

The Effectiveness of Monolingual Teaching on Students' English Listening Ability

Ruan Xinbei¹, Wardatul Akman Din²

¹Faculty of Psychology and Education, Universiti Malaysia Sabah;
Fuyang Normal University

Jalan UMS, 88400 Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia
287269283@qq.com

²Center for Internationalisation and Global Engagement,
Universiti Malaysia Sabah

Jalan UMS, 88400 Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia
wardadin@ums.edu.my

*Corresponding Author

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Abstract: Nowadays in China, the English proficiency of non-English majors in universities and colleges, in general, is not as satisfactory as expected. One of the reasons is supposed to be the sharp decrease of English input during classroom time, compared with that in junior and senior high school. The research investigates whether monolingual teaching is a possible answer to the problem and the role of the monolingual classroom in improving students' listening performance. The research is quantitative in nature. It adopts a quasi-experimental design, with two classes of freshmen as participants, one being the experimental group, receiving monolingual teaching while the other is the control group, which receives traditional bilingual teaching. In each class, there are 40 students. Before and after the implementation of 15 weeks' monolingual teaching, all the students have to take the pretest and posttest respectively. Besides, all the students have to take The Self-assessment Scales in China's Standards of English Language Ability before and after the implementation of monolingual teaching to see whether they themselves consider their listening ability as having improved. Together with the interview on some students, the research finds that students' listening performance in the experimental group does have a statistically significant improvement, compared with the control group and that L2 can help to change the class atmosphere and inspire

students to learn English. The research serves as an empirical evidence for the effectiveness of monolingual teaching on students' listening ability, as well as an indication for the direction in how to help the reform of foreign language teaching, especially English teaching in universities and colleges in China in the future.

Keywords: *Bilingual teaching, Listening Ability, Monolingual Teaching*

INTRODUCTION

In China, English has always received great attention due to the increasing importance of English as the globally accepted language and the increasing participation of China in various activities in the world. In August 1978, the Chinese Foreign Language Education Symposium was held in Beijing. In the symposium, it was put forward that “Enhancing foreign language education is an important component to improve the level of science and culture of the whole Chinese nation. High-level foreign language education is one of the prerequisites of an advanced nation as well as an advanced people. Therefore, it is a long-term strategic plan to do well in foreign language education.” As a result, students are burdened with high hope to be equipped with high English proficiency.

Currently in China, English is usually taught from the third grade in primary school, about 2 to 4 periods every week with each period lasting for 40 to 45 minutes on average, the position of which is secondary only to Chinese and Mathematics, both of which play a predominant role in primary school. As students enter junior high school, the span for English witnesses a soaring increase as 1 to 2 periods every day on average will be spent on English with each period lasting for 40 to 45 minutes. After that, the time spent on English in senior high school will be significantly more, about 1.5 to 3 periods with each period lasting for the same amount of time every day. In both junior and senior high schools, English is seen to acquire the same central position as both Chinese and Mathematics. In the senior high school entrance examinations in many provinces in China, English has the same total scores of 150 points with Chinese and Mathematics. The same is true for the National College Entrance Examinations, which is considered as the most important examination in China.

However, after students get into universities and colleges, the class time for English witnesses a sharp decrease, which may also vary from two periods per week to four periods per week, with each period equaling to 40 to 45 minutes. Although also a required course, the English course receives much less attention than the major courses from both students and teachers. Even as time goes by, from the third year, English may not be taught any more, whether as a required course or an optional course. Those who have eagerness to study English or the need to pass some English test can mostly rely on self-learning.

1.1 PROBLEM STATEMENT

Due to the sharp decrease of class time and much less attention to English, the English proficiency of Chinese university students is far from satisfactory. According to the China's Standards of English Language Ability (CSE), college students should be able to reach CSE-5 or even CSE-6. The result of a recent questionnaire showed otherwise. The questionnaire was designed to allow the students to test their own English proficiency according to The Self-assessment Scales in China's Standards of English Language Ability, which provides detailed descriptions in the nine levels in eight aspects, with level-1 being the lowest and level-9 the highest. 201 freshmen answered the questionnaire and they were asked to choose the level which description(s) they think match their own situations best. The results showed that in six aspects (i.e. organizational competence, listening comprehension, reading comprehension, oral expression, written expression, and pragmatic ability), only less than 20% of the freshmen assume that they have reached level-5 or beyond. Listening comprehension seems to be the worst part, according to the questionnaire results.

What's more, in an interview, more than 70% of the students answered that the part they fear most in English tests is the listening test. The reasons vary, including that they cannot understand what the speaker(s) is/are saying, that they cannot catch up with the speaker(s) pace, and so on. So, it can be found out that many, if not most of the university students, have not acquired the satisfactory English proficiency as expected, especially in listening ability.

1.2 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The study, as stated in the title, aims to explore the effectiveness of monolingual teaching in improving students' L2 proficiency. To be more specific, the study, in current situation of English teaching in China's higher education, is going to dig deep into the problem, and possibly answer the question as to whether converting the traditional bilingual classroom into monolingual classroom, will facilitate or hinder improvement in students' listening performance.

1.3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS

The research question is listed as follows: Does the implementation of monolingual classroom improve students' listening ability in English as L2, compared to bilingual classroom?

Based on the above research question, a research hypothesis is proposed as follows: Monolingual classroom in College English teaching plays a statistically significant role in improving the performance in listening in CET-4.

1.4 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The study is significant in that it will help to define the role of L2 in students' L2 performance, a much-focused and hot-debated issue in China, and even around the globe. It may present as a good piece of advice on how to reform the current English teaching in universities and colleges in China, especially since the country has been trying hard to look for better ways to produce more qualified graduates, with English as L2 proficiency being one of their characteristics. A more suitable curriculum may be reconsidered and redesigned if more of such research could be conducted.

All in all, this study can at least assist in exploring one of the possible ways for addressing the problems and difficulties existing in the current teaching pedagogy. It may not present an absolute solution to these problems, but it may reveal one of the possible answers.

1.5 LITERATURE REVIEW

1.5.1 TEACHING ENCOURAGING THE USE OF L1

The debate over monolingual teaching and bilingual teaching has had a long history, thus giving rise to different teaching theories, principles and methods concerning whether and how to use L1 in foreign language teaching and learning. Some instructors and students prefer only or maximum use of L2 in the classroom context, while some others insist that students' L1 share an important, if not prominent, role in teaching and learning English. Yet, some others even advocate the maximum use of L1, although this has long been frowned upon.

Historically, the grammar-translation method, is perhaps one of the oldest teaching methods- it once occupied certain parts in foreign language learning. In this method, L1 was commonly used in order to make abstract grammar rules more specific and easier to understand. Another similar example is community language learning, which also relied heavily on translation between L1 and L2, not focusing on mechanical translation but a comfortable and secure learning atmosphere.

However, history has proven that the only or maximum use of L1 in classroom context would do little, if any, good to the improvement of students' L2, which is also the reason why such teaching methods have now been despised and out of favor for long and gradually given way to other teaching ways advocating more use of L2. But it does not mean that the use of L1 is no good at all in the process of teaching and learning L2. Quite to the opposite, L1 may still play a certain role in language lessons because teachers may adopt their L1 consciously or unconsciously. A study by Cummins (1981) showed that monolingual instruction allows for more in-depth understanding and cognitive development, particularly in complex subjects like mathematics and science. Another study by Lindholm-Leary (2001) revealed that students who received instruction predominantly in English (L1) in a bilingual program had higher scores on standardized tests compared to students who were taught bilingually. The reasons for this may lie in that L1 is easy for students to understand and easy for

the teacher to adopt explaining such things as grammar items. Additionally, using L1 in foreign language teaching can effectively ease the nervousness and lower the affective filter, as in Krashen's input hypothesis, so that students can learn in a friendly and comfortable environment, as proposed in community language learning.

1.5.2 TEACHING ENCOURAGING THE USE OF L2

Contrary to what has been mentioned above, there also exists many scholars and teachers advocating learning L2 through L2. Such teaching methods include direct method, immersion method, natural method and so on.

The teaching methods have withstood the test of time and proven useful and productive to some degree, although still with some deficits. However, it has been agreed that L2 input is of vital use and significance in teaching and learning L2. Since the classroom may be the only or major environment from which students have the access to L2, as is the case around the globe, especially in most places all over China, the class time spent in putting in L2 does count much, thus giving rise to the many scholars and teaching practitioners who hold the opinion that the more students are exposed to L2, the more quickly and easily they will learn the language. (Kim & Elder, 2008; Ruiz-Funes, 2002; Crichton, 2009) And L2 owns its role in teaching and learning the language itself.

What's more, Hu (2010) focused on the listening and speaking part in English teaching in a Chinese university and analyzed the current situation that college students in China are now consciously learning. However, a lack of subconscious or unconscious acquisition due to the lack of a natural environment for acquisition, results in the creation of a large number of students who can get high scores in examinations but with relatively low application abilities. Therefore, Hu (2010) put forward some new teaching methods for listening and speaking courses, one of them being creating an all-English environment in class to keep students immersed in L2 and to encourage enough output to

help improve students' L2 proficiency. Such findings are shared by Xie (2001) and Hu (2008), all of whom encourage to increase the input of L2 and also emphasize that the input of L2 should be interesting to attract students' attention, and of high quality to improve students' L2 abilities.

There indeed exists some disadvantages of the only use of L2 in the classroom, as agreed by some of the scholars. For example, some think that it may produce a high filter affective in some of the students, which may lead to lower efficiency and less desirable effects in improving students' L2 level. Some others hold that it may waste more time since teachers may spend more time on some activities, such as explaining some abstract linguistic concepts. But, the advantages of the maximum input of L2 should never be underestimated and ignored.

1.5.3 SUMMARY

The debate over the use of L1 and L2 in teaching and learning L2 has never ceased. Whichever side one is on, there are a lot of arguments, experiments and evidence in both theory and practice which will be of great support. Reviewed from a diachronic perspective, the benefits of the use of L2 outweigh those of L1, based on the previous studies. Therefore, it is worth trying to implement a monolingual classroom with all input of English as L2 to explore the effectiveness of monolingual teaching in the context of English teaching and learning in higher education in China.

2. METHODOLOGY

This part deals with the methods and design of the research. The research is designed to compare participants' performance in pretest and posttest, and, with the assistance of SPSS, to determine whether there is statistically significant improvement in participants' performance in listening tests, after the monolingual classroom has been implemented, thus determining the role of monolingual teaching plays in improving students' listening ability.

2.1 PARTICIPANTS

The research is conducted among students in their first year in a Chinese university. In the research, two intact non-English major classes, with 40 students in each class, are chosen, one being the experimental group (EG) and the other one, the control group (CG). In both classes, there are both male and female students, aged between 17 to 19 and both genders are evenly allocated in the two classes. All the participants adopt Chinese as L1 and English as L2. Before entering the university, all the students have received at least 6 years of formal English education in both junior and senior high school.

The two classes are taught by the same teacher, using the same teaching plan and the same teaching materials, thus guaranteeing that the teaching content are the same in both experiment group and control group and that the teacher influence can be reduced to a minimum level. According to the teaching plan, the previous four units in the same textbook are covered. The teacher, being a native speaker of Chinese, has 10 years of College English teaching experience and has obtained 7.5 points in an IELTS (Academic), which is a well-grounded proof of her English proficiency.

In the research, the control group received traditional bilingual teaching (i.e. teachers and students in the classroom teaching and learning shared and used both their L1, Chinese, and L2, English), and the experimental group, monolingual teaching. on the other hand. The whole research will lasted around 15 weeks, 4 periods in each week, with 45 minutes in each period, which amounts to 2,700 minutes in total.

2.2 INSTRUMENTATION

2.2.1 PRETEST AND POSTTEST

In order to ensure the authenticity of the test, the research adopts the listening test in CET-4 (College English Test - Band 4) as its pretest and posttest. CET-4, planned in 1986 and implemented in 1987, is a national examination governed by the Department of

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Higher Education, the Ministry of Education of China. It is seen as the most important, the most widely taken, and the most official English examination in universities and colleges in China. It can reasonably be concluded that in China, CET-4 has been regarded as a yardstick for measuring a university student's English proficiency. The listening test in CET-4 includes three parts: News broadcast, long conversations and short passages. The listening test from the most recent CET-4 was chosen as pretest and posttest respectively in the research. The timing and detailed description are shown in the following table.

Table 1. The timing and detailed description of listening test

Parts	Detailed description	Time	Score
News broadcast	Three news items and 7 multiple choices, with 2 or 3 after each news.	About 25-30 minutes	1%*7=7% ¹
Long conversations	Two conversations and 8 multiple choices, with 4 after each conversation.		1%*8=8%
Passages	Three passages and 10 multiple choices, with 3 or 4 after each passage.		2%*10=20%

2.2.2 THE CHINA'S STANDARDS OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE ABILITY (CSE)

The China's Standards of English Language Ability (CSE), was released by The National Language Commission, Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China on February 12th, 2018 and implemented on June 1st, 2018. It describes an English user's English proficiency into 3 stages, including 9 levels, from eight aspects.

According to the CSE, college students should be able to reach CSE-5 or even CSE-6. So, participants have to take The Self-assessment Scales of CSE in the beginning and at the end of the research for all the students to gauge their own listening ability.

2.2.3 INTERVIEWS

Ten of the participants, 5 males and 5 females, in the experimental group were chosen at random to take the interviews, which is in the form of open questions. The interview was taken at the end of the research, and investigated amongst others, about the interviewees' feelings and opinions on the monolingual classroom to see whether there are any changes before and after the implementation of the monolingual classroom.

2.3 DATA COLLECTION AND DATA ANALYSIS

In the beginning of the research, the pretest means of both experimental and control groups in each major will be checked in paired samples t-test to make sure that there is no significant difference between the English proficiency of the participants in both groups. All the scores of participants in both groups in the posttest are collected and had been run through a paired samples t-test. This is to compare the scores of the experiment and control groups of the research so as to determine whether or not the intervention has had any considerable effect on the experiment group. The statistical analysis above is the main focus of the research.

Besides, the results from the students' answers to The Self-assessment Scales of CSE, together with those from interviews, are adopted to see whether the students themselves consider there is any improvement in their listening ability and for helping to ascertain the significance of monolingual classrooms in enhancing students' listening ability.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The following tables show the students' performance in both groups in the pretest and posttest.

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Table 2. Descriptive Statistics

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
CG-pretest	114.18	40	14.856	2.349
EG-pretest	110.83	40	11.277	1.783
CG-posttest	107.90	40	12.072	1.909
EG-posttest	131.98	40	20.569	3.252

Table 3. Paired Sample T-test in CG and EG in pretest

Paired Differences								
CG - EG	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
				Lower	Upper			
	3.335	21.672	3.427	-3.581	10.281	.978	39	.334

Table 4. Paired Sample T-test in CG and EG in posttest

Paired Differences								
CG - EG	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
				Lower	Upper			
	-24.075	21.654	3.424	-31.000	-17.150	-7.032	39	<.001

Table 5. Paired Sample T-test in CG between pretest and posttest

Paired Differences								
pretest-posttest	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
				Lower	Upper			
	6.275	20.129	3.183	-.163	12.713	1.972	39	.056

Table 6. Paired Sample T-test in EG between pretest and posttest

Paired Differences								
pretest-posttest	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
				Lower	Upper			
	-21.150	23.804	3.764	-28.763	13.537	-5.619	39	<.001

Table 7. The Results of The Self-assessment Scales of CSE

	Below CSE-5	CSE-5/CSE-6	Higher than CSE-6
CG-pretest	27	13	0
CG-posttest	26	14	0
EG-pretest	26	14	0
EG-posttest	18	20	2

From the above tables, several findings can be easily concluded.

1. In Table 3, the $\text{sig.} = .334 > .05$, indicating that the students' performance in listening comprehension in the pretest had no statistical difference between the two groups.
2. After the intervention of monolingual teaching, it can be seen that the mean of CG did not increase but decreased from 114.18 to 107.90, about 6 points lower. On the contrary, the mean of EG increased from 110.83 to 131.98, an increase of about 21 points. In Table 4, $\text{sig.} < .001 < .05$. : this shows that the performance of students in EG in listening comprehension had a statistical improvement, compared with CG.
3. In Table 5, the $\text{sig.} = .056 > .05$, which means that CG students' performance in listening comprehension had no statistical difference between pretest and posttest.
4. In Table 6, the $\text{sig.} < .001 < .05$, which means that EG students' performance in listening comprehension had a statistical improvement between pretest and posttest.
5. The EG students also consider that their own listening ability has improvement. In Table 7, before the pretest, the numbers of the students in both groups who think they have reached CSE-5 or CSE-6 are almost the same. After monolingual teaching, the number in the EG increases from 14 to 20 while that in CG stays nearly the same. Moreover, there are even 2 students in the EG who think they have reached CSE-7. So, from the students' perspective, monolingual teaching does indeed facilitate in their listening ability.

The results of the study demonstrate that after the implementation of monolingual teaching, students' performance in listening comprehension does show a statistical improvement, which proves that the increase of L2 input would significantly facilitate teaching and learning L2, at least in listening. The findings coincide with the opinions of many experts and scholars, such as Krashen (1982), who put forward in his input hypothesis, the focus of teaching and learning L2 should not be the explicit grammatical structures or learning activities, but rather on occupying classroom time with acquisition tasks or activities. According to his hypothesis, a learner must be exposed to enough comprehensible input before he reaches the level $i+1$, with level i standing for the learner's current L2 level. In his opinion, when they receive second language input that is one step beyond

their current stage of linguistic competence, acquirers will improve and make progress. If acquirers understand the input, and there is enough of it, “i+1” will be provided. Numerous studies have shown a positive correlation between comprehensible input and language acquisition. For example, a study by Swain and Lapkin (1995) found that immersion students who received comprehensible input showed higher language proficiency levels compared to those who did not. Although in agreement with the importance of input, some scholars claim that SLA is not achieved merely through comprehensible input. Other types of language input such as incomprehensible input, comprehended input, and comprehensible output are also considered to improve language learning through providing the necessary input. (Bahrani et al. 2014) Students' answers to the interview have also proven that. In the interview, almost all the students said that when the teacher used English only in the classroom, they had to focus really hard to understand what the teacher was saying, which did help to improve their listening comprehension. On the contrary, students receiving traditional bilingual teaching claimed that they still studied as always, and did not pay more attention to what the teacher was talking about than before. What is interesting to note is that 7 students interviewed said that at first, they found it hard to catch up with the teacher. But several classes later after they have gotten used to monolingual teaching, they gradually found that they could understand more, and later, even more, which greatly enhanced their confidence in their English ability, thus triggering more interest in English. At the end of the study, they even looked forward to English class, which has never occurred before, in their own words, “I have never imagined that I would long for an English class, but it did happen!”. Another 5 students said that monolingual teaching appeared ‘fresh’ to them since they have never had any class presented completely in English, which greatly attracted them to the lessons.

CONCLUSION

This study focuses on the effectiveness of monolingual teaching, in which English serves as L2, on students' listening ability in higher education in China. Taking into consideration the important role input plays in teaching and learning L2, the study is of great significance.

First of all, the study reveals that monolingual teaching can effectively increase L2 input, which is of great help in improving students' listening ability. Therefore, the implementation of monolingual classroom should at least be an option in further reform for English teaching, at least for students in higher education in China.

Furthermore, the study also indicates that using L2 can change the classroom atmosphere to a great degree, and it helps to break down the traditional teacher-student barriers. L2 can be a real communicative tool in such a classroom. As Seligson (1997: P.22) said, "By using English most or all of the time in class, you give students vital listening practise, and the opportunity to respond naturally to spoken English."

To sum up, increasing the L2 input plays a major role in college English teaching since it directly affects students' English proficiency. As a result, teachers should try to put in as much English as possible in their classroom in order to improve students' English ability, at least in listening, as well as drawing students' interest and attention to learn English, as the study proves. The debate over whether L1 or L2 should be adopted in teaching and learning L2 may never cease, but it always pays off to have more L2 input for students. How can one expect to manage a certain language without being exposed to the language itself, after all?

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