

Примечания

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Information Overload and its Influence on Activity Timing in Teaching Communicative English to Chinese Adults

Данная статья рассматривает временные рамки коммуникативных и практических заданий в практике преподавания английского языка взрослым китайским ученикам. Тайминги заданий объясняются с точки зрения теории информационной перегрузки. Практический аспект статьи позволяет тщательно разработать план урока английского языка в контексте мультимедийно-ориентированного общества.

Keywords: cognitive linguistics, communication, information overload, teaching foreign languages, pedagogy

Teaching a foreign language is always a challenge for the teacher as much as it is for the students. In the age of the Internet and mobile data technologies, the classroom paradigm is shifting from the traditional book-based methods of teaching to more interactive, modern technology-based ones. This shift leaves a lot of teachers, who belong to the classic school of pedagogy with questions pertaining to using technology in a language class and to the influence that the availability and accessibility of the information has on the classroom processes.

This article will discuss this paradigm shift as viewed through the experience of teaching English language to Chinese adults. Yet at the same time Internet technology development and accessibility are largely the same all around the world, so the information discussed will be useful not only for expat language teachers working in China and other foreign countries, but also for the teachers who teach foreign languages in their home countries.

It is no doubt that language teaching and its applied methodologies, have a special place within the scope of general pedagogy. The number of students in the classroom, their age and social background, their study purposes and classroom environment all differentiate isolated examples of language teaching. Thusly, it is very important to define the environment and the students the author of this article had taken into consideration when writing this piece of work.

The practical background to this article comes from teaching communicative aspect of English language to small groups of students, one to ten people, in a

traditionally facilitated classroom. The age of the students ranged from twenty to forty-seven years old, and their basic goal was to practice communicative skills in a number of pre-set daily or business English language environments.

Even though this experience defines a narrow scope of the information rendered below, it can be extrapolated to pretty much any modern adult foreign language educational situation.

One of the dominant views of cognitive linguistics and its application to language learning is that of a language learner acting like a certain receiver-transmitter [8, p. 12]. This approach is widely used in computer-assisted language learning, where students are required to do a set of drill exercises on a computer – which constitute language input – in preparation for a class with an actual teacher. The class in this model has a solely purpose of building a favorable environment for the students to produce language output, thusly actualizing and later personalizing language models they acquired through computer-assisted input.

In this approach to language education, language retention rate is described as a number of personalized language patterns that stay in students' long-term memory after a set of input-output sessions [5, p. 32].

The same process can be clearly seen in a traditional language classroom environment, where the students are being introduced to a certain grammatical pattern or vocabulary material first (input), and are later required to practice newly-introduced material via a set of language exercises (output).

An interesting variable in this method is the amount of time allocated for each practice (output) activity. It is universally known that excessively repetitive exercises demotivate the learners and instill a feeling of boredom among the students. To manage classroom boredom, the teacher needs to vary and change exercises, yet having students practice the same target material. In a way, the teacher's role is similar to that of a DJ changing music tracks to prevent public from being bored, yet doing this for one particular purpose, that is, for public to dance.

A certain clash here lies between the amount of time devoted to each of the practical activities and the time in which the students will start to feel bored doing them. To solve this problem, most of the methodological instructions to course books (teacher's books, course manuals and such) have approximate timings for practical activities that help a teacher to maintain a high level of students' interest and involvement and still provide a reasonable amount of time for target material practice. This time varies depending on the type of a practice activity, yet for most English language courses, individual activities, pair work activities and group activities have approximately similar time limits.

In the near past, that is, in the era before the Internet had become so widespread and accessible, the approximate activity timings were as follows: individual activities for language practice (written gap fill, translation and multiple choice exercises) were timed at fifteen to twenty minutes, depending on the level of students and the complexity of the task. Pair work exercises (dialogues, interviews and discussion-based exercises) were timed at approximately twenty minutes. Group work exercises (problem-solving, opinion polling and various creative tasks) were timed at approximately twenty-five minutes [1, p. 11, 17, 23].

A modern teacher, though, may find those timings extremely long, which results in either the need for the teacher to conjure up some activities then and there to make up for the set activity timing or the students feeling extremely bored and not getting the immediate gratification of achievement on completing activities successfully. It is hard to identify a single precursor for this situation; but, if it is taken as a trend, rather than as a series of isolated occurrences, it will be visible, that the classic activity timings got less and less relevant after the dawn of the modern mobile Internet age.

According to the studies of Stross Randall and Bill Kovach, a modern human processes more than three times the amount of information than fifteen years ago [9, p. 67; 3, p. 32], either voluntarily or not. We are being constantly bombarded by advertising, spam emails and social media updates. As highly adaptive intellectual beings, we learn to filter, hyperthread and multitask to avoid information overload [7, p. 19].

The mankind in general is now processing the information at a much faster rate than before, which, consequentially, leads to the emergence of a new kind of an adult student, who is able to apply information overload management techniques in a language class, and who is generally faster and more precise with crucial language-learning skills like finding key words or identifying the target vocabulary than the classic student of yore. Daily information management skills allow these students to complete individual, pair work, and group work exercises much faster, and still be able to retain high result accuracy above "satisfactory" mark.

In China, where the mobile Internet technologies are easily accessible, and every adult student has at least one smartphone, this situation is particularly visible. Modern Chinese lifestyle of being able to access any relevant information at any given time from any location with cellular connection contributes to the students' ability to process, analyze and filter information extremely fast. A typical modern Chinese person is extremely Internet-involved. Local social media, such as WeChat and RenRen and a rise in Internet shopping pioneered by Taobao.com as well as multiple smartphone applications to monitor stock market trends in real time have taught adult Chinese Internet users all the above-mentioned information processing techniques. This trend leads to the overall speed-up of classroom activities not only in English language learning but also in all academic disciplines.

As a result, local and expat English language teachers face with a problem of enriching class content in such a way as to manage boredom and still keep the relevant amount of practice so that students process, retain and actively use the material they studied.

As Chinese language educational questionnaires show, more than eighty percent of students would be happier with a more fast-paced class, citing higher study engagement in classes, run with shorter activity timings and a greater number of activities to do [10, p. 11]. Teachers' job satisfaction questionnaires run by Web International English Language School in 2015 and 2016 also show a trend, where the teachers tend to speed up activities and thusly manage classroom boredom [10, p. 12].

According to the data from the countrywide surveys and the research that followed, Web International English Language School suggested new optimal timings for various activity types for small classes consisting of adult English language learners. According to the research done in reference to teaching communicative DynEd Courseware, activity timings suggested for a communicative English class of up to ten adult learners are as follows: individual activities for English language practice, such as written gap fill, translation and multiple choice exercises need to be timed at ten minutes maximum, depending on the level of students and the complexity of the task. This gives students enough time to maintain the focus on the exercise at hand and to complete it at the peak of their brain activity.

Pair work exercises, such as dialogues, interviews and discussion-based exercises need to be timed at ten minutes maximum as well, which brings them closer to the modern-life communication patterns. According to small talk research by K. Richards and P. Seedhouse, in real-time communication a single topic in a discussion is usually "fresh" for around seven to eight minutes, after which it repeats itself and gets boring, so communication participants tend to change it [2, p. 47]. Bringing pair work exercises' timing closer to the real-world communication patterns helps students master the art of dynamic conversation and negates the need to forcefully bring discussion topics up.

Group work exercises, such as problem-solving, opinion polling and various creative tasks need to be timed at approximately fifteen minutes, which has practically proven to be a sufficient amount of time to keep a group discussion relevant and in focus [4, p. 53].

Such short timings stem not only from the culture of information receiving, which has gotten faster these days, but also from the culture of information transmitting and production. On the receiving side, students tend to treat any visual and audial information the same way they would treat mobile phone notification widgets. They would glance at the information provided, capture the essence of it, and shift their attention someplace else. On the information sharing side, students tend to treat face-to-face dialogues the same way they treat instant messaging discussion threads, that is, they would share the core information with the most relevant data and avoid peppering it with details, similarly to how it is shared on microblogs, where one hundred forty characters' limit is enforced [6, p. 40].

Working with new activity timings suggested above brings communicative English language study into a new era, where information is thoroughly sorted and valued according to its relevance, rather than to the beauty of its form.

This, though, in no way proclaims the demise of the English literature class, where large amounts of textual information are studied, processed and analyzed according to its artistic and cultural value. Yet the object of this article is the communication-focused English class rather than a literary one.

On a side note, since mobile communication mode is becoming more and more prevalent today all over the globe, a piece of practical advice to English teachers working with Chinese adults would be to bring mobile phone communication into the classroom and to organize activities that adequately mirror mobile phone usage in in-

ternational communication. Examples of those activities would be real-time emailing, creating an English language group chat thread on an instant messaging platform and practicing classroom-to-classroom calls on pre-set topics and pre-defined agenda. All these techniques should in no way replace traditional English language teaching methods, but should complement them, giving students a fairly balanced perspective and practical skills required for communication in the information age.

It is obvious that activity timing suggestions and activity modes described above are not isolated to a small class of Chinese adult students studying English language. They can be implemented in various pedagogical situations and with various learners. From this perspective, this article will be helpful to both, "old school" teachers with their transition into the modern age of Internet communication, and to the young teachers, who are still learning the ropes of classroom activity timing management. It mainly explains the reasons underlying a trend of activity time shrinkage in a modern English class, yet besides theoretical explanatory value, this article also carries a practical premise, which is undoubtedly of help for the majority of English language teachers.

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Фонетическая интерференция в русской речи китайских студентов

В статье рассматриваются явления, связанные с практическим освоением китайскими студентами фонетической системы русского языка и обусловленные межъязыковой интерференцией.