

Study on the Language Attrition in College English Teachers in Colleges and Universities

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ABSTRACT

English proficiency and professional knowledge structure in college English teachers have a direct influence on the construction and development of students' knowledge structure. On the basis of the three factors that affect language attrition — foreign language proficiency prior to attrition, social emotion, and the amount and frequency of contact with foreign languages, the author analyzes problems existing among college English teachers, discusses the possibility of language attrition in college English teachers, and finally provides constructive opinions and measures.

Keywords: *Language attrition, College English teachers, Professional knowledge.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Language attrition, also known as language loss, refers to the loss of language skills after a bilinguals or multilingual stops or reduces the use or learning of that language. In 1980, the importance of the study of language attrition was first recognized at conference on Attrition of Language Skills held at the University of Pennsylvania in the United States in 1980. Since the conference, many language attrition studies have been made overseas. Gradually, language attrition evolved into an independent research field. Generally, the study of language attrition has been carried out at three levels, namely, why attrition occurs? (reasons), what undergoes attrition? (contents) and how attrition occurs? (mechanisms of occurrence).

Compared with the studies in foreign countries, the study of language attrition in China started late. Since Zhong Shuneng (2003) introduced the study of language attrition to China, research in this field now has a history of twenty years, and many have yielded desirable results. However, through reviewing and sorting out previous research results, it can be found that most of the studies on language attrition in China mainly focus on learners. However, study on foreign language teaching should not be only limited to learners, because as an important part of teaching and learning, teacher undoubtedly has a direct and important effect on

learners' foreign language learning results. Similarly, it is not inappropriate to neglect the study of the language attrition in teachers.

In view of this, this paper aims to take university English teachers as the research object. Based on the analysis of three affecting factors found in previous research, this paper will then discusses several problems existing in college English teachers and then explore the possibility of English attrition in these teachers and the necessity of maintaining and improvement of the English skills and knowledge, so as to initiate more related research.

2. FACTORS OF LANGUAGE ATTRITION

Relevant studies at home and abroad identified seven influencing factors of foreign language attrition. For the convenience of discussion, this paper selects foreign language proficiency level, social affective factors, and exposure to foreign language.

2.1 Foreign Language Proficiency Level

Kennedy (1932) found that the final language proficiency level before attrition is one of the most significant factors that affect language attrition. Godsall-Myers (1981/1982) studied students who

learned German as the second language. He confirmed that high-proficiency learners retain large amount of knowledge and the rate of German attrition and final German proficiency level is inversely correlated. Vechter, etc. (1990) Summarized this phenomenon as "the inverse hypothesis", that is, the final foreign language proficiency prior to attrition is inversely correlated with the amount and speed of attrition. In addition, the researchers further found in the follow-up study that different levels of proficiency made a difference to the degree of attrition. There is a remarkable demarcation line set in different language proficiency levels, above or below which the amount and rate of language attrition differ dramatically. Neisser (1984) refers to this demarcation line as a "Critical Threshold" in language attrition.

Foreign linguists have made persistent efforts to assess the value of "critical threshold". Nagasawa (1999) identified the threshold value as the "superior" level in ACTFL scalogram. ACTFL, the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, published Provisional Proficiency Guidelines in the early 1980s as the organizing principles of foreign language study and the instrument for the evaluation of language ability. The criteria at the superior level described in "provisional Guidelines" is: being able to express self effectively in most formal and informal settings on practical, social and professional topics.

2.2 Social Affective Factors

Social affective factors like attitude and motivation have been proved to affect the attrition of language skills. In second language acquisition, motivation and attitude play a very important role in the process of second language learning and have either a positive or negative impact on the effect of second language learning.

Similarly, in the field of language attrition, Kennedy (1932) also found that motivation and the thought of continuing to learn a foreign language can help prevent attrition. Edwards (1976, 1977) found that motivation and attitude can first affect the efficiency of language use and then reduce the attrition rate. Snow, Padilla, & Campbell (1984) chose 58 Spanish college students as subjects to explore the role of language attitude in foreign language attrition. Factor analysis showed that language attitude was related to the attrition of conversational and writing skills. Gardner (1985) found that participants with lower levels of

motivation and negative language attitudes suffer severe attrition on both conversational and comprehension skills. The attrition degree is correlated with language attitude. Nagasawa (1999) investigated seven American Japanese majors and found that students with positive language attitude and strong learning motivation had a lower degree of Japanese attrition.

2.3 Amount and Frequency of Contact with the Target Language

In most cases, language attrition occurs when language learners stop or reduce their exposure to a foreign language after the termination of their formal language training. In this case, increasing the frequency and amount of contact with the language can effectively inhibit the occurrence of attrition. Learner's exposure to the target language takes place in either naturalistic or human-intervention settings.

Low frequency of contact with the target language in a naturalistic state will accelerate the occurrence of attrition. Edwards (1977) investigated 455 Canadian civil servants whose second foreign language was English or French, and found that language attrition did not occur in those civil servants who had been using and learning English. For those civil servants who speak French as a foreign language, there has been a remarkable attrition. The main reason for the difference is that the former have more opportunities to contact and use English, so language ability and skills are better retained. In addition, Clark (1984) also found that learners with less foreign language exposure showed obvious attrition in conversation and reading skills, but not in listening skills.

Human-intervention contact mode can reduce or even prevent attrition. In the United States, for example, U.S. Army Language Service specifies that some foreign languages must be retested every two years. In Japan, in order to prevent the attrition of English among children returning from English-speaking countries, some civil organizations provide these children with a few hours of contact with native speakers every month, so that they can communicate in English and increase the frequency of using English.

3. SOME PROBLEMS EXISTING AMONG COLLEGE ENGLISH TEACHERS

3.1 Gradual Waning of Linguistic Skills and Knowledge

The enrollment expansion of colleges has led to a rapid increase in the number of students as well as a shortage of teaching staff. Dai Manchun et al. (2004) selected 40 colleges and universities at different levels to better understand the current situation of college English teachers, and found that more than sixty percent of teachers were under the age of thirty five and fifty two percent of them didn't receive graduate education. Due to the lack of necessary language training, some teachers need to further improve their English skills and abilities. In addition, the expansion of college enrollment allows many students to get the opportunity to continue to study in colleges and universities, some students with poorer academic performance are also allowed admission. Some colleges and universities show a downward trend in students' quality. This phenomenon is more obvious in some secondary and vocational colleges. Some students do poorly in English. Therefore, teachers have to adjust the teaching contents and methods and spend a lot of time in class helping those students improve basic linguistic skills. Therefore, teachers lose many opportunities to communicate with students in English. To them, the acquired linguistic knowledge and skills cannot be practiced in class. Therefore, for the above subjective and objective reasons, if teachers don't consolidate and enrich linguistic knowledge in their spare time, language attrition is more likely to occur.

3.2 Shouldering Heavy Workload

College English teachers undertake heavy teaching tasks. According to a nationwide survey of college English teachers conducted by Wang Haixiao (2009), ninety percent of teachers have more than 10 classes per week. Ten percent of them have more than 16 classes a week. In addition, college teachers also need to do scientific research. They also have to deal with the pressure that life brings. According to Dai Manchun (2004), female teachers make up seventy nine percent of the total, which means that many of them have to devote a lot of time and energy to taking care of children and families outside of their daily work. Therefore, overloaded pressure from teaching, research and life makes college English teachers have no time to

pay attention to the development of their professional knowledge. They spend less time on learning and updating knowledge every day, and the cessation or reduction of contact with English will easily lead to attrition.

3.3 Occupation Burnout

College teachers are also the possible people prone to job burnout. According to Maslach's three-dimension theory of burnout, two manifestations of job burnout are emotional exhaustion and knowledge exhaustion, which are specifically manifested as: on the one hand, individual emotions are in a state of extreme fatigue and their work enthusiasm is completely lost; On the other hand, individuals lose the desire to explore new knowledge and feel tired of English. Tang Jin (2011) used Maslach Job burnout questionnaire to investigate college English teachers in 9 universities. He found that 46% of teachers had moderate level of job burnout and job burnout was more likely to occur in young teachers aged from 30 to 39. The harmfulness of job burnout is obvious. It not only affects the teaching level of teachers and their personal professional development, but also is not conducive to the cultivation of English talents. At the same time, it also has a serious impact on the quality of college English teaching and the sustainable development of society. From the perspective of language attrition, as in this circumstance teachers suffer from emotion fatigue and have less desire and time to expose themselves to English in leisure time, language attrition is very likely to happen.

4. CONCLUSION

It can be seen from the above analysis that there is a very high possibility of language attrition among college English teachers. In order to prevent attrition from affecting teachers and students, the author puts forward the following suggestions:

Firstly, college English teachers should establish the awareness of language attrition prevention and the idea of lifelong learning. They should try to acquire more linguistic knowledge after work and reach or even exceed the critical threshold of language attrition. Previous studies have confirmed that the attrition on language skills is selective. Tomiyama (1999) found that compared with receptive skills like listening and reading, output skills such as speaking and writing are more likely to undergo attrition. It is well-known that

language input and output are equally important in language acquisition. Therefore, in addition to extensive reading, listening to radio, and other activities to ensure language input, teachers should also strengthen language output activities, such as writing diaries and academic papers every day and increasing the opportunities to speak and use English every day.

Secondly, college English teachers should cultivate positive emotions, overcome job burnout, and deal with the pressure of teaching and research scientifically and reasonably. Teachers should also pay attention to the improvement of their psychological quality. Teachers with good psychological quality can properly deal with pressure and turn pressure into a driving force. But teachers with poor psychological quality tend to become depressed under heavy pressure. They are likely to lose interest in people and things surrounding them and become indifferent to everything. Therefore, teachers must improve their ability to cope with pressure, enhance the adaptation to different environments, and are able to deal with problems timely and effectively. At the same time, department concerned should also pay more attention to the teachers' mental health, hold some psychological lectures regularly and carry out psychological counseling and so on. Having a more positive mindset, teachers will devote more time and energy to work and English learning with full enthusiasm and increase exposure to English.

Thirdly, universities and educational administrative departments should provide teachers with more opportunities for further study and overseas exchange. Because in native language environment, teachers can get gain more opportunities to speak and use English and also gain a better understanding of foreign culture, which helps to cultivate their interest in learning English and strengthen their learning motivation. On the other hand, exposure to English in this way can continuously activate and strengthen the English knowledge acquired. This can effectively prevent the forgetting and loss of knowledge, making the occurrence of language attrition impossible.

Based on the theory of attrition and the actual situation of teachers, this paper discusses the attrition of English language among college English teachers in China and puts forward some suggestions. Of course, this paper also has some limitations. For example, in terms of research methods, further quantitative research can be

conducted to find out among the five linguistic skills — listening, speaking, reading, writing and translation which skill(s) is(are) more likely to undergo attrition.

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