

# **PART I**

**INTRODUCTION**

# Chapter 1

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## Teaching and Literacy Problems Abroad and at Home

Reading is the most important academic skill and the foundation for all academic learning. If our children cannot read, they are on the road to academic failure. Teaching children to read must be our highest priority.

—California Task Force on Reading, Every Child a Reader

### 1.1 Some Problems in English Teaching in Middle in China

In modern society, reading is one of the basic skills for everyone to get success in any field. How to teach students to read well has been one of the controversial issues in the field of English teaching, and it is not an easy job for us English teachers to do. One of the reasons is that English teaching is always affected by different teaching approaches and English teachers are often confused about what method will be used.

Before 1980s, traditional approach dominated English teaching

in China, which attached great importance to knowledge and rules about language, but neglected other functions of language and neglected developing students' abilities in using it. Since 1980s, the communicative approach has come to influence English teaching greatly, and many teachers have come to realize that English should be taught as a kind of tool for communication. In English class, all four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing should be trained and paid much attention to, among which the skills of listening and speaking have been given special attention to.

Therefore, the teaching concept of whole language approach has become very popular, which stresses that language should be presented as a whole but not as isolated pieces; teachers should attempt to teach language in a real context and situation; all four modes of language are used, thus lessons include all four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing, rather than a single skill (Richards, 2000). One of the central beliefs is that language should be learned from "whole to part" with word-recognition skills being picked up by children in the context of actual reading, writing and "immersion" in a print-rich classroom, which means that we don't need to teach students systematic knowledge about grammar and pronunciation. The concept of whole language has been widely spread and accepted by many of middle school teachers in China.

Admittedly, since we began to carry out the opening and reforming policy, environments for us to learn English have been greatly improved in China. Students learn English not only from teachers but also from other media such as radios, records, TV and Internet. They attend kinds of supplementary classes after school to improve English. Furthermore,

they can have direct talk with foreigners. We must admit that we have already made great progress in teaching and learning English, because English has become so popular and Chinese students are no longer so deaf-dumb in using English as it used to be years ago. Many Chinese students now can speak very fluent and idiomatic English. However, it cannot be neglected that with the acceptance of whole language approach, new problems in English literacy have appeared.

Firstly, it is investigated that spelling errors are quite serious, which brings about so bad results that many students cannot get good scores in some important examinations such as the exam from Junior School to Senior School, or the entrance examination to College (许有国, 2000). The research indicates that 52.7% to 53.5% of the errors are greatly related to students' incorrect pronunciation, 38% of which appeared in the words, which end with the consonant letters. These errors can be divided into the following five types (肖旭月, 2001; 何安平, 2001).

1) Related to the mistake of final consonant of a word. For example, caught—cough; offend—offen; hello—hellow; although—althought; flag—flat; front—frond, etc.

2) Related to the mistake of double writing of consonants in a word, such as difficult—dificult; impossible—imposible; untill—until; mirror—miror; terrible—terible; satellite—satelite; suddenly—sudenly; million—milion, etc.

3) Related to the mistake of the continuous reading of consonants. For example,

(1) C+l: flag—fag; explained—expained; puzzled—puzzed.

(2) C+r: cross—coss; across—aross; regret—regeret; drove—dove; surprise—surprise.

(3) n+C: wonderful—woderful; offender—offeder.

(4) Others: against—againt; instead—intead; remember—remeber; surprised—surpride; smiled—similed; crossroads—crossroades.

Except the phonetic factor, 38.5% of spelling errors is caused by the another factor that Chinese students do not know or sometimes misuse the grapheme-phoneme rules in English (何安平, 2001). As we all know, there exist a certain alphabetic principles in English. Each letter or letter combination stands for a certain sound. However, the sound of the letter or the letter combination often changes. That is to say the relation between the sounds and graphemes is single but multiple. For example, the sound /i:/ can be pronounced at least in 11 different ways: *fee*, *me*, *machine*, *sea*, *field*, *conceives*, *key*, *quay*, *people*, *subpoena*, *Caesar*. It has the same conditions that the same grapheme has different sounds in different words. For example, *game* /eɪ/, *cat* /æ/, *what* /ɒ/, *American* /ə/. Therefore, the writing principles in English are not easy to master. When writing, students may overuse the spelling rules so that some spelling errors happen. For example, *factor*—*facter*; *instead*—*insted*; *peasant*—*pesant*; *phone*—*foan*; *kite*—*cite*; *what*—*wat*; *right*—*rite*, etc.

Secondly, many students cannot read a word according to English orthography or English notation. If they learn some new words or phrases, teachers must teach them. Without teachers' help, they do not know how to read a word or even a regular word.

Because most of them do not know there are certain mappings between the sounds and printed forms of words.

And finally, when they remember words, they cannot use the grapheme-phoneme rules but just remember them by repeating mechanically. For the lack of phonemic awareness, students' reading comprehension will be influenced in some degree.

## 1.2 Literacy Crisis and Reading Activity in the USA

Actually, these kinds of problems in literacy have also been quite serious in the USA since whole language approach was adopted widely, which is called "literacy crisis" by some American educators. Statistics shows that 95% of American students have difficulty in learning to read. Another 20% to 30% of American students learn to read at ease once exposed to formal instruction. That leaves 60% for whom learning to read is a major problem. As many as 20% of Americans above the age of sixteen are classified as functionally illiterate—unable to use print to perform essential tasks—and the ranks are growing every year (Levine, 1994). It was described in an article named "Why California Kids Can't Read?" that Rebecca, a second-grader, wrote a page, in which there were many spelling mistakes. For example, seed is written "sd", and smile is written "sinil". When you read this page, you cannot determine where sentences end, since the student had not been taught punctuation. For example, the sentence "I go to my class." is written as "I got gum calls." Without the student's help, you could

not finish reading the page.

It is reported that the crisis in literacy also influences students' reading. Many students in the USA can just derive the surface understanding, but pay no attention to details of what they read. Without detailed information, it's impossible for them to gain a real understanding of what the author is saying (Singal, 1991).

As one might expect, students who do not read at an advanced level can't write well either. The average incoming Harvard student has a "utilitarian command of language" resulting in sentences that follow a simple subject-predicate format with little variation or richness of verbal expression. Students' essays in college are often composed without the slightest sense of paragraphing, and writing that can't sustain a thought for more than half a page.

The sharp decline in test scores is another apparent problem, which troubles Americans. For example, the Stanford Achievement Test, which has been served as one of the main instruments for measuring pupil's progress in American school, and the Scholastic Aptitude Test, which retains its well-deserved status as the most important educational measuring device in America, both have gone down greatly.

Evidence is mounting that whole language approach may not be all that effective, and that its underlying premises may simply be false. In the USA, educators and parents have attacked many school districts that have used the whole-language method for a subsequent drop in test scores. In Texas, a significant minority of schools has elected to spend their own money on phonics-based reading program

rather than use whole-language course funded by the state; in California, \$ 150,000,000 was investigated to organize the teachers to be trained by phonics instruction. The protest against whole language approach happens not only in the USA, but also in Canada and Britain. For example, in Canada several citizens' groups have been formed to protest the widespread adoption of whole language methods; and in England in late 1992, the British Education Secretary, alarmed at declining achievement scores, called for a return to instruction in basic skills. His action followed an advisory panel's report that derided "foolish methods that often lead to poor results", including Britain's version of whole language teaching.

At the beginning of this new century, Bush, American President, issued his new education plan with the title "No Child Left behind" (胡庆芳 , 2001). This new education plan includes ten items of education reforms, of which, one of the most important items is to emphasize and improve children's ability to read and write. To co-operate with the reform, an activity called "Reading First" was started by the American government, which must guarantee that every child in the USA can learn to read when he or she is in Primary Three. After 100,000 research papers about reading were studied, the National Reading Panel issued a report in April 2000, which contained the latest research merits in the domain of reading research—phonological awareness has a great good effect on children's reading. The new achievement about reading research will be offered and applied in classes of the schools all over the USA except the money and other strategies, so that this activity will



be ensured to succeed. Therefore, at the present, phonological awareness training is conducted in the effective teaching of reading in the USA by teaching students how to segment and manipulate the spoken sounds. When training students' phonological awareness, children must be taught that these sounds in a word can be represented by English letters, which means phonics instruction is conducted at the same time. As being discussed in the following, this method is to train phonological awareness combined with letter-sound instruction.

Phonological awareness and its role in beginning reading have the potential to confound supporters at both extremes of the whole language vs. phonics "debate" over reading instruction. Regardless of instructional technique, phonological awareness is an essential element for reading progress (Griffith & Olson, 1992). In another study, it is found that children with high phonemic awareness outperformed those with low phonemic awareness on all literary measures, whether they were taught using a whole language approach or traditional basic instruction. Whole language advocates need to admit that not all children develop this necessary ability simply through immersion in a print-rich environment and that some children will need direct instruction in phonological awareness. "Phonics first" supporters (and perhaps even "phonics only" supporters) need to admit that teaching students letter-sound correspondences is meaningless if the students do not have a solid visual familiarity with the individual letters and if they do not understand that the sounds (which can be complex, shifting, and

notoriously rule-breaking) paired with those letters are what make up words (Adams, 1990).

What is needed, and what many practitioners probably already actually implement, is a balanced approach to reading instruction—an approach that combines the language and literature-rich activities associated with whole language activities aimed at enhancing meaning, understanding, and the love of language with explicit teaching of skills as needed to develop fluency associated with proficient readers. Honig (1996) offers a review of reading research supporting such a balanced approach and presents detailed guidelines on how to integrate whole language principles with the necessary reading skills. Common sense would seem suggest that most teachers should, in fact, blend systematic skills instruction with the use of appealing literature—and many, in fact, do.