HOW TO TRANSFORM PASSIVE LEARNING INTO ACTIVE LEARNING IN CHINESE

ESL CLASSROOM

Approved by Regina Pauly   Date: May 4, 2011

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A Seminar Paper

Presented to

The Graduate Faculty

University of Wisconsin-Platteville

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In Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirement for the Degree

Master of Science in Education

English Education

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By

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2011

Abstract

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In recent years, researchers have paid much attention to active learning. Research consistently has shown that traditional lecture methods, in which professors talk and students listen, dominate college and university classrooms. It is therefore important to know the nature and importance of active learning, the empirical research on its use, the common obstacles and barriers that give rise to faculty members' resistance to interactive instructional techniques, and how faculty, faculty developers, administrators, and educational researchers can carry out active learning in their teaching and transform passive learning into active learning.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Many students in China are passive in their studies. Students just do what the teacher asks them to do, and they learn what is required for their examinations. They seldom preview their tests and look for more information related to it after school. Why does this phenomenon happen? One of the reasons is that the teaching method most students use is passive learning.

Although passive learning has been the dominant teaching method for many years, it does students much harm (Wang, 2004). For example, the passive learning style can make students lose interest in studying and reduce the quality of their education. There is no doubt that effective methods should be taken to improve the enthusiasm among students and especially to encourage students to make the best of their creativity.

Some studies claim that active learning is more effective than passive learning. Regardless of the subject matter, when active learning is compared to passive learning (such as in lecture), students learn more material, retain the information longer, and enjoy the class more (Norbert, et.al, 2009).

Above all, it is essential to transform passive learning into active learning in the Chinese ESL classroom, and active learning strategies are very important in the Chinese ESL classroom. The main purpose of the present study is to compare the impact of an active teaching approach with a traditional or passive teaching style and

to find ways to transform passive learning to active learning. The research is guided

by the question: Is the active teaching approach more effective than the passive

teaching approach in the Chinese ESL classroom and how does one transform passive

learning into active learning?

Statement of the Problem

The problem expressed as a question is, "How does one transform passive

learning into active learning in the Chinese ESL classroom?"

Definition of Terms

Active learning. It is proposed that strategies promoting active learning be

defined as instructional activities involving students in doing things and thinking

about what they are doing (Liu, 2001, p. 215).

Passive learning. Passive learning is that students are assumed to enter the

course with minds like empty vessels or sponges to be filled with knowledge (Dean,

2001, p. 424).

ESL. Abbreviation for the term English as a Second Language

Delimitations of the Research

The research will be conducted in and through the Karrmann Library at the

University of Wisconsin-Platteville, over a period ninety days. Primary searches will

be conducted via the Internet through EBSCO host with ERIC, Academic Search Elite,

Google/Google Scholar and China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) as the

primary sources. Key search topics will include "passive learning," "active learning,"

and "ESL."

Method of Approach

      A brief review of literature on the studies of active learning strategies employed by ESL learners will be conducted. A second review of literature relating factors include the differences between passive learning and active learning, the disadvantages of passive learning, and the importance of active learning. The findings will be summarized and recommendations will be made.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The definition of passive learning and active learning

Research has consistently shown that traditional lecture methods, in which professors talk and students listen, dominate college and university classrooms. Wang (2004) holds that although passive learning has been the dominant teaching method, it does students much harm.

Some studies claim that active learning is more effective than passive learning. Regardless of the subject matter, when active learning is compared to passive learning (such as lecture), students learn more material, retain the information longer, and enjoy the class more.

Therefore, it is essential to transform passive learning into active learning in the Chinese ESL classroom. The use of active learning strategies is significant in the Chinese ESL classroom. Thus, what is passive learning and active learning?

According to Vicky (2000),

> Passive learning occurs when students use their senses to take in information from a lecture, reading assignment, or audiovisual. It is defined as that type of learning in which it is assumed that the students will enter the course which they want to study with open minds, which are like empty vessels or sponges, and the teachers will merely fill the minds of the students with knowledge, simply for the sake of securing better results in the examination. (p.13)

This is the mode of learning most commonly present in the Chinese ESL classrooms. The lecturer in passive learning is basically a verbal textbook whose lectures are usually dull.

Michel , Cater and Varela (2009) hold that active learning is a phrase tossed around a great deal today on college campuses and it suggests an approach to classroom instruction in which students engage material through talking, writing, reading, reflecting, or questioning-in other words, through being active. According to Gong (2003), active learning involves providing opportunities for students to meaningfully talk and listen, write, read, and reflect on the content, ideas, issues, and concerns of an academic subject.

The disadvantages of passive learning and the importance of active learning

For many people this is the conventional image of passive learning in the Chinese ESL classroom; the teacher standing at the front of the class teaching and the students sitting in their seats listening. This teaching style is often based on the assumption that the teacher is the knower and has the task of passing over this knowledge to the students. Throughout the lesson the teacher keeps control of the whole class, and makes decisions about what the students should do. In this classroom the teacher talks so much and gets very tired in class, while students just keep writing down the teacher's words in a passive manner and get bored. The students have little chance to actually use the second language.

Analysis of the research literature (Xu, 2002, p.95), however, suggests that "students must do more than just listen. Students must read, write, discuss, or be

engaged in solving problems and most importantly, to be actively involved, and they must engage in such higher-order thinking tasks such as: analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. "

Research (Lu, 2000) has shown that active learning is an exceptionally effective teaching technique in the Chinese ESL classroom. In Table 1, the differences between passive learning and active learning are obvious.

Table 1: The differences between passive learning and active learning.

Passive learning	Active learning
You wait for directions and information to be fed to you	You look for ways of being more involved in what you are learning
Information is delivered to you – you just follow what is said or written, and you do as you are told	You are engaged in the whole learning process (and in a position to see why information has been selected)
Different pieces of information are treated as separate units	You look for links between things that you discover
You repeat information without understanding	You make a conscious effort to make sense of, and find meaning in, what you learn. Understanding is usually deeper
You don't reflect on what you have learnt	You are involved in reflection and self-assessment
You may become bored and tired easily	Your attention span is longer because your mind is fully engaged
You use surface processing, in which case you are less likely to understand or remember what you have learned.	Long-term memory is assisted. If you understand what you learn, and keep relating what you learn to what you already know, you are more likely to remember what you have learnt
You are less likely to be able to use what you learn	Linking information helps you to see how you can apply it to different situations
What you study may seem irrelevant	Learning is personalized and interesting
Adapted from "The strategies that lead students to learn actively." by Liu, X. and Gao, Y. X., 2005, *Journal of Elementary and Middle school teaching*. 183(3), p. 49-50.	

According to Table 1, one can find that active learning shifts the focus of instruction from what the instructor, teachers or delivers to what students are able to do with the course material. Similarly, students must enter class prepared to use assigned readings and reviewed material from past classes.

To illustrate the importance of active learning, Chinese scholar Zhang (2003), contends that regardless of the subject matter, when active learning is compared to traditional teaching methods (such as lecture), students learn more material, retain the information longer, and enjoy the class more. A similar point of view is expressed by Western advocates of active learning, for example, Keyser (2000) who believes that not only are students expected to be up-to-date on course material, but they also have to assimilate the material so they can use and build on it later. When students recognize that your course involves active learning, they will also recognize that they must be active if they are to succeed in that course.

Numerous research studies have shown the value of active learning, particularly in improving the achievement level of the lowest-performing students and minorities.

Active learning allows students to learn in the classroom with the help of the instructor and other students, rather than on their own. Classrooms where learning activities are varied give these students the opportunity to excel. Students become involved in their learning rather than disinterested. Involved learners enjoy school and become lifelong learners. (Liu, and Gao, 2005, p.49)

The strategies of carrying out active learning in the Chinese ESL classroom

One noted educational researcher in the United States, Slavin (2004) finds that

To address adequately why most faculty have not embraced recent calls for

educational reform, it is necessary first to identify and understand common

barriers to instructional change, including the powerful influence of

educational tradition; faculty self-perceptions and self-definition of roles; the

discomfort and anxiety that change creates; and the limited incentives for

faculty to change (p.433)

In the traditional Chinese ESL classroom, instructors sometimes also face

disinterested students, time pressures, and the potential difficulty of using active

learning in large classes, and a lack of needed materials, equipment, or resources.

Wu (2008) states that perhaps the single greatest barrier of all is the fact that

faculty members' efforts to employ active learning involve risk--the risks that

students will not participate, use higher-order thinking, or learn sufficient content, that

faculty members will feel a loss of control, lack necessary skills, or be criticized for

teaching in unorthodox ways.

How could one overcome those barriers and transform passive learning into

active learning effectively in the Chinese ESL classroom? So far, the literature on

strategies of transforming passive learning into active learning focuses on three

aspects: what should teachers do to keep active teaching in the classroom? What

should students do to keep active learning in the classroom? How to deal with the

relationship between students and teachers?

For teaching, Daniel (2009) points out that teachers should focus on students' learning rather than their teaching, and the main body of teaching is students rather than teachers.

Much of the research shows that the clear purpose of learning English is very important for students. Niemi (2002) states that if students have a clear purpose of learning, they will try their best to learn; their learning will be initiative; they will be responsible for their own learning; and they will use all learning opportunities to achieve learning objectives.

He also points out that teachers should examine the student's psychology. It requires teachers to do the following:

First, one needs to help students build self-confidence; self-esteem and academic achievement are closely related. If students enhance their self-confidence, they will improve academic performance. On the opposite side, if students' performances are improved, students will enhance their self-confidence.

Second, one needs to eliminate the stiff attitude of students; students' cautious attitude and self-protection make them separate from others. Then they don't dare to answer the teacher's questions, and also don't dare to communicate with others in English. The main reason is that they are afraid of speaking the wrong words. Teachers should try to eliminate students' cautious attitudes, and encourage students to use foreign language boldly, and improve their foreign language from mistakes.

Third, it is necessary to properly handle the anxiety of students. Anxiety will encourage students to prepare for lessons before classes and review after examination,

and then they will achieve better results in English learning. Therefore, teachers should pay attention and make students have less anxiety in language learning.

For students, according to Pipes and Wilson (1996), the students who have a learning initiative should do the following in the process of learning English:

1. Seize every opportunity of communication.

2. Participate in teaching activities actively.

3. Make recommendations to the teacher's teaching methods, ways of learning text and exercises which the teacher arranged.

4. Share knowledge, experiences, emotions, methods of solving problems with others.

5. Accept the correction of teachers and other students.

6. Use reference books, libraries and so on.

7. Discuss problems with other students. (p.22)

Many other researches hold that teachers should pay attention to teaching methods, create the ideal language environment, and provide students with a variety of learning opportunities. In addition, teachers should change the traditional role in the classroom, and use appropriate teaching skills and steps in the classroom. For example, Finocchiaro and Brumfit (1983, p.65) proposed teaching steps in the interpretation of linguistic communication:

1. Present a brief dialogue or several small dialogues.

2. Do some oral practice about every sentence in the dialogue.

3. Practice questions and answers according to the theme of the dialogue or scenes.

4. Do some questions and answers practice around the theme of the dialogue and link with students' personal experiences.

5. Express the function, structure and basic communication languages of sentences in the dialogue.

6. Students find the grammar rules from the basic communication of the language.

7. Verbal recognition or translation of the sentence structure.

8. From the verbal output activity to the free communication.

In this process, teachers should use strong interpersonal skills, not only to help explain what student should do, but also to help students strengthen their memory and learn something step by step.

According to Breen and Littlejohn (2002), devising student-centered teaching plans is essential for keeping students active in the English classroom. Scrivener (2002) holds that

Teaching plan is an effective procedure that contains two parts. The first one is an outline of the procedure of the lesson (i. e. a description of the activities: their order and predicted timing). The second one is background information (i. e. aims for the lesson, target language, material used, predicated problems, etc). All the content of the teaching plan is based on student-centered class teaching. (p. 86)

Therefore, when planning, teachers must consider some essential factors for the students: Will the students enjoy having the lesson? Will they benefit from the lesson? What do they need? What skills will the students be working on? A carefully thought-out plan enables the teacher to think logically and will result in a good effect.

Xia (2003) made a conclusion from his research,

> Classroom activities are very important for keeping students active in English learning, teachers arrange these activities appropriately to arouse students' interests to participate into the activities and create sufficient opportunities for the students to interact with the teacher and other learners. (p.11)

Much research points out that in the process of teaching activities, the teacher and students overcome the difficulties and achieve the teaching effect together. Thus teachers help students to construct their own autonomous learning both as a classroom group and as individuals. According to Yang (2002), those activities are very effective in the classroom.

1. Minute Papers provide students with the opportunity to synthesize their knowledge and to ask unanswered questions. Give students a few minutes at the end of class to answer the following questions in writing: What was the most important thing you learned today? What important question remains unanswered? Variations of these questions, and the student questions and answers they generate, enhance your students' learning process and provide you with feedback on students' understanding of the subject material.

2. Writing activities of many kinds offer students the opportunity to think

about and process information. For example, in addition to minute papers, you could pose a question and then give students time to free write their answers. You could also give students time to free write about other topics.

3. Brainstorming is another simple technique that can involve the whole class in a discussion. Introduce a topic or problem and then ask for student input, which the teacher records on the board.

4. Games related to the subject can easily be incorporated into the classroom to foster active learning and participation. Games can include matching, mysteries, group competitions, solving puzzles, dictionaries, etc.

5. Debates staged in the classroom can be effective tools for encouraging students to think about several sides of an issue.

6. Group work allows every participant the chance to speak, share personal views, and develop the skill of working with others. Cooperative group work requires all group members to work together to complete a given task. Break the class into groups of 2-5 students. Give each group articles to read, questions to answer and discuss, information to share, and subjects to teach to other groups.

7. Case studies use real-life stories that describe what happened to a community, family, school, or individual to prompt students to integrate their classroom knowledge with their knowledge of real-world situations, actions, or consequences.

In addition, teachers can also use technological means, such as projectors, tape recorders, television sets, or computers.

Doing so will make you an "active teacher," and you will cross beyond the essential, but incomplete, role of content expert. Content expertise and active teaching will provide students the opportunity to become engaged learners and dynamic thinkers. All these attributes can also make students acquire a number of learning opportunities and enable them to keep long-term maintenance initiative, teachers can play the leading role of teaching and passive learning will be transformed into active learning effectively.

In order to build up a good relationship between teachers and students, much research holds that how teachers play the role in the classroom is the key for building up a good relationship between teachers and students. In the following, Yang (2003) has noted a number of factors in a teacher that are considered the important personalities and qualifications which teacher should become characteristic of the teachers.

He holds that the effective teacher ---

1.　really listens to their students

2.　shows respect

3.　gives clear, positive feedback

4.　has a good sense of humor

5.　is patient

6.　knows their subject

7.　inspire confidence

8.　trusts people

9. empathizes with a students' problem

10. is well-organized

11. paces lessons well

12. does not complicate things unnecessarily

13. is enthusiastic and inspires enthusiasm

14. can be authoritative without being distant

15. is honest

16. is approachable (p. 22)

Beside these factors, greeting each other warmly before and after class is a good way to improve the relationship between students and the teacher (Breen and Littlejohn, 2002). In addition, motivation and encouragement is indispensable for a teacher. Giving compliments and encouragement as much as possible is wise and necessary: "Well done!" "Good job!" "Much better than before", teachers can use these expressions to build up their self-confidence and encourage participation of their students.

In short, the main task of English teaching is to transform passive learning into active learning. Active learning can help students to think critically, analyze, synthesize, and evaluate information, solve problems within a variety of different disciplines, work efficiently and effectively in groups. It also can make students be the centre of the class, institute students' interest of English learning, so that they love English, learn English, and use English truly from their hearts.

CHAPTER 3

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Recapping on the previous chapters, it appears obvious that most of the published articles on active learning have been descriptive accounts rather than empirical investigations, a large number of important conceptual issues have never been explored. Therefore, new qualitative and quantitative research should examine strategies that enhance students' learning from presentations, explore the impact of previously overlooked, yet educationally significant, characteristics of students, such as gender, different learning styles, or the stage of intellectual development, and be disseminated in journals widely read by faculty.

After reviewing a lot of literatures, it is also obvious that teachers play very important roles in active learning classroom, it is also very essential for teachers to build good relationship with students. Therefore, to change the traditional "filling-duck" (One teaching method that teachers standing at the front of the classroom teaching and students sitting in rows listening) teaching approach and transform passive learning into active learning, teachers should bear the teaching model of students-centeredness in their minds, attach more importance to applying various teaching methods and lively activities would increase more cooperation between teacher and students. If teachers persist in an active method of teaching, students will eventually improve their linguistic competence and their communicative competence, and through the coordinated efforts of individual faculty, faculty developers, academic administrators, and educational researchers. The relationship

between teachers and students must be good. Teachers not only care about students' performances in the classroom, but also pay attention to student's psychology. Through the efforts between teachers and students, active learning in the true sense and passive learning transform into active learning will be realized.

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