

Influence of English Teachers' Classroom English on Students' Learning Enthusiasm in Junior High School

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Abstract

It's well-known that most of Chinese students learn English in classroom. English teachers' classroom language, especially English, is particularly important to the teaching effect under the circumstances of English classroom. The paper analyzes the classifications, features and functions of classroom English, discusses the key problems existing in junior high school English teachers' classroom English, and finally puts forward suggestions that English teachers can adopt so as to inspire students and improve students' learning enthusiasm.

Keywords: classroom English, learning enthusiasm, junior high school

Introduction

With the development of New English Curriculum Standard in China, many linguists and scholars have paid more attention to the researches on the English teachers' classroom English which serves not only as a tool of accomplishing teaching goals, but also as a resource for students to acquire comprehensible second language input. English teachers' classroom English is one of the most important methods for students to learn English. Therefore, effective use of classroom English can greatly influence students' learning enthusiasm.

However, many junior high school English teachers have little knowledge about classroom English to which they don't attach great significance. They tend to use some substandard Chinglish during their English teaching procedures, which may set a bad example for their students. Therefore, how to help junior high school English teachers to correct their unsuitable classroom English so as to improve students' learning enthusiasm has been up to agenda.

Although many educators and scholars have conducted a large number of studies to find out the relationship between English teachers' classroom English and students' learning enthusiasm, those studies are mostly done among the university students and little attention is paid to the junior high school students. The paper is trying to address the following questions. What problems are there in junior high school English teachers' classroom English? What's the relationship between English teachers' classroom English and students' learning enthusiasm? What kind of measures can be taken by teachers to improve their classroom English and arouse students' learning enthusiasm?

1. English Teachers' Classroom English

1.1 The Classifications of English Teachers' Classroom English

Generally, classroom English can be divided into four types.

1) Organization English

Organization English refers to classroom English used to keep classes in order, to organize teaching procedures, to arouse students' behaviors, to control discipline in classroom and to implement language teaching in the process of English teaching.

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That is to say, organization English is usually used “to elicit information and encourage participation, to check students’ comprehension, to focus their attention and involve them in the lesson, and also to control and manage behavior” (Cao, 2010).

Organization English is a kind of connection which brings teachers and students together. Teachers can convey the information about what students should do and what students are going to do through organization English. Some frequently used patterns of organization English by teachers in English classes are as follows. “Let’s begin our class.” implies that students should focus all their attention on class and other kinds of activities ought to be stopped. “Please read after me.” tells that students are going to read some words or sentences as the teacher does. “Be quiet.” means that students should keep quiet at the moment and listen carefully to the teacher. Effective use of classroom English can ensure the normal carryout of teaching activities and create a good language environment for English learners. As a result, students will gradually develop the habit of thinking in English and using English to communicate.

2) Instruction English

Instruction English is what English teachers use to explain grammar, vocabulary, text and so on. “In language classroom, talk is one of the major ways that English teachers convey information to their students” (Cao, 2010). So, students can get the general knowledge about this subject from those instruction English. For example, if a teacher explains a word as follows: “it’s a noun, but it also can be used as a verb.”, then the students will get two pieces of information about this word.

It is worth mentioning that students’ communicative ability has been paid more and more attention to in recent years, which implies that the traditional spoon-feeding teaching in English grammar couldn’t adapt to this new trend. However, no matter how teachers try to develop students’ communicative ability, teaching vocabulary and grammar is still the basic foundation of English learning. Therefore, English teacher talk is greatly essential in that English teachers’ classroom English is the best way to convey language knowledge to students.

3) Teacher-student Interaction English

The teacher-student interaction English refers to the English in the form of classroom conversations and discussions. It also includes the English used to ask questions and answer questions.

It is said that questioning and answering are the most general ways of creating opportunities for teacher-student interaction. “The classroom question and answer discourse serves the instructive and exploratory functions in addition to the communicative and interpersonal functions” (Fu, 2008). For English teachers, questioning is a critical skill because questions can elicit students’ responses and then pushes further interaction. In other words, teachers encourage students to participate in classroom activities by asking them questions, and get some feedbacks on whether the students know well about what they’ve learned from their answers.

Raising questions can draw the students’ attention, arouse their enthusiasms of participation, offer opportunities of practice, and improve their learning. It is obvious that open questions and referential questions provide students with more opportunities to use the knowledge that they have already mastered so as to improve their communicative ability. Therefore, English teachers should pay attention to their ways of questioning so as to get better teaching effect.

4) Teacher Feedback English

Teacher feedback English is the classroom English to evaluate students’ answers to the questions and to correct students’ errors. Teacher feedback English can be divided into two categories: positive feedback and negative feedback. To English teachers, giving feedback is an important skill and can fulfill different functions in the classroom interaction. Positive feedback includes approval of students’ answers and compliments for students, such as “Yes, you are right.”, “Good job.”, “Wonderful.”, “Excellent performance.” and so on. As far as negative feedback is concerned, it appears to be a kind of direct corrections of students’ errors. For example, teachers tend to ask the rest of students “Is he/she right?” in an interrogative mood when they think that the answers are not that good.

Positive feedback such as affirmative evaluation can help students to increase their interests in learning English and establish their self-confidence which is normally considered to be a crucial factor contributing to successful learning, while too much negative feedback such as criticism against the learners will depress them.

“It’s important to communicate positive messages in the classroom to enhance students’ self-esteem since their beliefs about their abilities strongly influence their performance” (Arnold, 2000). Therefore, English teachers should try to give their students more encouragement to arouse students’ learning enthusiasm.

1.2 The Features of English Teachers’ Classroom English

According to Cheng Xiaotang(2009), there are four features of English teachers’ classroom English, which are authenticity, interactivity, logicality, and standardization.

What does authenticity mean? The authenticity of English teachers’ classroom English can be described from three aspects: the authenticity of conversational context, which means the classroom communication between teachers and students should observe the principles of reality and nature; the authenticity of language in discourse, which means teachers should use what exists in the real world instead of fabricated words or sentences; and the authenticity of conversational content, which means what teachers say is true but not false.

What does interactivity mean? The interactivity of English teachers’ classroom English means that what teachers say in class is aimed to interact with their students. Classroom interaction can be divided into 4 conditions according to the purpose of interaction: for the purpose of improving the classroom participation, for the purpose of the construction of knowledge, for the purpose of language input, for the purpose of the organization of classroom activities.

What does logicality mean? The logicality of English teachers’ classroom English includes two aspects: logical order and discourse coherence. A lack of logicality of what English teachers say will lead to a shortage of coherence in teaching procedures, which is not good for students to learn English.

What does standardization mean? The standardization of English teachers’ classroom English implies that what teachers say should be correct, accurate and appropriate, and should be in accordance with the majority of English native speakers. However, it is not the case in China because most English teachers in junior high school are Chinese with no experience of living in those countries where English is the native language. “They themselves are English learners and often don’t know the culture and history thoroughly” (Song & Pan, 2000). For example, almost every student tends to greet their teachers with “Good morning, teacher!” in China. As a matter of fact, people in English-speaking countries won’t call their teachers “teacher” face to face. Although this kind of widely used greeting is not accepted in English-speaking countries, many English teachers do not correct their students because they think it is acceptable. Therefore, quite a number of English teachers in junior high schools in China can not meet the requirements of using standard English to teach.

1.3 The Functions of English Teachers’ Classroom English

As we know, English teachers’ classroom English plays a crucial role in classroom teaching, and the quality and the quantity of English teachers’ classroom English have direct influence on students’ language development and English learning. Just as Cao Yamin(2010) says, English teachers can “give instructions to students, explain grammar, vocabulary or activities, ask questions, give feedbacks to students’ response or correct students’ errors through multi-form classroom English”. We’ll elaborate the functions from four aspects, which are as follows:

Firstly, it has organization function in that organization English is considered to be an important guarantee of effective English classes. English teachers’ organization English can ensure the carryout of organized teaching procedures, which will contribute to a successful class. Secondly, it has teaching function in that students can obtain language knowledge about English and English-speaking countries, which will broaden their horizons and enrich their minds. Thirdly, it has interaction function in that teachers’ classroom English can serve as a tool of teacher-student interaction. In the process of classroom interaction, students can develop the ability of communication in English and form the habit of thinking in English. Fourthly, it has inspiring and encouraging function in that teachers’ positive feedback can help to arouse students’ interests in English learning. Moreover, those encouraging words can make them confident to express themselves.

To sum up, English teachers’ effective classroom English is a kind of facilitation which can help students’ learning by providing organized teaching procedures, clear instructions, positive feedbacks and an ideal classroom atmosphere for learning.

2. The Present Situation of English Teachers' Classroom English

In junior high school classroom teaching, English is not only the target language for students to learn, but also a medium for teachers to teach English. Moreover, English teachers' classroom English is considered to be the most important source for students to get comprehensible input of the target language. However, in the present English teaching in junior high school, the situation of the use of classroom English by English teachers is not optimistic. The following four problems are most obvious.

Firstly, there are considerable problems existing in the organization English. Some teachers' classroom organization English is not systematic and relatively rigid and monotone, which cannot arouse students' interest in learning English and even lead to a fossilization of English communication and a lack of authenticity. Others tend to talk too much to introduce the topics, which is not only a waste of time, but also not helpful to students' learning.

Secondly, there are serious problems existing in the English teachers' instruction English. Many English teachers are not strict with themselves so that they are used to making some grammatical mistakes when speaking too fast in explaining some grammar rules or texts. Their imperfect and incorrect sentences will indirectly affect the students' language acquisition since imitation is one of the major characteristics of English learning in junior high school. If those incorrect sentences are copied by the students, it will bring huge negative transfer to their English learning. In addition, some English teachers are inclined to neglect their students' learning ability. Sometimes they tend to use some unfamiliar words and sentence patterns in the teaching process, which is not helpful for students' understanding and will have negative impacts on the teaching effect.

Thirdly, there are noticeable problems existing in the teacher-student interaction English. Many English teachers tend to talk too much in class while their students have fewer opportunities to practice, which is not helpful to develop students' communicative ability. Besides, interactions between teachers and students are often framed by questions and answers. However, junior high school English teachers tend to ask students display questions and closed questions instead of referential questions and open questions, which is of little use in enlightening the minds of students.

Fourthly, there are some problems existing in the teacher feedback English. Teachers' different feedback on students' answers and classroom performance will have diverse psychological influence on students. Happily, junior high school English teachers are inclined to praise their students to increase their confidence, but those praising words are always rigid and monotone, such as "Good", "Wonderful". Besides, many English teachers can't keep a good balance between positive feedback and negative feedback. They are not willing to point out their students' mistakes in time because they are afraid of depressing their students to some extent.

What's more, using Chinese and English interchangeably is very common in junior high school English classrooms. During English teaching, "bilingual language often appears when teachers cannot find a proper English word" (Song & Pan, 2000). Junior high school English teachers are accustomed to using half English and half Chinese either because they don't prepare well before class or because they are not proficient in English. What's more, "they sometimes speak Chinglish, which will have a great effect on the students' thinking" (Song & Pan, 2000).

3. Influence of English Teachers' Classroom English on Students' Learning Enthusiasm

Enthusiasm is a strong feeling of excitement and interest in something and a desire to become involved in it. Students' English learning enthusiasm is closely related to some personal factors which include motivation, attitude and self-esteem since students' learning enthusiasm is a kind of complex psychological condition. In addition, the extent of students' cooperation and participation is also a kind of reflection of their learning enthusiasm.

3.1 Motivation

"If asked to identify the most powerful influences on learning, motivation would probably be high on most teachers' lists" (Williams & Burden, 2000). "Motivation is commonly thought of as an inner drive, impulse, emotion, or desire that moves one to a particular action" (Brown, 2001). Students with high motivation will be willing to put more energy into learning English, while students with low motivation will not be ready to show great interests in learning. Therefore, junior high school students will be in various types of state on account of different kinds of information conveyed by their teachers.

On one hand, English teachers can mobilize their students' motivation by using methodical organization English, effective interaction English and positive feedbacks. For instance, if a teacher gives much more praising and complimentary words after a student has answered his question, there is no doubt that the student will hope to answer the following questions. Such praising words are exactly what mobilize students' motivation. On the other hand, sometimes what English teachers say will also discourage their students. For example, some teachers will become so angry that they tend to use such direct expressions as "Why are you always making such mistakes?" when encountered with wrong answers from their students in the classroom. This kind of negative feedback is what greatly decreases students' motivation.

3.2 Attitude

Attitude refers to the way that one thinks and feels about somebody or something. "The teacher needs to be aware that everyone has both positive and negative attitudes" (Brown, 2001). If English teachers present their classes in an attractive way, students will adjust themselves to positive attitudes; conversely they will hold negative attitudes towards English. "Second language learners benefit from positive attitudes and negative attitudes may lead to decreased motivation and in all likelihood, because of decreased input and interaction, to unsuccessful attainment of proficiency" (Brown, 2001).

3.3 Self-Esteem

Self-esteem is a kind of individual judgment or evaluation that is expressed in the attitude that the individual holds towards himself. "Some children with low self-esteem may be excessively fearful and timid, unable to make decisions, expecting failure and reluctant to express opinions; others may be bullying and bragging" (Arnold, 2000).

"Being one of the most important mirrors through which children discover who they are, English teachers are in a very strong position to create conditions that can be conducive or detrimental to their self-esteem" (Arnold, 2000). English teachers' encouraging and inspiring words can convey positive energy to their students so as to enhance their self-esteem. On the contrary, negative responses will attack students' self-confidence and even damage their self-esteem. For instance, some English teachers who are not qualified would use humiliating and vulgar words to shame their students. They don't take students' feeling into consideration, which will cause serious detriment to the students. As a result, students' self-esteem is damaged and they dare not express themselves in future English learning.

3.4 Cooperation and Participation

"The successful implementation of activities depends largely on the students' response, cooperation and participation" (Jiang, 2006).

If English teachers use efficient and effective classroom English which can form a good atmosphere for students' English learning, students will be willing to become involved in classroom activities. However, English teachers' classroom English is not always helpful to encourage students' cooperation and participation. Some rigid and monotone classroom English can neither attract students' interests nor get students involved in class activities, which will not be beneficial for their English learning. For example, some English teachers are accustomed to using the same praising words which they've used for numerous times. As a consequence, students will get bored with such classroom English soon and lose enthusiasm gradually.

4. Suggestions for Junior High School English Teaching

Usually, students are full of enthusiasm during the first few classes, but their enthusiasm will wane by the end of a semester (Jiang, 2006). Since we have discussed four factors which influence students' learning enthusiasm, there are a few suggestions for junior high school English teachers on mobilizing students' learning enthusiasm so as to get better teaching effect.

4.1 Mobilizing Students' Motivation

Motivation is very important in language learning. English teachers can provide positive feedback such as encouraging and as much praise as possible without sounding insincere (Jiang, 2006). Only in this way can students be motivated to put more energy into learning English through positive teacher feedback.

In addition, teachers can motivate their students by presenting their classes in a vivid and interesting way through changing their language style into a flexible and humorous way to attract students' interest.

There's a saying that interest is the best teacher. That is to say, once students develop strong interest in English, they will be willing to seek knowledge, explore English and put those pleasant emotional experiences into English learning. Junior high school students are extremely curious about new things, which implies that they will be ready to spend time on English if they are interested enough in English.

4.2 Adjusting Students' Attitude

Students' attitude towards English is the key factor that decides the teaching effects. Therefore, junior high school English teachers should help students to establish positive attitude towards English by using effective classroom English.

English teacher keeps the discourse and turns allocation under control by questioning. But sometimes, the teacher uses more polite and indirect directives than students so as to encourage students to participate in the classroom interaction in language teaching (Fu, 2008). That is to say, some English teachers who use polite classroom English can greatly arouse students' enthusiasm in participating in classroom activities because showing respect to their students is an important way to make students hold positive attitude towards English.

4.3 Enhancing Students' Self-esteem

It's known that junior high school students are still in the stage of building their self-images. "The way that teachers talk to students, that is, the manner in which they interact with them, will affect students' feeling, which requires teachers to empathize with the students they are talking to" (Harmer, 2000). "Teachers really can have a positive and influential effect on both the linguistic performance and the emotional well-being of the students" (Brown, 2001).

Moreover, English teachers should also convey the information to their students that they are actually prominent and outstanding, which will greatly increase students' self-efficacy. The term self-efficacy refers to students' beliefs about their capabilities, which will "affect the amount of effort that they are prepared to expend and their level of persistence" (Williams & Burden, 2000). "Learners with high self-efficacy may well perform better on achievement tasks than some apparently more capable peers" (Williams & Burden, 2000).

4.4 Improving Students' Cooperation and Participation

As we know, if English teachers can strengthen the emotional education by interacting with their students frequently and enhance students' experience of achievement by giving encouraging words, they will greatly stimulate students to participate in classroom activities.

Besides, English teachers should also make what they say understandable because "not all the available input is processed by the learner, either because some of it is not understood or because some of it is not attended to" (Ellis, 1999). Only when students understand what their teachers are talking about can they get involved in classroom activities.

Conclusion

From the above discussion, we can see that English teachers' classroom English has a lot to do with junior high school students' learning enthusiasm because English teachers' classroom English is not only the main source of language input, but also an instrument of accomplishing teaching goals. However, there are still many serious problems existing in English teachers' classroom English. Some teachers don't speak classroom English systematically and are used to making some grammatical mistakes during their teaching. What's more, many English teachers can't keep a good balance between positive feedback and negative feedback, which is not beneficial for students' learning. Therefore, it's very necessary and urgent for teachers to improve their proficiency of using appropriate classroom English to mobilize students' learning enthusiasm. As we know, teachers can play many roles in the course of teaching, such as a controller, director, manager, facilitator and so on. Whatever role an English teacher plays, he or she should always use correct and accurate classroom English to stimulate students by interactive ways because effective classroom English can both motivate students' learning enthusiasm and inspire them to learn better.

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