

An Approach to Develop a Model Program for Gifted & Talented English Education

Weichang Li, China

Introduction

In 1985, a special section, or an attached school for the gifted and talented education was founded at Beijing No. 8 Middle School. The gifted and talented children at this section complete their study within four years which will take normal school students six years to complete. Education of the gifted and talented is a special process; therefore it is obviously inadvisable for the teachers to follow the teaching program provided for normal school students. But the fact was that there was no teaching program available for gifted and talented English education. To ensure the children to complete their study within four years and be successful in the University Matriculation Tests, it was necessary to develop a model program for the gifted and talented English education. This paper presents some strategies which make up the English teaching program and its achievement.

Mobilizing the Children's Non-Intellectual Characters

It is my understanding that the superb intelligence merely provides the gifted

children a basis to become qualified persons, only with mobilizing the children's non-intellectual characters can we make their great minds mature earlier. A number of researches indicated that the superb intelligence of the gifted children can be either stable or variable, showing that the superb intelligence is not the sole index that predicts children's lifelong achievement. In pace with growth of the children, their intelligence may either develop rapidly or be at a standstill and even be backward, depending to a great extent on the factors of the postnatal environment of education, the subjective initiatives of the children of which, the latter is considered to be nonintellectual factors. The positive individual characters expressed as being ambitious, curious, self-confident, independent, enterprising, persistent, not afraid of difficulties and creative. The accomplishment of instruction aims is secured by sustaining and developing the children's intelligence and bringing the children's non-intellectual characters into good play. Being aware of that, the first tactic practiced was to activate the individual characters of the children to have the children establish a clear aim and

stimulate their conscious activities and interests in English learning.

One predominant feature of the children's characters is the emulous nature of trying to excel others. Noticing this feature, the children were encouraged to set up their great ambitions. Those were:

1. Within three or three and half years, complete their English study which will take average school students six years to complete and gain an advantage over the senior key middle school graduates in English utilization abilities.

2. Acquire a higher level of listening comprehension and oral capabilities in order to communicate with people from English speaking countries, the level that is equivalent to Book 3 of New Concept English and Book 4 of Intermediate American English.

3. Be highly successful in the State Matriculation English Test with a percentage of good marks and an average mark superior to that of senior key middle school graduates.

Being prompted by their great ambitions, the children expressed a passionate commitment to their English learning. They made independent study and preview consciously, behaved actively, inquisitively did wide-range extracurriculum

reading and listening practices on their own initiative. The extra reading and listening materials were mostly from original English fictions, short stories, popular science books, encyclopaedias and daily news.

Making Teaching Excogitations in Accordance with Cognitive Laws

The Law of Maternal Language Acquiring

Under mother tongue environment, a child, growing from infant to subteen, acquires his or her maternal language naturally by effective stimulations of the mother tongue through stages of speech sound perception, speech babbling, words imitating, words comprehension, vocabulary expanding, words and phrases speaking, and then communicating with others. This language acquiring process is called "Stimulation-Reflection" process.

The Law of Foreign Language Acquiring

For the teenage students whose memories have been loaded with their mother tongue information, their foreign language learning is absolutely a non-mother tongue cognitive activity. They

naturally tend to find the correspondence between foreign language and maternal language when they learn foreign languages. It is obvious that the process of their foreign language acquisition can not follow the law of subteen children's acquiring of maternal language.

Psychological studies on foreign language learning under mother tongue environment indicated that the communication between two languages was accomplished by translation between the two languages with same meaning. The purpose of foreign language teaching is to make students acquire capabilities of effective thinking and communicating in foreign language. The thought of foreign language can be decomposed into individual linguistic elements, or say semantic structures, or psychologically called cognitive structures. Consequently, the development of thinking capability in foreign language relies on fully understanding and memorizing those semantic structures which convey specific meanings of the language, and then, according to the psychological principle of assimilation and conformity, correspondingly transferring the mother tongue systems into foreign language spontaneously and adeptly. This process of foreign language acquiring is called "Structure Cognition" Process.

Teaching Excogitations for the Gifted and Talented English Education

The new students at the special section for gifted and talented children were aged nine or ten, they expressed remarkable capabilities of perception, attention, memory and thinking. Therefore, the "Stimulation-Reflection" process in mother tongue acquiring was applicable to the foreign language education for the gifted and talented children of subteen.

However, as they acquired maternal language more rapidly than average children at same ages, the laws of foreign language acquiring under mother tongue environment should be considered in the foreign language education for the gifted and talented children.

It is therefore advisable to combine the laws of maternal language acquiring with the laws of foreign language acquiring in English education for the gifted and talented children.

Under the aforesaid considerations, the "Stimulation-Reflection" principle was applied in the preceding semesters as teaching excogitation. A vast amount of English language information inputs from comprehensive and multiple practices in pronunciation, language sensation, vocabulary, sentence pattern, dialogue and short story reading resulted in effective

stimulations, enabling the children to be perfect in English pronunciation and language sensibility, instinctive in comprehension and memory of vocabularies and in accumulation of patterns and grammatical rules, and then gradually be able to communicate. One result of applying "Stimulation-Reflection" principle was that the children automatically acquired the rules of adding -s or -es to the verbs of third person and single number in the present tense through frequent pattern drills without teacher's explanations.

As the children grow up and their knowledge accumulate, the "Structure Cognition" policy was introduced into the teaching program from the beginning of their third school year. It was suggested to the children that they attentively analyse and sum up the regularities and rules of English construction. A vast amount of practices in listening, speaking, reading and writing effectively assisted well migration of the learnt English semantic structures into the children's memory inputs of cognitive structures, variant but related structures rearranged and developed into cognitive systems through assimilation and conformation actions, thus resulting in the children's spontaneous thinking ability in English.

One example was that when the children were asked to list the phrases with the same or alike meaning as "go on doing sth", they were proficient in giving the list as follows:

go on with sth.
do sth. constantly.
do sth. continuously.
continue to do sth.
continue doing sth.
keep doing sth.
keep on doing sth.
proceed with sth.

A variety of English cognitive structure systems were stabilized in the children's memory that they have adept and swift response in English communication.

Implementation of Acceleration Strategies

Acceleration which speeds up learning time is required in the gifted teaching program to ensure the accomplishment of the teaching objectives.

Acceleration not only fits the teaching objectives but accommodates the gifted children's cognitive progress and their psychological development and match their capabilities. The gifted children have superb perceptivity and have a mind of great capacity. They have a craving for speeding up and learning more.

The following strategies were taken to facilitate the acceleration program.

1. Utilizing class time in the most efficient and effective way to speed up teaching and maximize class capacity.

Speeding up teaching and maximizing class capacity rely on well-preview by the students themselves and on condensing the lessons to provide the children more time to practise.

2. Adding the depth of learning by enrichment. The knowledge from textbooks is finite even if it is well acquired by the children. Fox indicates that there will be no obvious significance for gifted children if the speeding up process does not combine with curriculum enrichment. Barton points out that teachers should provide the gifted and talented students diverse extra-curriculum materials and organize a variety of deepening activities which provide the gifted children more complete and sophisticated information than regular classroom curriculum and is beneficial to the development of their basic knowledge and skills. It is more important to add depth by enrichment rather than learn new lessons continuously. The enrichment activities were taken as follows:

(1) Extensive reading

Liu Fan indicated that reading was conducive to extending the students' knowledge, developing their learning abilities and intelligence and speeding up learning. With reading, students accumulated a large amount of complicated sentence patterns, therefore they are developmentally advanced in language expression.

Each week the children were offered some selected reading materials which contained basic knowledge and was somewhat more difficult than the textbooks. The reading materials were selected from vast informative and instructive supplementary books such as Junior World Encyclopaedia, The Golden Book Encyclopaedia, Why?, What?, Where?, Odhams Encyclopaedia for Children, 365 Things to Know, The World's Best Fairy Tales, Wonders of Nature, Around the World Program and China Daily.

(2) Intensive and extensive listening

From the second term of the first school year, the New Concept English and the Intermediate American English were taken as the intensive listening materials for the children. The children were asked to listen and read after the materials repeatedly.

Meanwhile, a vast listening materials

selected from listening drills, listening collections, radio programs, science reports from Voice of America and radio news were taken as the extensive listening materials for the children. The children were asked to listen carefully, follow the pace of the records, pay attention to the topic sentences and key words. For the materials with multiple choice, answer the questions immediately after listening.

(3) Diversified deepening activities and programs

① Setting up an English day.

Each week, an English day was set up on which the children were urged to talk in English.

② Regularly arranging foreign teachers to give instructions.

Making contact with foreigners from English speaking countries provided the children good opportunities to learn idiomatic English and improve their listening and speaking abilities. Each week the visiting foreign teachers at my school who came from America, England and Canada were invited to give the children instructions and lectures. The children showed considerable interests in the lessons and they were unconstrainedly active in asking and answering questions of the foreign teachers.

③ Taking summer program.

During summer vacation, the children were organized to participate in the summer residential English programs supervised by the college teachers of both China and foreign countries, which provided the children marvelous opportunities in English communication practices through lessons, lectures, instructions, conversations, performing plays, audio and video materials.

④ Taking part-time Olympic English courses and TOEFL courses.

⑤ Communicating by letters with American school students.

Through the letter communication between the children and the American school students, the children improved their English writing ability, learned a lot about American society, local conditions and customs, science and technology and education.

Encouraging and Assisting the Gifted Children in Becoming Individuals Who Are Able to Study Independently

The gifted education should not follow the traditional teaching model which put the students in the passive position as receptive learners. Considering that the gifted children are superb in intelligence, we should activate their initiatives to

encourage and assist them in becoming individuals who are able to study independently.

The acquirement of the competence of independent study relies on three factors:

- (1) having high level intelligence,
- (2) having stable basic knowledge,
- (3) being adept in learning.

It is clear that the children have a superiority in the competence of self-study for they are all intellectually gifted and so self-study policy is more applicable to the gifted education.

There is an action and reaction relationship between giftedness and basic knowledge acquiring. The extra capabilities in comprehension and memory make it possible for the children to learn and memorize basic knowledge rapidly and stably. With the accumulation of basic knowledge and skills, the migration of the basic knowledge and skills becomes skills more effective, thus facilitating new knowledge and skills acquiring intelligence development. Based on this understanding, the basic training was the essentials throughout the gifted English education. For instance, from the initial stage, English audio tapes of American or England origin were used in phonetics teaching, thus making standard and typical English sound inputs into the

children' memory, forming accurate language sense in their memory. Consequently, the children made little mistakes in dictation, phonetic notation of words and pronunciation distinction of words. When repeating tape materials, the voice of some children could mix the spurious with the genuine. In vocabulary learning, the children were advised not to isolate a word from a sentence which contain the word. This means that the understanding and memory of a word are achieved through sentence learning. Meanwhile, the children were offered a vast listening and reading materials which present new words that have same or similar meaning as the learnt words, and for memory of grammar teaching, the regular cramming method was not applied. Instead, the children naturally acquire grammar rules through analysis of sentence structures and applications of the structures with pattern drills to achieve a better comprehension.

To foster the children their competence of independent study, the teachers should give them scientific instructions. The PQ4R Method by Thomas and Robinson was introduced as references. The brief description of PQ4R is as below.

P---Preview

Preview the contents of next lesson.

Q---Question

During preview, the children list their questions for which they expect to get solutions on the classes. In this way, the children will concentrate their attention and be active in the classes.

1R---Read

After preview and listing questions, try to go over pattern drills and text.

2R---Reflect

After going over the pattern drills and text, try to recall the main points of the text, analyse the structures of complex sentences and study the meaning and usage of new words.

3R---Recite

Try to recite the text to deepen the impression of new patterns and words.

4R---Review

Review whole contents.

It was noted that the superb intelligence combined with stable basic knowledge and proper learning mode enabled the children to be very capable in self-study and therefore take the initiative in preview, which boosted the class efficiency and facilitated the speeding up progress.