Survey on adult student opinions of English classroom activities

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Abstract: This paper explored the adult student opinions on four types of English classroom activities (language learning; language acquisition; information convey; role play) and the relationship between the fondness degrees and their personality, test performance and motivation. It turned out that the majority of students ranked all classroom activities a bit highly. However, most of them would like to be taught language forms rather than to communicate in English with others. Motivation came out to be the factor that leads to most of the significant differences in this research. Taking into consideration the focus of researches in China nowadays, the results seem to be out of place and deserve serious consideration and further research.

Key words: language learning, language acquisition, information convey, role play, fondness degree

1. Introduction

There are lots of adult students here in Huazhong University of Science and Technology (HUST). They would like to grip this last chance of schooling to learn something. But due to various reasons, they are not taking advantage of the rich resources here. Their teachers are feeling the pinch too. Unfortunately, this is not a rare situation in Chinese adult education. This complex issue is surely far beyond the ability of such a short paper, still it intends to make some contribution to the improvement of the situation, but will content itself to the field of ESL classroom activities.

Now with the shift in language education towards a more learner-centered approach, learner opinions should be more important in the choice of any teaching method. In order to get some useful information from the students to improve the teaching situation, the researcher singled out some typical classroom activities for the adult students to judge according to their own opinions. These classroom activities were language learning (LL), language acquisition (LA), role-play (RP) and information convey (IC) activities.

Based on the following theoretical framework, the research designed the above-mentioned classroom activities (LL, LA, IC and RP) for the students to experience and then evaluate in a questionnaire according to their own judgments in terms of fondness degree. The questionnaire also includes three variables: test performance, personality, and hardworking degree in order to find out any possible relationship between these variables and the fondness degrees of classroom activities.

No matter what controversies may occur in the issue of an optimal pedagogy, there do exist some common grounds. All classroom activities fall into two categories: formal instruction (FI) and informal instruction (II) (Ellis, 1985). FI is a kind of instruction focused on language forms, while II focused on language communication. Formal instruction splits into 2 more groups: language learning (LL) and language acquisition (LA) (Krashen,

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1981, 1982). Informal instruction also falls into 2 groups, i.e., functional communicative instruction and social communicative instruction (Littlewood, 1981). Role-play (RP) is a typical way of social communicative instruction according to Littlewood (1981), while information convey (IC) is a model given by him (1981) to represent functional communicative activities.

The questionnaire in this survey also included three independent variables, test performance (TP), personality and hardworking degree (HWD). They emerged from a small-scale pilot study among these adult students revealing that these 3 factors might account for the different fondness degrees of the four classroom activities. The definition and quantification of the three is somewhat rough yet practical in order to avoid the fatigue effect in the otherwise time consuming survey which would threaten the reliability of the research. The notion test performance (TP) is chosen to indicate students' language proficiency or achievement, although the three differ from each other in strict sense because nowadays in China TP is still the most reliable index to measure student's language proficiency. The second variable, personality, is also self-evaluated in terms of introversion by the students themselves instead of by the 2PF or 16PF scale. Hardworking degree (HWD) can be the indicator of the learners' motivation in foreign language study (Ellis, 1984). This is a simplified way of dealing with motivation considering that motivation is a complex construct in SLA, which can be further categorized according to different criteria and can be measured by the achievement motive scale. HWD indicating motivation was self-evaluated in terms of the time spent in English study by the students themselves.

2. Literature review

It is true the contexts of language education cover everything from linguistic to psychological, from sociological to political, from cultural to economic factors (Spolsky, 1974; Banbasky, 1982). Among these, cultural factors are the latest focus. Different cultures require different pedagogy (Widdowson, 1990). Chinese students have quite different cultural background from their western counterparts, so the teaching method for Chinese teachers should not be the copy of these famous teaching trends, most of which have their roots in the western culture. Moreover, Adult students also differ from other college students in several aspects, thus their opinions deserve to be studied.

Most Chinese educational practitioners and researchers are paying more delicate attentions to informal instruction (II) rather than formal instruction (FI) now. Some think that interactive classroom activities help to motivate students in learning English, which can be interpreted that students would welcome II more than FI.

As for LA vs. LL, Krashen argues that LL differs from LA and only LA facilitates language ability (1981, 1982). The conditions, advantages and disadvantages of LL and LA are frequently dealt with in the area of CALL. The so-called explicit learning refers to LL, and the implicit learning refers to LA. Research findings from laboratory settings have overwhelmingly favored explicit learning conditions, i.e., the conditions in LL rather than implicit learning, i.e., LA (Chapelle, 2001). Chinese researchers Zhou and Liu (2000) also believe that Chinese students are accustomed to be taught fixed language forms rather than be asked to acquire knowledge themselves.

The independent variables were chosen according to the subjects' opinions, the literature resource for them is not abundant, yet there do exist some relevant ones.

On the comparative level of TP, Garrett (2002) found out that lower level students tend to be much more dependent on the teacher, thus favoring the teacher-centered LL activities and guided IC more.

As for personality, there are two major hypotheses (NIE, 2001). One is that extroverted learners are better in

communicative ability than introverted ones. The other is that introverted ones surpass the extroverted students in cognitive and academic linguistic ability. Strong (1983) confirmed the first hypothesis through some research, whereas the second hypothesis still needs further empirical support.

As for HWD, WEN (2001) found out that there is no close relationship between motivation and subjects' opinions on II or FI. Tomoko (2002) thinks that motivation affects self-confidence in L2 communication, which leads to willingness to communicate (WTC). Another researcher Garrett (2002) argues that the relationship between motivation and WTC is somewhat indirect. Here WTC is a construct mainly applied to students' willingness to communicate with native English speakers outside the classroom. But it is feasible and reasonable to relate it to willingness to take part in RP activities in the classroom partly because RP in this research is made as authentic and meaningful as possible, and partly because "willing to RP" and WTC overlap each other to a large extent. Therefore, the two notions are combined into one in this research.

3. Method

3.1 Subjects

The subjects involved in this study are a convenience sample of 130 adult students at HUST, which has a dozen times the amount of this type of students. This was not a randomly chosen sample for the sake of convenience and accessibility. Fortunately enough, the sample had a large enough size so that when statistic analyses were done on different levels, there were always more than 30 students on each comparative level to guarantee the reliability of the results.

3.2 Materials and procedures

Although there are no scientific principles that can guarantee an optimal or ideal questionnaire (WEN, 2001), a lot has been done to keep the reliability level as high as possible. The questionnaire is designed in clear explicit Chinese, and the researcher was on the spot monitoring the survey so that the students understood all the items in the questionnaire correctly. The activities were carried out for the students to conceptualize so that they could understand them in their true sense. To avoid novelty effects, all the activities were familiar to the students and were carried out by their own teacher. The purpose of the survey was introduced to the subjects as that the researcher and teacher want to know their opinions on these activities so that she can adjust her teaching to their needs. No personal identity information is required so that the subjects felt free to express their own opinions for their own benefit.

As mentioned above, four types of classroom activities were presented to the subjects. After each type of the activities, the participants were ask to rank it on the questionnaire in terms of fondness on a 5-point scale, with 5 meaning "like best" whereas 1 the least. It is estimated that there was no fatigue effect threatening to the reliability of the research because the participants were asked to rank only one activity each time.

Two independent variables, HWD and personality were offered by the participants themselves. The third variable, TP representing students' language proficiency originates from the latest final term exam in HUST. Because of the relatively low level of their language proficiency, the advanced level was missing from this research.

After the data were entered into SPSS, 3 more variables were created for further research. One is the summation of LL score and LA score, i.e., the score of FI. Another is the summation of RP and IC score, i.e., the score of II. The last is the total score of LL+LA+RP+IC. The first two variables were invented for the comparison

between formal and informal instruction, and the last was for an exploratory study which tried to find out the relationship between students' total scoring and other factors. After this, a paired sample t-test was done to compare the 3 pairs of activities (LL vs. LA, RP vs. IC, TI vs. II), then a 3×7 repeated measure one-way ANOVA was run to test means on three comparative levels, TP, personality and HWD. The null hypothesis for the research was that there was no significant difference in any of comparative level. All significant level was set at 0.05.

3.3 Results

Table 1 tells the selected descriptive statistics. The majority of the students ranked FI (78.6%), LL (63.4%) and Total (69.6%) as something they liked or liked very much. The frequency of "dislike" and "just so-so" for II, IC, RP, LA were 52.7%, 56.3%, 65.2%, and 52.7% respectively.

Table 2 shows the results of paired sample t-test. No significant difference arose between LL and LA (t=-1.498, df=111, p=0.137), nor was there any significant difference between RP and IC (t=-1.290, df=111, p=0.200). But significant difference occurred from the comparison between FI and II (t=4.431, df=111, p=0.000).

Table 1 Frequency of different fondness degrees

	LA	LL	RP	IC	FI	II	Total
Dislike	2	2	2	4	1	0	0
dislike	9	7	32	15	2	9	3
Just so	48	32	39	44	21	50	31
like	42	62	27	42	77	47	72
Like most	11	9	12	7	11	6	6

Table 2 Paired sample t-test

	Mean	Std.	t	df	Sig.(2-tailed)
LA-LL	-.1607	1.13545	-1.498	111	.137
RP-IC	-.1607	1.31898	-1.290	111	.200
FI - II	.6429	1.53551	4.431	111	.000

Table 3 One-way Anova on test performance

Dependent	(I)TP	(J)TP	Mean Difference	Std. error	Sig.
LA	beginner	elementary	-.1460	.19375	.753
		intermediate	-.1724	.21482	.725
	elementary	intermediate	-.0263	.19563	.991
LL	beginner	elementary	-.1027	.17973	.850
		intermediate	-.3700	.19928	.183
	elementary	intermediate	-.2673	.18148	.342
RP	beginner	elementary	-.5874*	.22336	.035
		intermediate	-.5716	.24765	.074
	elementary	intermediate	.0581	.22552	.998
IC	beginner	elementary	.1492	.20574	.769
		intermediate	-.1714	.22811	.755
	elementary	intermediate	-.3206	.20773	.308
FI	beginner	elementary	-.2487	.26909	.653
		intermediate	-.5423	.29836	.196
	elementary	intermediate	-.2936	.27170	.559
II	beginner	elementary	.-6869	.46548	.341
		intermediate	-.2853*	.51652	.049
	elementary	intermediate	-.3048	.31594	.629
Total	beginner	elementary	-.6869	.46585	.341
		intermediate	-1.2853*	.51652	.049
	elementary	intermediate	-.5984	.47037	.448

The following tables tell the results of one-way ANOVA. No significant differences emerged from all these comparisons except for the following 3 arenas:

Firstly, on the comparative level of test performance, for RP activities, there was significant difference between opinions of the beginners and the elementary level students (p=0.035). On the same comparative level, beginners and intermediate level students differed significantly on their total scoring, i.e., Total (p=0.049). (Table 3)

Table 4 One-way Anova on personality

Dependent	(I)personality	(J)personality	Mean Difference	Std. error	Sig.
LA	introversion	average	-.1872	.19391	.629
		extroversion	-.1774	.21806	.719
	average	extroversion	.0098	.19591	.999
LL	introversion	average	.2574	.18111	.368
		extroversion	.2731	.20367	.410
	average	extroversion	.0517	.18298	.996
RP	introversion	average	-.4345	.22332	.156
		extroversion	-.7247*	.25114	.018
	average	extroversion	-.2902	.22563	.440
IC	introversion	average	.1252	.20729	.833
		extroversion	.2527	.23311	.557
	average	extroversion	.1275	.20943	.831
FI	introversion	average	.0702	.27356..	.968
		extroversion	.0957	.30764	.953
	average	extroversion	.0255	.27638	.996
II	introversion	average	-.3093	.31751	.623
		extroversion	-.4720	.35706	.420
	average	extroversion	-.1627	.32079	.879
Total	introversion	average	-.2391	.47879	.883
		extroversion	-.3763	.53843	.784
	average	extroversion	-.1373	.48373	.961

Secondly, on the level of personality, also for RP activities, introverted students differed from extroverted ones significantly (p=0.018). (Table 4)

Thirdly, most significant differences appeared on the comparative level of hardworking degree was: for LA, the hardworking group differed from the average working group significantly (p=0.048). For LL, lazy students differed from the average working (p=0.047) and the hardworking (p=0.014). For RP, lazy students again differed significantly from hardworking group (p=0.001). For FI, again, lazy students differed from the hardworking ones (p=0.005). For II, lazy ones once more differed from the hardworking ones (p=0.007). For the total score, hardworking ones differed significantly from the average working group (p=0.043) and the lazy ones (p=0.000).

4. Discussion.

The most striking result is that there were only limited significant differences among the comparisons. Among the possible 66 pairs of distinguishing, there were only 12 pairs of significant differences. That is to say, the students did not see much significant difference between most of these activities.

However, they did make a few interesting differentiations. From the descriptive statistics, we can see that the majority of the students viewed LL and FI activities as something they liked or liked very much. Nearly 70% of the students ranked the summation of all the activities as “like” or “like very much”. These figures are quite

inspiring because it indicates that these adult students were really fond of some type of learning, and as a whole they were willing to learn English well. On the other hand, more than half of the students concluded that they did not like LA, IC, RP or II activities. The ratio is too big to be overlooked. Although students' opinions do not mean everything in teachers' choices of classroom activities, it will be tough to carry out certain classroom activities even if they are beneficial to the students if they simply do not like them. At least the teacher should negotiate with the students and keep them well informed that some less popular activities will prove to be useful and fun in the long run.

As a whole, the students did not view the comparison between LL and LA significantly different. This result obviously shows that Krashen's proclamation (1981, 1982) should be qualified, while Chappelle (2001) and Zhou (2000) have now one more empirical proof to justify themselves. The students on the whole did not distinguish between RP and IC either. They just do not like any forms of communication, ie, II. This is a well-known fact in Chinese adult education. From the t-test of means between FI and II, there was significant difference ($t=4.431$, $df=111$, $p=0.000$). All the students on the whole obviously hailed FI as much more enjoyable than II. According to their answers to the open-ended questions, some thought II is not practical, because it did not relates to the exams closely. Some thought that they felt awkward to put ideas in English. This finding not only challenges Liu's argument (2002) but also seems to be out of place in the present Chinese English educational context. As is known to all that communicative ability nowadays in China is the slogan of most people concerned.

From the perspective of language proficiency, the elementary level students favor the RP activity much more than the beginners, but the intermediate ones did not. The intermediate ones ranked the total score much higher than the beginners, but the elementary ones did not. It seemed a bit confusing, so the cause need further research. On this comparative level, no evidence occurred to support Garrett (2002) claiming that lower level students favor guided instruction more.

On the personality scale, the introverted students differed significantly from the extroverted ones in perception on RP. This result gives another confirmation to Strong's finding (1983). It is an understandable phenomenon, because the introverted students are too shy to enjoy the chance to communicate with others even in their mother tongue, not to say in English.

As far as hardworking degree is concerned, the hardworking students favored LA more than the average hardworking students, but not more than the lazy ones. That is another case calling for further survey. Both the hardworking students and the average ones favor LL significantly more than lazy students. This is an interesting finding. Adult students working harder than the lazy ones would more likely to be taught by teachers directly in a passive way! Those more diligent students told their teacher after the survey that LL saved more time for them, while LA was too time consuming. Perhaps the lazy ones do not care so much about how much time the activities take. Hardworking students differed significantly again from the lazy ones in both FI and II. It showed that WEN's finding does not apply to these adult students. These two groups of students also differ in RP significantly, a result going hand in hand with Tomoko's (2002). For total scoring of the four activities, these two groups once more differ significantly. One plausible explanation may be that the lazy ones are too lazy to be interested in many activities.

5. Conclusion

Although relatively fewer significant differences arose compared with the possible ones, there did exist a few

valuable findings. First of all, these students ranked all activities a bit high. That indicates that they want to learn something in the classroom. Teachers need to work more closely with them to maintain their interest, improve their learning strategy, and try not to fail them.

Another fact is that the factor of HWD came out to be the factor that led to most of the significant differences in this research. The teacher can draw on this finding to guide the students to a more reasonable causality.

Thirdly, the teachers are supposed to help the students develop their language learning strategies if the current teaching trend in China has sound grounds. It is also recommended that teachers can arrange the classroom activities alternatively according to their different degrees of popularity among the students so that the students will not be bored for long and also have chances to reevaluate these activities.

Although the research is carried out with great care and with the help of more experienced researchers, it still leaves much to be improved. Time and recourses permitting, a face to face interview will reveal many reasons under the students' choices in the research. It will be also rewarding to do a research into the relationship between the students' learning styles and their fondness on the activities in this research. Comparative studies on the difference between adult students and other college students are also most likely to be promising and worthwhile.

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