

## **A Brief Talk on the Application of Second Language Acquisition Theory in Junior Middle School English Teaching**

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### **Abstract**

**This thesis attempts to apply some theories of second language acquisition to study briefly the factors of obstacles of junior middle school students in the process of second language acquisition. It aims to summarize the inherent and potential hindrances that English learners are always faced with and put forward some accordingly feasible solutions. Through the analysis, it is found that second language acquisition, as a complex process, is influenced by both internal and external factors: age, language environment, learning motivation, plateau period, etc. In light of the problems in every aspect, teachers should at first have a correct attitude and understanding. Based on the commonness of the hindrances and the differences between students, teachers should teach students in accordance with their aptitude and help them overcome a variety of barriers to acquire English with the help of some theories of second language acquisition. Although the ability in English acquisition varies with each individual, the stages every learner passes through are generally the same with high similarities of obstacles. Therefore, it is hoped that the results of this thesis can be effective in solving the common problems in English teaching of junior middle school.**

### **Keywords**

**Second Language Acquisition; English Teaching; Junior Middle School.**

### **1. Introduction**

Since the 21st century, China has set off a frenzy of English learning, which makes our primary and secondary school English education face greater opportunities for reform and development. In fact, English acquisition is a growing challenge for junior middle school students due to cultural differences, the absence of a language environment, age constraints, etc. The purpose of this paper is to summarize the obstacles shared by students of junior middle school and analyze how teachers can help them acquire English better and more efficiently under the guidance of some theories of second language acquisition.

### **2. Text**

Students are in a critical period of language acquisition between the ages of 11 and 13. The main concept of the Critical Period Hypothesis advanced by David Lenneberg is that there is a limited time period for language acquisition. From a neurophysiological perspective, he explains that learning will be more difficult after puberty and calls the corresponding turning point brain lateralization.

The above-mentioned determines the particularity of junior middle school students, which is an inevitable problem that teachers must focus on in the preparation of learning materials. The teacher must carefully select the learning materials to be taught to ensure the optimal input effect of students. In this way, what is the optimal input? As far back as the end of the 1990s,

American language educator Krashen proposes that Acquisition only occurs when the material of the second language is slightly above the student's current language level, that is, understandable material. In his "i+1 theory", "i" represents the current language level of the students, and "1" the slightly exceeded part. If the learning materials are too simple, students cannot learn meaningfully new knowledge, hence their internal driving force will decline. Obviously, it is not conducive to the improvement of their acquisition. On the contrary, it may lead to their laxity in English learning. Similarly, if the learning materials are too difficult, students feel that the materials are apparently beyond their understanding scope, and they can't digest and absorb them effectively, which will be counterproductive. Therefore, English teachers should pay special attention to the selection of learning materials when preparing lessons. They should choose materials with moderate content and difficulty to arouse students' internal driving force as much as possible, which will make their thinking more agile, their attention more focused and their imagination richer. One thing needs to be emphasized is that teachers should not only put much thought into the selection of extracurricular teaching materials, but avoid indiscriminately imitating the materials from the textbooks. For relatively difficult texts, Teachers can add necessary notes, appropriate deletion or introduce relevant background information before class to ensure that students can accept and absorb the knowledge effectively, they're about to learn.

Evidently, if teachers want to choose materials suitable for students, they should have a comprehensive understanding of the students' existing language knowledge structure in the first place, to correctly estimate and evaluate the difficulty of the selected learning materials according to their level. In addition, students will show differences in learning strategies, motivation, aptitude and learning style. For example, according to Ehrman and Leaver, learners basically come down to two types: ectenic and synoptic. Ectenic learners prefer or require conscious control over their learning; while synoptic learners leave more to unconscious processes. And it is the difference of students that makes it necessary for teachers to thoroughly know about students. Teachers can learn about students' learning styles, advantages or disadvantages by observing students' external performance and analyzing students' several performance reports; they can also further understand students' needs and problems in learning English through questionnaire survey and direct conversation with them. New teachers can learn from the teachers who have rich teaching experience over the years, and old teachers should constantly update their concepts, study for life, and master more methods to understand students thoroughly to make corresponding adjustments in teaching according to the characteristics of students.

The diversity of students exacerbates the difficulty of second language teaching. According to Harte, learning motivation, one of the differences among students, can be generally divided into 2 categories: internal motivation and external motivation, further divided into seven types by Gao Yihong on the basis of his quantitative study of Chinese foreign language learners. Harte insists that internal motivation, like learners' strong interest in English culture and language itself, is more durable for foreign language learners. By contrast, external motivation, like the intention to get good grades or gain praise from teachers, is less resist to the disturbance of the external factors. Given that, teachers should break the limit of the simple teaching method in precious years and explore and adopt rich and colorful teaching means. By virtue of diversified teaching activities such as dubbing games, group competition and animation show, teachers actively guide students to stimulate internal motivation to maintain strong enthusiasm for second language learning and persist in related learning activities.

In addition, to some extent, the seemingly adequate classroom teaching also limits the second language acquisition of students. For junior high school students, English language teaching is mainly carried out in the classroom teaching. But in reality the amount of time spent learning English in class is not in direct proportion to the level of language acquisition. According to

Krashen, many people spend long hours in studying the language in a classroom situation, but are unable to use it properly. There always exists a distance between classroom language or text book language and authentic language materials. Therefore, teachers should incorporate extra-curricular activities into the teaching plan, like role-playing activities or summer camp. By providing students with real language communication situation, students can really participate in the use and learning of English, promote to develop English thinking in communication and finally could acquire English.

It is ineluctable that students will encounter some common problems that shared by second language learners regardless of how full preparation the teachers have made before teaching. For example, after a period of hard work, some students could feel that they have not made noticeable progress because of the emergence of "plateau period". That is, slow progress after learning for a period of time. At this point, it is the teacher's duty that helps students realize that language learning is not a linear process, but a U-shaped process. If students persist in going through the low tide of language learning--the bottom of the U-shape, the language proficiency level will continue to improve; if they stop and give up at this point, the lack of appropriate English practice may lead to stabilization, which is the precursor of fossilization. That means they're going to be in a situation where they always make mistakes which can't be corrected.

Undeniably, there are a large number of phenomena of mother-tongue negative transfer that students find difficult to get rid of during the process of second language acquisition. This kind of influence of mother tongue mainly in terms of negative transfer in vocabulary, culture, syntax, etc. Due to the great discrepancy between English and Chinese cultures, when students of junior middle school express or understand English based on our own national habits and cultural patterns, the results are usually inappropriate. For example, they could find it challenging to understand phrases with color terms accurately. When they encounter the problems of part of speech, word order and word form, they tend to transfer the correct usage of Chinese words to English, and eventually make a mess. In addition, the negative transfer of writing habits, especially in punctuation, cannot be ignored for junior high school students. They have difficulty with normalized expressions restricted by grammatical rules, let alone the fixed collocations and idiomatic expression. There is no doubt that the interference of mother tongue in second language acquisition involves virtually all aspects. However, teachers can guide students to make full use of the favorable aspects of mother tongue and actively use the positive transfer as much as possible to help students overcome the influence of fossilization. Teachers should incorporate culture into language teaching. When explaining key words, teachers should skillfully integrate the cultural meaning into them and reveal the symbolic meaning of them, rather than merely the superficial meaning of words. Before explaining the content of the text, teachers can add some relevant cultural background knowledge to help students better understand and master the gist of the text. Although some people emphasize that English teaching should pay more attention to the practicability of language, and even propose "weakening grammar teaching". In junior high school, however, without the support of systematical grammar, students cannot understand English expressions correctly which could eventually lead to their fragmented expressions without framework. When explaining grammatical rules, teachers should reveal the connection and difference between new and old knowledge, strengthen the comparative analysis of similarities and differences between English and Chinese, and improve their sensitivity to the differences of expression habits.

Negative transfer of mother tongue is arguably the main reason for the errors. Teachers should pay attention to master the scale of error correction. For students' mistakes, teachers should not ignore them, nor should they point out every mistake. If there are some key or general grammatical errors, teachers should point out and correct them. At the same time, it should be noted that the way to correct errors should be mild, for example, to indirectly correct students'

errors by means of question confirmation. For children aged 11 to 13 in the rebellious period, indirect error correction method is generally advocated, and direct error correction method seldom. In this way, teachers not only correct the mistakes of students in time, but protect their self-esteem. As for the small mistakes in students' language communication, teachers should not interrupt the communication activities to correct them, but just write down some representative mistakes and find the appropriate time to explain and correct them. In teaching activities, teachers should not take error correction as the ultimate goal, while pay attention to the success and progress of students, build a universal, relaxed, democratic and harmonious classroom atmosphere for students, and make the utmost efforts to keep and improve their interest in learning.

Language acquisition is a lengthy process. Based on the situation of Chinese primary and secondary school English learners that English acquisition is becoming more and more significant and challenging, teachers should select appropriate learning materials according to students' overall age characteristics and individual language proficiency levels. Meanwhile, teachers should constantly enrich their own theoretical knowledge of second language acquisition and apply the rules of it, especially at some critical turning points to help students reduce or overcome the negative factors in English learning and guide them to learn English more actively and effectively.

### 3. Conclusion

This paper is dedicated to use some theories of second language acquisition to make an analysis of the problems long existing in English learning and put forward some ways to help overcome the obstacles from the teacher's point of view.

First of all, teachers should be aware of the obstacles and attach importance to them. Secondly, teachers should apply the theories of second language acquisition to summarize the common problems students encounter during their studying English. Thirdly, teachers should lay emphasis on guiding students to overcome the obstacles in different stages of second language acquisition, and implement a series of coping strategies which could be practical and effective in second language acquisition based on analyzing the factors leading to these difficulties.

All in all, there is still scope of improvement in English teaching of junior high school. More efforts and researches into this aspect are worth making, and more fruitful and effective solutions are anticipated.

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