

A COMPARATIVE STUDY ON THE STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF THE STUDENTS BETWEEN CHINA AND HONG KONG

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Abstract In August 1999, three lecturers and fourteen students of Zhejiang University of Technology (ZUT) and Hangzhou Institute Applied Engineering (HIAE) were invited by the Department of Electrical & Communications Engineering (EE) of Institute of Vocational & Education Tsing Yi (IVE/TY) coming to Hong Kong for a Student Exchange Summer Camp. Joining the camp were seven year 1 Higher Diploma students from the EE department. The objectives of the camp were three folds: (a) to find out any difference in the command of English for the post secondary school students from China and Hong Kong; (b) to substantiate an effective means for the learning of Putonghu ; and (c) to investigate the practical skills and mentality of these students. A series of activities were organized for the students and their performances in all activities were analyzed to achieve the objectives of the comparative study for these two groups of students.

INTRODUCTION

The fourteen students from the two institutes in Zhejiang province were mainly year 2 students in their respective courses, which was equivalent to a 2-year study after graduating from the six-year secondary school in China. The EE students were all year 1 students, and all of whom had done the 2-year A-level study after graduating from the 5-year secondary school in Hong Kong. This showed that all the participating students had achieved almost the same academic attainment since their schooling. Since these two groups of students could only communicate with each other in either Putonghua or English and they were in the same age group, the situations had provided the needed platform for this comparative study.

During the thirteen-day camp, all activities were carried out on group basis; with two students from China and one student from Hong Kong were put in the same group. The program included English learning classes and tests, Putonghua learning classes and tests, individual presentations, sports, shopping, industrial visits, sightseeing, staying with peers' families, debate, meeting and mini-project competition.

Activities and Purposes of the Study

On the first day of the camp, all students attended the first English attainment test, which included basic grammar, Chinese to English translation, English to Chinese translation, comprehension and writing skills. A second test, with the same areas as the first one, was held again for all students one day prior to the end of the camp. Between the two tests, three 3-hour English learning sessions were conducted, and they were "Pronunciation" and "Misuses of English by Chinese". Of course, the purpose of these English sessions was not meant to improve students' ability in English, but meant to share with them the use of English in the normal ways. The two tests were conducted to ensure the consistency of the results, and the aim was to find out the students' weaknesses and strengths in English.

Again on the first day of the camp, all Hong Kong students were tested for the attainment of Putonghua. The test included two parts; one was a presentation in front of all participants, and the other was a peer group discussion. In the presentation, each Hong Kong student was requested to give a ten minutes talk on any kind of subject, and the topics were mainly self introduction, interesting hobbies and local tourism. Each speaker then responded to few questions raised from the floor. In the peer group discussion, the three students in each group discussed and talked about any topics which they shared common interests. After the test, scores were given to each Hong Kong student for his attainment in Putonghua. In each peer group, the two students from China were the language mentors for the Hong Kong students in the rest of the program, they used Putonghua as the only medium of communication for the activities either held in or off the campus. This kind of enforced and environmentally embedded learning model was repeatedly used to drill the Hong Kong students all day long on the use of Putonghua over the next twelve days. By the end of the program, Hong Kong students were tested again for their attainment of Putonghua after the camp. This time the format of the test was different from the first test and more pressure was on the Hong Kong students. Each peer group conducted a fifteen minutes talk in front of all the participants, and then the Hong Kong student of the group responded to questions raised from the floor. Finally, he was requested to brief the audiences about the camp and what he had learned from it. Apart from the individual peer group, scores were given to the Hong Kong student from all participants. The testing areas for both tests were on pronunciation, fluency, use of words and understanding of Putonghua.

Opportunities for both groups of students to communicate and exchange of views/ideas were ample; through many occasions such as laboratory visits, industrial visits, shopping, touring Hong Kong, preparation for a debate, during meals, singing, sports, peer family visits and mini-project competition etc, students were able to mix naturally and had a free atmosphere to better understand each other.

Three 3-hour sessions of mini-project were organized and had been used to test the students' logical thinking, practical skills, understanding of science, co-operation, mentality/maturity and creativity. The seven peer groups were re-organized into four larger groups for the mini-project competition. Each of the four groups was requested to design and build a toy car and students had to make use of the available building blocks, driving mechanism, interface units and microprocessor supports for their designs. The target was to get the car to complete two separate routes in shortest time. The end result of the project work was not important, but it was through this process that we were able to observe the students' performances and behaviors in the aforesaid areas. The other test, which had similar effect, was the debate competition, but this time students were divided into two groups with one as the "for" group and the other as the "against" group. The major difference between these two events was that one involved practical skill and the other was purely hypothetical work.

Results and Their Meanings

Results of the two English tests^[1] revealed that both groups of students were very good in the category of translation from English to Chinese. This was probably due to rich of vocabularies, hence students could do the translation easily. For this part Zhejiang students had better Chinese expressions and better handwriting than the Hong Kong students.

On the contrary, in the category of translation from Chinese to English, students' average performance was 30% worse off than the previous category. The major weaknesses were in lack of vocabulary, misuses of words, and confused structures of sentences, both groups of students had similar weaknesses. The main reason contributing to the poor performance in this area was the lack of reading time on English publications; most of the students had literally not spent any time on non-curriculum English materials at all.

Both groups of students had an average score in English comprehension, although HK students had

a slightly better average than their peers did. Apart from the contributing factor as stated in the above paragraph, students were found unable to precisely comprehend the materials and their relate information. The effect would be more pronounced, if the subject matters had been unfamiliar to the students.

Zhejiang students had better performance than their peers did in the category of English grammar. Looking together with the category of writing test, the weaknesses for HK students were more pronounced. They were very weak in using correct grammar and tenses to form sentences, hence the messages were unclear and confusing. Whilst for the Zhejiang students, clearly they had better training in English grammar, and at least rarely made mistakes in simple and short sentences. They committed the same mistakes as the HK students did in writing long sentences; the major mistakes came from incorrectly use of tenses in most of the sentences. The other weakness in writing was the style of sentences; direct translations from Chinese were found in as many sentences as they wrote. Of course the meanings of these sentences would inevitably be ambiguous and confusing, especially to non-Chinese readers.

The biggest reward from the camp to the HK students was the amazing improvement in Putonghua. The results of the two tests^[2], before and after the program, showed remarkable improvement in Putonghua for the majority of them. Of course the embedded learning environment was the major catalyst for the learning process, HK students also played a very major role in actively taking part in all the events. Apart from the test results, the improvements could be easily seen from their involvement in debate, project work and meeting. From the self introduction session in the first day of the camp, where they could hardly express any meaningful sentences in Putonghua to the meeting session in the last day, where they could talk freely about their feelings. In fact the results has been anticipated because the department has a strong belief that embedded approach is a proper way to learn a language.

On mini-project work, where required practical skills and sense of engineering, HK students were found superior as compared to their peers. Zhejiang students were good in designing the outlook of the car and some of them were also good in computing programming. But on practical work, they had very little and limited ideas on how to make things work. However, they were quick to learn and responded very well to challenges.

Other observations from this Student Exchange Summer Camp were: (a) Zhejiang students had higher anxiety to learn and were more serious about learning than their HK counterparts; (b) HK students tended to obey rules and were better in time keeping; (c) Zhejiang students had received more thorough education, whilst HK students were only good in technical subjects; and (d) HK students were more independent, whilst Zhejiang students tended to rely on supports from others.

CONCLUSIONS

EE department financed the whole operation of this Student Exchange Summer Camp, and for this reason the student sample could not be too large. The small group size might have affected the accuracy of some investigative results. However, the preliminary results from the targeted activities were found useful and encouraging, which is worth further and wider investigation. The comparative study has revealed many areas, which educators need to pursuit for the betterment of student quality, and more effective teaching methodology. The weak areas, which have been suggested from the study, are:

- (a) Poor English communication skills in speaking, understanding and writing. The problems lie in lack of practice and an environment for students to get training.
- (b) Insufficient education on sense of responsibility and work attitudes. Many students had shown some degree of lack of commitment because they did not have the concepts of

being responsible and behaving with proper attitudes. Students would not be 100% learning, if they do not get the concepts right in their minds.

- (c) Zhejiang students have to strengthen their practical skills and sense of responsibility, whilst HK students have to strengthen their language skills and be more committed to study.

Further Study

An astonishing fact has been revealed during the camp, the Chinese students had equal, if not better, English standard as the HK students did. But the fact is that the former group of students only started learning English from their first year in secondary schools, while HK students all learned English since their kindergarten years. This area is worth further investigation in the wake of finding a right approach for the teaching and learning of a second language.

With the success that the camp has achieved in Putonghua, a broader study on this embedded approach to help learn English is recommended. Learning in class can only help students to memorize the rules and skills of a language, but an embedded environment can help students to practice and own the results from it.

The other fact also revealed during the camp was that learning an engineering subject could be more beneficial through work base approach. Students were given a project and, through trials and tests, they learned the technology much faster and in a more useful way, which helped them to remember for rest of their lives.

Note 1: Results of English Tests

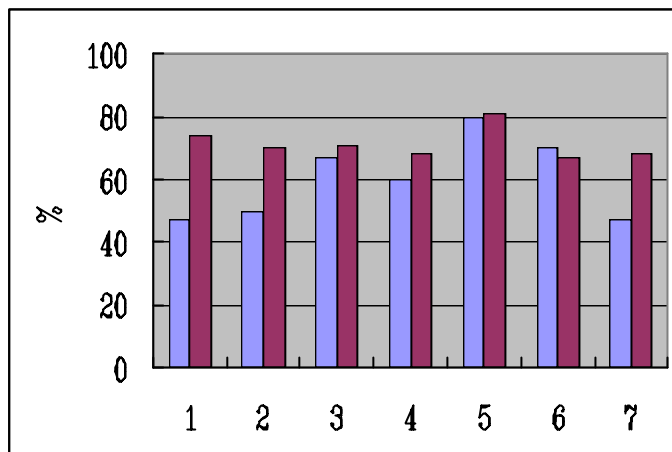
	1	2	3	4	5
	English to Chinese	Chinese to English	Comprehension	Grammar	Composition
HK Stdts	98	68	80	63	66
Zhejiang	100	72	68	77	69

Results of the First Test

	1	2	3	4	5
	English to Chinese	Chinese to English	Comprehension	Grammar	Composition
HK Std	95	64	58	61	65
Zhejiang	97	62	52	71	72

Results of the Second Test

Note: 2 (Test results of Putonghua)



Left: The results of first test in Putonghua

Right: The results of second test

- #1 student: Attended 3-year Putonghua in primary school and took a short course
- # 2, 6 & 7 students: Attended 2-year Putonghua in primary school
- #3 student: Attended 3-year Putonghua in primary school
- #4 student: Parents speak Putonghua, but he never attends any class.
- #5 student: Brought up in China, and knows Putonghua

REFERENCES:

- [1] Irina Terehoff, "Learning by living the language: The benefits of foreign exchange programs.", Reston, Jan 2000.