Research on Classroom Interaction of International Chinese Online Teaching in Post-Epidemic Era

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Abstract

In the post-epidemic era, international Chinese online teaching still faces four problems in classroom interaction: implement difficulties, single interactive form, insufficient interaction design, and unsatisfactory interaction effects. Interaction, which plays a very important role in second language acquisition, is an inevitable path to realize communication goals and improve the effectiveness of international Chinese online teaching. Therefore, we can improve the classroom interaction of international Chinese online teaching from five aspects: teaching content, teaching process, teaching medium, learners and teachers.

Keywords: international Chinese, online teaching, classroom interaction

1. Introduction

Since the outbreak of COVID-2019, online teaching of all courses has been carried out in full swing across China. By the fall of 2020, the domestic epidemic in China has been well controlled, and most colleges and universities have restarted normal offline teaching; at the same time, the epidemic abroad is unstable, and international students of Chinese colleges and universities are stranded abroad and cannot return to China. So, their courses had to be continued by online teaching. Chinese language learning is one of their compulsory courses. The online teaching of Chinese language, which is also called international Chinese education in the academic circle, on one hand, has accumulated a lot of effective experience on online teaching in the previous stage, on the other hand, there are still many challenges in the post-epidemic era, the biggest of which is the design and implementation of classroom interaction.

2. Analysis of Current Situation of Classroom Interaction in International Chinese Online Teaching

In the early days of the COVID-2019 outbreak, Chinese teachers responded to the call and actively carried out international Chinese online teaching (hereafter ICOT for short). After one or two semesters' online teaching practice, their relevant researches have shifted from extensive focus on implementation and completion to detail-focused classroom control and curriculum improvement, and the researches on classroom interaction have also achieved some results.

At present, ICOT is mainly realized through the

live broadcast platform. Most teachers have mastered how to deliver a lecture through instant communication, including instant call, text or voice message, to guide students to interact with them through the live broadcast platform, which makes the current Chinese online courses have a certain degree of completion on interaction. However, due to some objective factors, implement difficulties still exist; at the same time, some other problems such as relatively simple interaction form, insufficient interaction design and poor interaction effects are all challenges.

2.1 Implement Difficulties

In the early stage of the epidemic, most colleges and universities carried out online teaching in the form of live broadcast. Wu Yongyi (2020) pointed out that interaction is very difficult in online teaching due to the separation of time and space. Cao Xiuling (2020) also believes that online teaching has greatly reduced the interaction between teachers and students. Sun Rui (2020) also pointed out that a defect in online teaching is the limited interaction.

2.1.1 Interaction Is Subject to Time Difference

A prerequisite for online live classes is that the time difference is within an acceptable range for most teachers and students. This is related to the national distribution of international students stranded abroad. If the time difference between their time zone and Beijing time is within an acceptable range, live classes can be conducted on the basis of compromises between teachers and students. In Jianghan University, where the author is located, most of the international students come from Asian and African countries, and there is a time difference of 3-8 hours with Beijing time. In order to take into account all students, the courses for international students are arranged from 14:55 Beijing time every weekday, and the latest class ends at 21:45 Beijing time. If the students in the class are from American countries and the time difference is too large, it is inconvenient to conduct live teaching, and classroom interaction is impossible.

2.1.2 Interaction Is Subject to the Network

Another important constraint on course interaction is the network. First, the teachers' network conditions must be very stable and smooth; second, the students' network environment must also be good. However, the network development in some overseas countries and regions is still in its infancy phase, and network instability occurs from time to time, and even weather conditions can affect the quality of the network, which is a constraint affecting classroom interaction. Even when the network is normal, delays and mutual interference in language transmission can affect interaction. When talking about interaction, Cao Xiuling (2020) mentioned that in order to ensure a smooth teaching network, some teachers turn off their cameras. In order to prevent mutual interference, students generally mute themselves in class, and they only open their micro when they are going to talk. They cannot talk freely, which is inconvenient. In addition, as the time lag phenomenon always happens in the instant communication, the slow responses from both teachers and students make the interaction in low efficiency.

2.1.3 Interaction Is Subject to the Platform

At present, the most frequently used online live broadcast platforms for ICOT include ZOOM, DingTalk, Tencent Conference, Tencent Classroom, etc. Each platform has its own advantages and disadvantages, but none of them are designed for online teaching or international Chinese teaching, so the interaction is also subject to the functional limitations of the platform. In addition, due to international political risks, some platforms may not be available in some countries.

2.2 The Form of Interaction Is Relatively Single

At present, the interaction of ICOT is mainly carried out through real-time talk and voice or text message, which is relatively single. Liu Lening (2020) believes that the biggest difference between online courses and face-to-face teaching in normal classroom is that online courses lack real and diverse interactivity. Language learning requires multimodal perception, and it is not enough to just listen to the teacher. It also requires vision, feeling, emotion, expression and body language, which are not available or limited in most online courses.

2.3 The Insufficient Interaction Design

The teaching content and teaching design of online live courses is not a simple transfer of offline courses, which needs to be adjusted according to the attributes of live broadcasts. However, at present, some teachers only have the basic ability to complete the live courses and they have not improved to the advanced level that they can teach students and design the

course in accordance with the platforms flexibly.

2.4 The Interaction Effect Is Not Ideal

The above-mentioned problems such as platform, network, single interactive form and insufficient interaction design will inevitably directly affect the quality of online classrooms, resulting in unsatisfactory interactive effects.

3. The Necessity of Improving Classroom Interaction in Online Chinese Teaching

3.1 Classroom Interaction Is the Only Way in the Process of Second Language Acquisition

Interaction is the key to language learning. Language teaching and learning has certain particularities. It is not only the imparting of knowledge, but also the process of skill training through exercises and activities, and the process of interacting with society to achieve socialization. In one word, language proficiency is achieved by practice, which is all based on interaction.

3.2 Classroom Interaction Helps to Achieve the Purpose of Chinese Learning

The purpose of language learning is to acquire the ability to communicate in that language. The goal of teaching Chinese as a second language is to cultivate cross-cultural communication skills in Chinese. Language courses should fully reflect the characteristics of language's function of being a tool and skill. Only through effective interaction in situational simulation, can students understand how to use Chinese in the simulated scenes, and then can apply it to real social situations, thus can truly improve their ability to communicate in Chinese.

3.3 Classroom Interaction Is an Inherent Requirement to Improve the Effect of Language Teaching

Learning a language through the cramming method of filling the hall has long been proven unfeasible, and it is unimaginable to learn a language without interaction. Teachers are the guides and monitors of teaching activities. On one hand, they must design the classroom interaction in advance elaborately and guide students to interact. On the other hand, they need to know students' mastery of language through real-time classroom interaction and make timely teaching adjustments. This is an inherent requirement to improve teaching effect.

4. Strategies to Improve Classroom Interaction in Online Chinese Teaching

4.1 The Meaning and Type of Interaction

American scholar Michael G. Moore is the first scholar to divide the interaction in distance education into three categories: the interaction between the learner and the learning content, the interaction between the learner and the teacher, and the interaction between the learner and the learner. The interaction of learners with learning content is a defining characteristic of education, without which it is not education. The last two categories are what we usually call teacher-student interaction and student-student interaction. However, with the development of online teaching, academic staff, teaching media (mainly referring to online teaching platforms, auxiliary teaching resources) and even the parents of learners (aim at juveniles) have all participated in all aspects of online teaching, and these elements intersect with each other. Besides, the presentation of learning content in online teaching and the teaching medium are complementary and closely related. Therefore, the three categories of interaction types are not enough to summarize the current online education. We also need to add the interaction between learners and teaching media, and the interaction between teachers, and the interaction between the juvenile learners and their parents.

4.2 Strategies to Improve Classroom Interaction in Online Chinese Teaching

To improve the interactivity of online Chinese teaching, we can start from five aspects: teaching content, teaching process, teaching medium, learners and teachers.

4.2.1 The Interactive Nature of Teaching Content

In most colleges and universities, the teaching content is basically given, including new words, texts, grammar, etc. When designing teaching content, the teachers should make sure that the teaching content has the potential of interaction, which should not only be close to our daily life, so that students have a certain degree of familiarity, but also should be of richness, appropriate difficulty and distinction. This is the premise of the production of teacher-student interaction on content aspect. Students have something to say if they are familiar with the content. For content with moderate difficulty, it is accessible to students under the guidance of teachers. Once the teachers provide a scaffold, the students can climb up and make progress. The teaching content should also be rich and of different levels of difficulty, thus can cover as

many students as possible and motivate students of different levels to participate. In general, interactivity is closely related to familiarity, richness, difficulty, and differentiation of the content.

From the perspective of each element of ICOT, the design of vocabulary, grammar and text should be of interactivity. When dealing with vocabulary, the interaction effect of directly presenting the vocabulary and its meaning is poor. Teachers can explain new words through picture guidance, heuristic questions, comparison and association, or overall processing from the perspective of the text, in which the text or dialogue is given, and let students find out a few new words, then guide them guess the meaning of new words according to the context. By above methods, the teaching content design has better interactivity. Teachers should also note that the pictures and example sentences they used when explaining new words must have a certain degree of familiarity and moderate difficulty.

The grammar part is generally explained by creating certain situations. Creating familiar situations or using current hot events to explain language points is more interactive than simply presenting the example sentences in the textbook. For example, when explaining the language point 以来 (since), referring to a certain time in the past to the present, we can choose the current situation of the impact of the novel coronavirus epidemic as the topic, and guide students to say such an example sentence: 新冠疫情发生以来，我们一直在线上学习 (Since the outbreak of the novel coronavirus epidemic, we have been studying online). At the same time, we must adhere to the principle of teaching only the essential and ensuring plenty of practice. The more practice, the more students are involved in the interaction, and the wider the scope of the interaction.

Generally speaking, there are two types of texts in ICOT, namely dialogue and essay. In the text part, the interaction should be first considered when preparing the leading-in part of the content. For example, when introducing the topic of love, it is not enough to only introduce Chinese classic love stories and the Qixi Festival. Students should also be guided to tell the famous love stories or festivals in their own countries, and then make comparison of the love stories or festivals of China and their own countries, thus can increase interactivity. The

difficulty of text explanation design should show a series of steps from easy to difficult. Questions about the text after extensive reading and intensive reading cannot be the same. The dialogue text can be designed to be read aloud by role play, both dialogue and essay can be checked by hiding some new words, that is, hollowing out the text, let the students retell the text with the support of scaffolding and then do the practice of retelling the text without any prompts. Students retell the content of the text from different perspectives and play different roles which appear in the dialogue text; and then fully express their opinions, comments, self-related experience and evaluation based on the content of the text.

Even if the content design of the above elements has the greatest degree of interactivity, it is only the interaction of the elementary level, and the interaction of the advanced level is inseparable from the help of technology.

4.2.2 The Interactive Nature of the Teaching Process

In all aspects of teaching, asking questions should not only happen between teachers and students, but also should occur among students. Evaluation is the same, which not only happens in the traditional case that teachers comment students, but should also be held mutually between students and students. For example, after a dictation, teachers can require students to send what they write to the group, and then assign students to pair up, grade each other, point out mistakes, and then comment with the whole class. For the after-class exercise, students take turns to share answers.

4.3 Interactivity of Teaching Media

4.3.1 Teaching Platform

At present, in the development of teaching platform, domestic K12 education has been ahead of ICOT. All kinds of futuristic technology and its new functions are first produced and used on the K12 online education platform. For example, in January 2021, homework help Website/App (Zuoyebang), the largest K12 online education platform in China, upgraded the group speech function in its elementary school live class product. After the upgrade, students can be grouped in the different groups in the live broadcast class. After the grouping, the 6 group members in the group live broadcast room can hear each other's voice in the group speech session, and teachers can also choose any

group to monitor. This function simulates the high-frequency interactive scene of offline education in an all-round way, and better promotes the interaction between students. Zoom also has this grouping function, but it's too expensive for Chinese users. Chinese online teaching is also in urgent need of this function. If this function can be realized, teachers can organize group activities in live classes and conduct group discussions. The cooperation within groups and competition between different groups can greatly improve the interaction of teaching. In addition, we also urgently need to build a unified online platform for ICOT. Even if it cannot be realized in the near future, the existing teaching platform should closely follow the K12 platform in terms of technology, and launch functions that are beneficial to interaction. And it is also necessary to carry out targeted design according to the characteristics of ICOT.

4.3.2 Teaching Aids

Currently, we witness the emergence of many new technologies, such as augmented reality (AR), virtual reality (VR), artificial intelligence (AI), speech synthesis and speech recognition technology. If they can be effectively applied to ICOT, the classroom interactivity will be hugely improved. Zhang Peng (2020) pointed out forward-lookingly that online teaching needs to introduce AI and VR to promote the contextualization, actual operation and gamification of online Chinese teaching.

AI technology can directly help the learning of ICOT through human-computer interaction. For example, the AI Teacher Chinese Learning System of Xueersi Online School integrates advanced AI technologies such as facial expression recognition, speech recognition and testing. It can not only intelligently evaluate and correct students' pronunciation in real time, but also provide teaching from different aspects, like pinyin, vocabulary, grammar, etc., and let each student has his or her own AI Chinese teacher. As another example, the Chinese Speech Ability Assessment system can be used to improve students' ability to express Chinese in paragraphs. After giving a speech into the microphone, the screen will display basic information such as duration of speech, number of words spoken, vocabulary, etc., and at the same time evaluate the students' language expression. This technology can comprehensively evaluate students' oral expression ability, mark score from each dimension and the whole, and realize the functions of classroom speech evaluation, oral practice correction and other functions, thus can help students improve their oral expression proficiency. In addition, iFLYTEK App, the global Chinese learning platform, etc., also demonstrated the integration of artificial intelligence technology and Chinese teaching. If these technologies can be applied to ICOT, it will definitely greatly improve the willingness of students to participate in the interaction, and improve the effectiveness of the interaction between teachers and students, students and the teaching media.

The use of VR in ICOT can also enhance the interactivity of the classroom. Qiu Xinyi (2006) believes that VR technology can create an environment for daily oral language acquisition, and can adjust input according to students' performance, thereby realize understandable input, which has advantages in interactive individual teaching. Zhao Jingjing (2015) systematically introduced how the application of the virtual world of Second Life, a typical representative of foreign VR, assisted language teaching in ICOT. In Second Life, interpersonal communication can be achieved through text interaction, voice interaction, action and expression interaction. She believes that the value of VR lies in providing technical support for the simulation of learning situations and immersive experience teaching, and VR promotes the development of cooperative learning through various interactive tools and interactive community. However, there is no such platform in China, and there is still much to be done in this field.

Speech synthesis technology and speech recognition technology can also be used in paragraph expression training to enhance the interactivity of teaching. For example, using WeChat voice-to-text function can make students' expressions literal. When students express in paragraphs, the teacher records it on the mobile phone and transcribes it or conducts the transcription on the computer in real time, then the oral expression will be showed in written form. By doing this, the pure auditory expression becomes a combination of visual and auditory, adding one more modality, which makes it easier and traceable for teachers to revise and comment.

4.4 Learners

Learners are generally taught online in a class-by-class unit. Reducing class sizes and miniaturizing classes is another way to enhance classroom interaction. Chen Wen (2020) believes that a major trend of online Chinese teaching is the miniaturization of small class teaching. In the past, physical classrooms were limited to 20 learners. After a period of experience, online teaching should be limited to 12 learners. If there are more than 12 learners, the participation rate will not be high whether in group drills or individual drills. As a language training course, if the class size exceeds 12 learners, the learning experience for participants will be bad. Su Yingxia (2020) also mentioned that the quantity of students participating in online courses in the Chinese class of Beijing Language and Culture University is smaller than that in offline classes. Liang Xia (2020) pointed out that online teaching will weaken the interaction between teachers and students, and proposed that reducing the quantity of students in a class is an effective way to increase interaction opportunities, meanwhile more attention will be paid to each student. It can be seen that reducing the quantity of learners and realizing class miniaturization is a way to enhance classroom interaction under the existing technical conditions.

4.5 Teachers

As the main body of teaching, teachers are the guides of online teaching. Firstly, they must have a strong sense of interaction. Secondly, teachers should regularly share their experience in enhancing classroom interaction. Thirdly, teachers should pay extensive attention to the latest scientific research results in this field, and actively apply them to their own teaching.

5. Conclusion

ICOT still faces four problems in classroom interaction, namely implement difficulties, single interaction form, insufficient interaction design and unsatisfactory interaction effect. However, interactivity is an inevitable requirement to achieve language proficiency and improve the effectiveness of ICOT. We can improve the interaction of ICOT from five aspects: teaching content, teaching process, teaching medium, learners and teachers. And with the further development of science and technology, the forms of online classroom interaction will become more diverse, and the effect of ICOT is also worth anticipating.

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