

Analysis of the Current Situation of Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language for the Elderly and Discussion of Countermeasures

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Abstract

Teaching Chinese as a foreign language (TCFL) to the elderly, though similar to general TCFL, needs to be treated differently because of the special situation of the elderly in terms of physiology, psychology, and learning ability. Elderly learners are susceptible to failing memory and comprehension during Chinese learning and strong self-esteem is likely to be a stumbling block that hinders the efficiency of learning. This paper discusses the status quo and characteristics of senior people's Chinese learning and explores countermeasures through integration and analysis.

Keywords

The Elderly; Teaching Chinese; Countermeasure.

1. Concept

Teaching Chinese as a foreign language (TCFL) to the elderly, as the name suggests, is Chinese language teaching specifically for foreign senior learners. This kind of teaching is based on general TCFL and has different adjustments in the methods, processes, do's and don'ts, and other aspects of teaching. Closely related to general TCFL, it also has distinctive features. The discipline of TCFL has gradually developed into several branches based on the initial general teaching, with teaching Chinese to the elderly as one of them.

2. Significance of the Study

China's rapid development is drawing the attention of the world and results in a worldwide craze for the Chinese language. As the oriental country is more influential, the number of foreign friends interested in learning Chinese culture and characters is surging, leading to increasing demand for disseminators of Chinese culture. By the end of 2014, 476 Confucius Institutes and 851 Confucius Classrooms for primary and secondary schools had been opened in 127 countries and regions around the world. Over 200 universities in more than 70 countries are still actively applying for Confucius Institutes. In the context of globalization, there are two major changes in foreign learners' requirements for Chinese learning. Firstly, they hope to use Chinese as a tool for communication with which they can quickly fit into the diversified Chinese culture of China, so they want to learn something more than simple daily communication and pay more attention to popular courses such as economics, culture, education, art, and medicine. At the same time, learners expect to master Chinese at different difficulty levels and have various focuses due to their situations and needs. Secondly, more people from different age groups start to learn Chinese, from kids to seniors, in addition to middle-aged and young people. It is worth noting that Chinese teaching to school-age children is still carried out in schools, and the teaching methods and curriculum are similar to those of general TCFL, except for the differences in the age of learners and the difficulty levels of textbooks. However, elderly learners are special in that their characteristics (e.g. physiological, psychological, time, and other reasons) lead to different requirements for Chinese language classes, in addition to the differences in age and textbooks. Since few studies have touched upon TCFL for the elderly, this

paper intends to discuss the current situation of senior people's Chinese learning, explore the characteristics of the learning, and discuss countermeasures after integration and analysis.

3. The Current Situation of TCFL to the Elderly

Hanban (Center for Language Education and Cooperation) provided a lifelong course of advanced Chinese on 18 February 2013, which enrolled more than 20 students upon its inception, with an average age of nearly 50 and the eldest one aged around 80. Elderly learners, especially those with a certain cultural background, have a better understanding of what the teacher imparts to them. In terms of Chinese traditional culture and etiquette, in particular, they can keep up with the teacher's pace, get an in-depth understanding, and even make comparisons and summaries in line with their daily life to resonate with the cultural spirit conveyed by the teacher. Some of them are merely interested in the Chinese language, some are pursuing better communication in China, and some others learn Chinese to feel the profound Chinese culture... In a word, more and more elderly people are learning Chinese now because of different reasons. However, the characteristics of the elderly inevitably cause some problems.

3.1. Strong Self-esteem

Senior learners, from different perspectives, cannot compete with younger people in terms of the quality and efficiency of learning, which triggers a lack of self-confidence among some of them. On the other hand, elderly people are likely to be learned and boast experiences, which boosts their pride when studying with their younger counterparts. Elderly people feel embarrassed and perplexed when dwarfed by younger people. Some of them cannot dispel the awkward emotions so they remain annoyed, which stymies their enthusiasm for learning thus leading to poor outcomes. Some of them even keep arguing with teachers and other students or boycott classes in anger in order to save face, badly affecting the course arrangement. All of these are common examples taking place in TCFL classes.

Thus, the self-esteem of elderly people should be protected in any type of learning task, not only out of respect for the aged but also to lay a foundation for their long-term study. Irrespective of the learning outcomes, seniors should firstly of all be respected and the teachers and other students should try their best to cater to the requirements of the elderly during lectures and activities so that the aged can calmly face their shortcomings and learn Chinese knowledge in a harmonious atmosphere and pleasant relationships with others.

3.2. Unavoidable Physical Conditions

It is difficult to avoid ailments in everyday life, especially for the elderly, who often fall ill as their bodies age. Under such circumstances, they cannot compete with young people in terms of the efficiency of learning, and it will make them feel even more stressed and difficult to catch up if they miss some classes due to health reasons. This is also a challenge for the Chinese teachers as elderly learners fall behind and need to make up missed classes, causing a wider gap among the students in the class and preventing the class from running properly.

3.3. Lower Efficiency

There are three main reasons for the low efficiency of learning among senior learners, i.e. the failing memory, inadequate acceptance of novel things, and a lack of utilitarian requirements and study pressure leading to slacking off. Objectively speaking, these reasons jointly weaken the ability to learn. Elderly people have deeply-bedded values and are subjectively stubborn while objectively unable to easily understand or grasp a new language. Meanwhile, the aged have different purposes for language learning, different from pursuing higher education and job hunting. Some Chinese teachers have not incorporated the philosophy of lifelong learning

into their teaching and the Chinese courses now are overly entertaining, with the basic skills in Chinese teaching ignored.[1].

3.4. The Difficulty of Balancing the Teaching in Mixed-age Classes

While young and middle-aged people are still the majority of Chinese language learners, the elderly and children make up a significant proportion. Therefore, in many cases, learners from different age groups study in the same classroom. The classroom activities and teaching can be designed in accordance with the physiological and psychological characteristics of a certain age group if the class consists of students of similar age. But when there are people from different age groups, the elderly are usually at a disadvantage because they inevitably fall behind. The difficulty of striking a balance is an obstacle for students and also a big challenge for the teacher. Some common teaching methods do not work well on the aged. For example, the “challenge and pressure” approach is new and exciting for young and enthusiastic learners, who are constantly competing with others to fulfil tasks set by the teacher and to renew the records set by themselves. And the “task-based approach” motivates progress. For elderly learners, however, these commonplace methods are no longer so intriguing, and “forcing” them to complete tasks is not a good idea.

4. Discussion of the Countermeasures for Teaching Chinese to the Elderly

4.1. To Thoroughly Protect Their Self-esteem

All learning tasks should be based on respect for senior learners. Many older learners tend to show a lack of self-confidence in the beginning and are less likely to open up to others. When they encounter a problem they cannot understand, they are too shy to ask for help, so that a vicious circle is generated because they move on to the next question without unravelling the first one. Therefore, teachers should encourage and praise them more in class, especially through eye contact, to let learners feel valued and cared for by the teacher, which can constantly strengthen their confidence. If they make a mistake, it is advisable not to point it out immediately but remind them of it after class as long as it is not a major problem to avoid embarrassment. Teachers should take the lead in showing respect for elderly learners when they get along with other younger generations. This not only encourages the elderly to forge ahead without fear of hardship but also carries the Chinese cultural tradition of respect for the elderly, which all students can personally experience.

4.2. To Motivate Their Enthusiasm Through in-class Methods and Alleviate Objective Shortcomings

Elderly learners cannot compete with their younger counterparts in terms of physical fitness, memory, or comprehension, which makes them prone to lose heart in learning. At this time, it is necessary for TCFL teachers to adjust and organize the classroom activities in favour of the elderly to keep them interested and motivated, as long as these activities do not affect other students' learning progress. (1) Many senior people learn Chinese because they are interested in traditional Chinese culture, so more videos on Chinese culture and traditional handicraft skills can be presented to them during the break. This will not only allow the elderly to learn new things during the break but also ensure that they are motivated to continue learning, thus ensuring that the whole class can proceed in an orderly manner. (2) Topics that the seniors are interested in can be selected for dialogue and description practice in class. When talking about something familiar and interesting, no matter football or dancing, the elderly can smoothly communicate with the younger students, irrespective of the generation gap, thus enabling oral practice. (3) It is advisable to mention what has been taught before in subsequent classroom activities, not only unknowingly leading all students to review the knowledge together, but more importantly, recalling the highlights for elderly students. These teaching methods allow

elderly students to learn confidently and positively and at the same time avoid the embarrassment that other students blame the elderly for slowing down the teaching schedule.

4.3. To Treat the Elderly and Younger Students Differently

As mentioned above, many people from different age groups are mixed in a classroom to learn Chinese because of the limited number of classrooms and teachers. They have various learning abilities and physical conditions and always have different learning outcomes. If it is not possible to separate them, it is necessary for the teachers to strike a balance between the students. Since elderly learners are physically weaker, with poorer memory and understanding, and are less able to accept new things, teachers should resort to differentiated treatment as follows. (1) Teachers can lower the requirements of the same tasks for the elderly, asking them to read instead of memorizing, speaking instead of writing. (2) Teachers should encourage elderly students more and not blame their mistakes too much. It is more acceptable to discuss them after class than to point them out in person. (3) When marking the students, teachers can, if possible, increase the grades of elderly students as encouragement without breaking the rules, so that the seniors can find they are not too far behind the younger students, which does not undermine their confidence. (4) Teachers can assign slightly different homework to elderly and younger students in line with the favourite things of both groups, which not only satisfies everyone's preference but also keeps pushing the younger students forward while not leaving the elderly behind. (5) It is advisable to communicate with elderly students during break time and after school, asking for their views and suggestions on the class while answering their questions in order to prevent some senior students from being too shy to talk with others and missing the opportunities to communicate with the teacher.

5. Conclusion

TCFL to the elderly is a seemingly easy but actually complicated discipline, which can only be properly handled with years of experience from teachers. In the process of Chinese learning, senior people's physical conditions, memory, comprehension, and ability to accept new things are all challenged, which is also a great test for Chinese teachers. The physiological, psychological, and learning characteristics of elderly students should be paid extra attention to during TCFL, with suitable remedies for specific conditions. TCFL professionals all want to see that young and elderly students can study together in a harmonious atmosphere and methods such as special care in class and follow up after class can result in good learning outcomes.

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