respondents tend to convey what they think is the perception of norms rather than their real thoughts. Finally, measurement error is likely to explain the associations between instructional measures and outcomes[8]. For example, suppose no one thoroughly explains the questionnaire and ensures everyone has the same understanding. In that case, the results may be subjective because everyone may have a different interpretation of your question. Respondents may have difficulty understanding the meaning of specific questions, leading to deviations in answers.

Although this research is small-scale, its results may provide some advice and help to English teachers who need to be in kindergarten. For any well-established project, it is worthwhile to conduct follow-up research to determine whether participants can solve their teaching problems in the future or apply what they have gained from the project to their teaching situation[9]. This research only looks at the second language-English teaching problem from the teacher's perspective. The views of the kindergarten learners on the issue of English teaching are also worth considering. As more and more kindergartens include English learning in the curriculum, it is worth considering how to help kindergarten learners to master English more comprehensively. Future studies can focus on the time allocation of English courses and how to improve learners' concentration.

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