

What Do Those Impressive English Lessons Look Like?

CUI Lin

School of Foreign Languages, Shaanxi Normal University, Shaanxi, China

This research aims to explore the characteristics of Chinese students' unforgettable English lessons from the quantitative and qualitative aspects. The research bases on 43 students' recalling of their impressive English lessons, and it finds out that four aspects contributing to impressive English lessons which provide insightful ideas for effective English education in China.

Keywords: unforgettable English lessons, classroom events, students' participation

Introduction

English education, either as a foreign language education or second language education, has been enjoying great popularity in the world in the past decade, and Chinese government has always been paying significant attention to English education for the younger generation (Brophy & Good, 1986; Ellis, 1999; Hakansson & Lindber, 1988; 施良方, 2001; 王本陆, 2009). Chinese students currently are supposed to receive English course from Grade 3 in primary schools, and in some advanced areas such as Shanghai and Guangdong students there could have English course even from Grade 1 (刘道义, 2008).

The focus of attention on English course enjoys historical development with the development of society, from focusing on language knowledge to communicative ability, and to English overall proficiency as well (王蕾, 2015). In the new era, the ultimate goal of English education is to enhance students' language competency from an overall consideration including cultural awareness, language ability, communicative ability, learning strategy and things like that, so as to bolster students' lifelong learning in the future (鲁子问, 2016; 王蕾, 胡亚琳, 2017).

Generally speaking, an average student in China tends to receive at least 9 years of English education before he/she goes to college, and Gao Kao¹ is the milestone for his/her achievement of English learning. On the other hand, historically speaking, English courses in China seem to bear much criticism from the mass and experts as well for its time-consuming in process and low efficiency in outcome (陶行知, 1981; 钟启泉, 2013). Frankly speaking, daily English lessons in China are far from satisfying because teacher-centered teaching and learning are pervasive and the exam-oriented tendency of the English lessons are always the target for public complaints (程晓堂, 赵思奇, 2016).

Albert Einstein once said, "Education is what remains after one has forgotten everything he learned in

CUI Lin (1976-), female, Ph.D. in English Education; Lecturer in School of Foreign Languages, Shaanxi Normal University, Shaanxi, China.

¹ Gao Kao refers to the Chinese National entrance examination, which is a kind of proficiency examination serving as a benchmark examination for selecting candidates for Chinese colleges and universities.

school.” What on earth do those English lessons remain from the students’ eyes? What are the nutritious elements we could assimilate from those remains for the sake of meaningful education? Are those remains parallel to governmental predictions and expectations? All these questions are fascinating to responsible educators, including the researcher in this research as well.

This research aims to answer this research question: What are those unforgettable English lessons look like from students’ eyes? The research harbors an ambition to elaborate the characteristics of the most impressive English lessons so as to bring some insights to English education in China.

Research Design

The research subjects were 43 freshmen (5 boys and 38 girls) in Shaanxi Normal University, who have received at least 9 years’ English education² before going to the university. In the research, they were required to write down a piece of English composition with the title of “one of the most unforgettable English lessons”. It’s a free writing task with the time limitation of 30 minutes. On the other hand, some additional information such as the score of Gao Kao of each student was also gathered by the researcher for further exploration.

Research Methods

The research data have been analyzed from the quantitative and qualitative aspects by using the SPSS18 and Nvivo10 respectively, so that the descriptive information could be revealed and qualitative exploration could be realized (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Maxwell, 2012; Neuman, 2014; Yin, 2011; 陈向明, 2000).

The 43 pieces of essays were collected and they were put into the Qualitative software Nvivo10 so as to seek out “original terms” firstly, and work out “themes” consequently, and finally a “possible systematical explanations” could be revealed with great clarity.

At the same time, basic facts and numerical evidences were gathered in the SPSS18 for descriptive analysis so that the overall picture of unforgettable English lessons could be generalized.

Research Results

The research was conducted in the winter in 2017. After lengthy exploration for 3months, the research results are becoming obvious, and the detailed research results are as followings:

Table 1

Basic Information of the Research

Students	Average score in Gao Kao	Average words for the composition	Male English teachers	Female English teachers
43	129.2	235	9	34

From Table 1, it’s safe to conclude that 43 students are top students in English before college, because the full score in Gao Kao is 150 while their average score is 129.2, with the highest score 142 and lowest score 95. As to the composition itself, students have showed great interests in recalling and describing what happened in their

² English education before college in China normally includes 3 years’ English education in elementary schools, 3 years’ in junior high schools, and 3 years’ in senior high schools. Some advanced areas and top schools in China will begin English education from Grade 1 in elementary schools.

unforgettable or impressive English lessons, so that they ended in finishing long essays of average words 235, with the least words of 208 and the most words of 377.

In 43 pieces of essays, there are 9 male English teachers and 34 female English teachers, among which 2 male teachers and 7 female teachers were in elementary, 4 male and 15 female teachers in junior high, and 3 male and 12 female teachers in senior high respectively. Male English teachers seem to enjoy low percentage of around 20% in China.

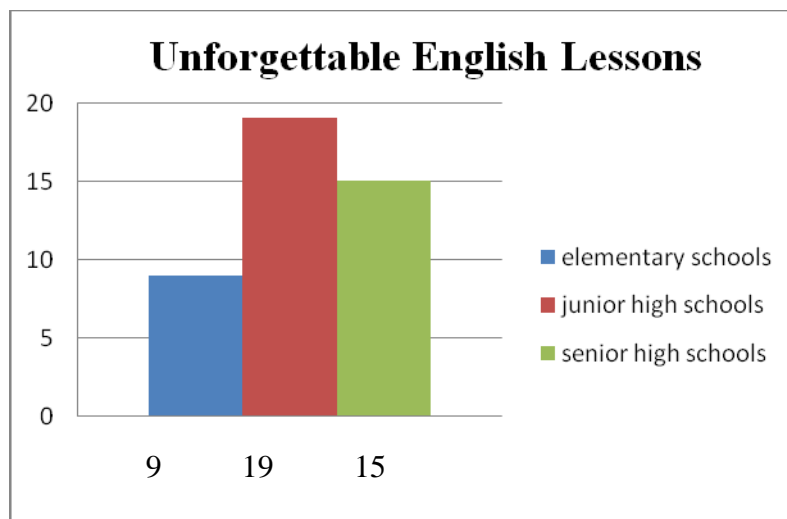


Figure 1. Time distribution of 43 unforgettable English lessons

From Figure 1, it's obvious that the most unforgettable English lessons occurred during the junior high schools, which include 19 lessons constituting 44.2% of the total. There were 9 lessons in elementary level and 15 lessons in senior high school, which constitute 20.9% and 34.9% respectively.

Table 2

Types of Classroom Events

	Elementary Schools	Junior High Schools	Senior High Schools
Planned events	8	12	14
Incidental events	1	7	1

In 43 pieces of essays, students all mentioned their unforgettable lessons and impressive classroom events were indispensable parts for those lessons. From Table 2, we can see that 9 events were incidental and 34 events were planned events. Planned events referred to those which were pre-arranged or prepared before the class and conducted in the classroom by English teachers according to teaching plan, such as playing a game, making a dictation, presenting group works, translating the text, reading aloud, etc. Whereas, classroom incidental events referred to those happened incidentally and unexpectedly which deserved immediate reaction from English teachers accordingly. Frequently those incidental events could always have some influence on students' sides. Students in junior high schools seemed to be more sensitive to those incidental events, and 7 out of 9 incidental events occurred in junior high schools.

For example, a girl student mentioned one incidental event in her unforgettable English lesson. Her mobile phone rang suddenly which broke the silence of the English lesson and disturbed the class to some extent. At that

time, she immediately turned off the phone during the fussy noise because students were discussing heatedly on whose phone it was. The girl felt guilty and ashamed and she was afraid of being punished or criticized. It was an incidental event in the classroom which was unexpected to the teacher and the students, and needed the teacher’s immediate reaction. The teacher’s reaction was indeed of great importance because it may compose as a critical lesson for the student, just as this girl mentioned in her essay.

I forced myself to be calm, and at least I didn’t want anyone else to punish me. I was just afraid that my teacher may find me out and give me a strict punishment. And I bet she must know I was the ‘chief criminal’ at that time.

To my surprise, while everyone was discussing the event, my English teacher smiled, and said to the whole class, ‘I think that student now has realized her mistake and she will not let her telephone ring again. Don’t be puzzled about it all the time. Just continue our class now.’

After hearing this, a warm current welled up in my mind, and I deemed that my teacher was so kind and smart that she protected a student’s self-respect. [Composition 21]

Obviously, classroom incidental events are of potential educational significance and deserve great attention or artistic reaction from the teachers.

Table 3

26 Adjectives Modifying English Teachers

26 adjectives
admirable, affable, beautiful, best, caring, considerate, cute, easy, fond, friendly, funny, gentle, guiding, helpful, humorous, interesting, kind, lovely, mild, patient, responsible, smart, strict, serious, versatile, warm.

From Table 3, we know that students have employed 26 adjectives to modify their English teachers. All these 26 words were used at least once, and among which the words “kind”, “patient” and “strict” were used three times, while words “lovely”, “best” and “interesting” were used twice.

Based on concrete facts of unforgettable lessons, further explorations of the characteristics of those unforgettable English lessons are conducted with the help of Nvivo10. Some qualitative elements were analyzed and it gradually revealed that there were four distinct aspects contributing to those impressive English lessons.

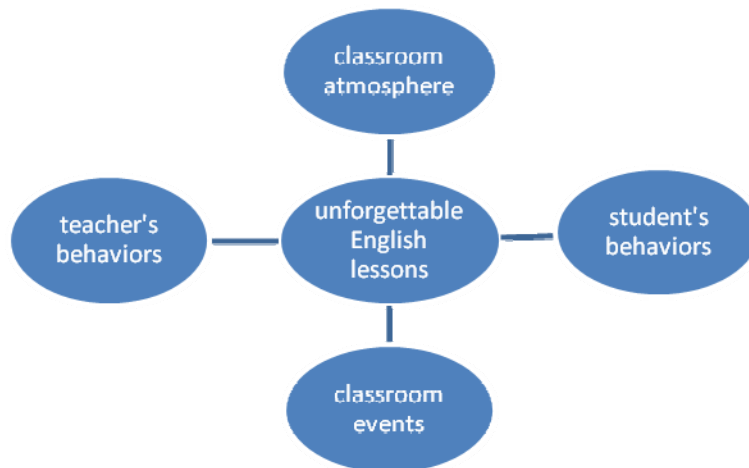


Figure 2. Aspects of unforgettable English lessons

From Figure 2, we can see that the most unforgettable English lessons include four general aspects: classroom atmosphere, classroom events, the teacher's behavior and the student's behavior. Specifically speaking, these four parts also could be divided into detailed elements as figure 3.

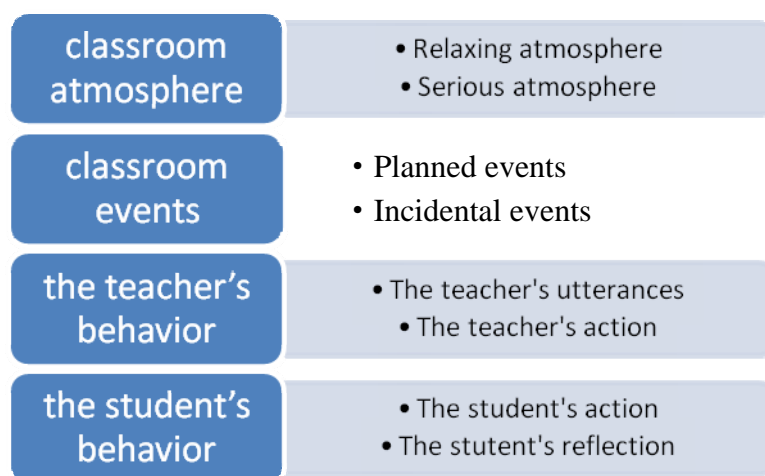


Figure 3. Specific elements of unforgettable English lessons

From Figure 3, we know in depth that a piece of unforgettable English covers more or less 8 specific elements. They are relaxing or serious atmosphere, planned or incidental events, the teachers' utterances or specific action, and the student's performance in the classroom or his/her reflections about gains and harvest of the lesson.

Firstly, favorable classroom atmosphere is doomed to be unforgettable no matter it is relaxing or in tension, because it enables students to improve their language ability, communicative competency or cultural awareness subconsciously. Teachers are not always kind with encouraging remarks, and those serious teachers with sharp scolding words would always achieve the educational goals as long as teachers enjoy a sincere heart and educational passion for students.

10 students mentioned their teachers' criticizing and scolding on them. One of them vividly described the embarrassing situation like this:

I had thought that my English was good enough that I could pass the final exam, and it's unnecessary for me to be diligent like other students. But the outcome was obvious enough for me. I was a loser this time. That class the teacher publicized the score and it was awkward for me. I tried to escape from the teacher's sharp glance, but it was no use to do so. The teacher criticized me for nearly five minutes. [Composition 6]

Five minutes of criticizing was hard to bear in deed. However, the student gradually realized her demerit of procrastination and laziness, and therefore understood the teacher's strong remarks. She continued to write like this:

That class is one of the most embarrassing English classes during my senior high school, but I must say THANKS to my teacher, because from that class, I realize that the important role of diligence, and maybe from that time on, I have gradually developed the right attitude towards study. [Composition 6]

In fact, as long as the educational intention was favorable and positive, students will always be ready to

immerse in the classroom setting. They'd like to enjoy the "happy classroom"³ and "relaxing atmosphere" of language learning, and they were also brave enough to endure the painful experience in the "embarrassing situations" and "sad moments".

Secondly, classroom events in English lessons constitute magic educational occasions in which teachers exert efforts to educate and students grow up little by little unconsciously. 43 pieces of composition revealed 43 classroom events in English classrooms, or anecdotes in other words, which could be divided as planned events and incidental events. To be frank, planned events performed educational functions as teachers' expectation, and students have taken part in them and grown up step by step. On the other hand, incidental events also played a crucial influence for its unique and unexpected essence and they are full of potential educational senses to some extent.

Anecdotes in English lessons served as educational cases or rare opportunities for students' enhancement academically and emotionally. Teachers' remarks enjoyed profound educational influence as well. In those occasions, after hearing teachers' remarks, all of a sudden, students seemed to "understand" more, "learn" a lot, "move" deeply, and many of them regarded those incidents and remarks as turning points or milestones, from which they "reflect" and "think" profoundly, "change" their attitudes and behave differently "from then on."

10 students used "from then on" in their compositions so as to indicate that those events or teachers' words were critical moments for them which were full of multiple educational functions. As one student wrote like this:

From then on, I became more cautious, careful and modest. [Composition 37]

Classroom events and teachers' sincere words helped students to pluck up courage and march forward with great efforts and confidence. What's more, classroom events not only triggered the educational possibilities, but rendered golden opportunities for students to "reflect", "think", and "learn" by themselves and therefore positive educational consequences would expect to occur.

Almost all 43 students consciously reflected the reasons why his/her lessons were unforgettable. From those meaningful reflections, the researchers could sense the strong endeavor of students' development and sincere gratitude towards English teachers. From their reflections, it's clearly to see that students gradually became grateful individuals, reflective learners and autonomous thinkers which were of great benefits for their sustainable progress, life-long learning and self-perfection. Some touching reflections are listed below.

To be frank, maybe for this substitute teacher, she only helps her student as usual. But for me, she is like an angel, and I will always be grateful to her. Thank you, my angel. [Composition 1]

It's too hard to say which detail has left unforgettable impression in my mind. Maybe it is the atmosphere. It makes me forget about the worries and I could put my heart into English totally. [Composition 4]

Maybe just because of my kind English teacher and it was her simple smile and patience that encouraged me to stand up and speak up. At that time, I made my determination that I will become a kind and easy person like her. [Composition 5]

Thirdly, it seems that teachers are of great importance for they are indispensable parts in unforgettable lessons, especially teachers' remarks which have left great impression on students mind and students could recall

³ Words in the quotation marks are the original expression from the students' composition.

without difficulties vivid words produced by teachers. 24 students quoted teachers' originally remarks indicating the long-lasting effects of teachers' utterances in the specific situations. The followings are some examples of teachers' words.

- You are a spiritual girl!
- You are brave and passionate.
- Practice makes perfect.
- Shattering pens are better than good memories.
- Oh! My God! What happened on my clever assistant?
- If you are gold, you may glitter everywhere.
- Try to be a wise thinker, and do not do things without destination.
- These photos are memories of what we have spent together.
- English is not a subject, but a tool in the future life.
- Whatever your grades were, they have passed. And in the next three years, the more you work hard, the better grades you will have.

Every remark was related to an unforgettable experience, and teachers' words no matter they were encouraging, sarcastic, or scolding, they were doomed to be cherished by students as their valuable experiences.

Fourthly, all 43 pieces of compositions mentioned students' own participation in English lessons, such as individual presentation on the platform, playing drama with classmates, delivering speeches anxiously, playing games happily, even the common activity of translating the text seemed to be exciting from students' sides because the lessons were not boring any more with their active involvement and frequent contribution.

Students described in length what happened in the classroom, expressing their anxiety before the speech, or setting a record of reciting a text within 50 seconds, or put up hands bravely to answer the questions, etc. Obviously, those student-centered classes, in which creative and diverse activities were employed, are the most unforgettable lessons.

In unforgettable lessons, students enjoyed "fantastic videos", learned through "games and pictures", "discussed" meaningfully, and their "passion" enhanced, "interests" increased, and "learning" reinforced subconsciously and consciously. Classrooms with students' involvement tended to bring students into their blossom academically and emotionally.

In a word, from the research, we know that the favorable learning atmosphere serves as a setting for learning, while classroom events, planned or incidental, are engines to push students develop and grow up gradually, in which students' whole-hearted participation and teachers' sincere assistance are of critical impacts. Those 43 unforgettable English lessons are full of meaningful interactions between students and teachers in a happy learning environment, and more or less gains and positive elements are achieved which enable students to be more confident to encounter with any challenging and obstacles and believe firmly that they can make it sooner or later with their self-esteem, diligence and strong wills.

Discussion

Many researches including this research once again prove that teachers are of great importance in the educational arena (Aho, Haverinen, Juuso, Laukka & Sutinen, 2010; Ortega, 2013; 刘道义, 2008). Chinese

government never fails to enhance teachers' social status and tries to promote them to be the most prestigious people in society.

We know it for sure from the research that anecdotes in students' learning processes are important, but the conclusions derived from them and the golden lessons students draw from the events are more important. It's obvious that favorable learning atmosphere and teachers' sincere feeling towards students constitute as crucial factors which enable students to develop a positive attitudes and upright characters in their learning processes (Allwright & Bailey, 1991; Cazden, 2001; Chaudron, 1988).

Additional speaking, teachers' professionalism is always the center of attention for sustainable educational development. Teachers' diverse preparation and their quick response towards classroom incidental events are of profound interests for educational researches as well (Burns & Richards, 2009; Danielson, 2012; Dubin & Olshtain, 1986; Fives & Gill, 2015; Richards & Schmidt, 2010).

Chinese classrooms are fighting to shift from the teacher-centered classrooms to the student-centered classrooms. There is no exception to English lessons (McDonald, 2013; Mercer, 2010; Merry, Price, Carless & Taras, 2013). In this research, we find that a student-centered classroom enables students to participate actively and students therefore could immerse in the language setting and acquire language naturally. This research also indicates that as long as students involve actively in the learning activities, they will learn more from the learning experience (Gage & McDaniel, 2012; Kahn, 2012; Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991; Marzano & Kendall, 2007; Stiggins & Chappuis, 2012). Learning is an interactive construction through which students build up their individual academic systems and upgrading mentality from their own perspectives. Learning is an innate acquisition and dynamic process, and everything is possible in the educational arena.

Suggestions

From the research outcome, we can conclude that those unforgettable English lessons are lessons with favorable leaning atmosphere in which memorable incidents often occur which tend to push students reflect thoroughly and attract them to participate in the learning activities actively. Additionally, encouraging and thought-provoking teachers' remarks and effective tutorial behaviors from teachers are also considerably important which need continuous improvement and always need to meet with higher expectation. Therefore, the following suggestions for teachers and English lessons are safely drawn from the research:

(1) Teachers need to create a favorable learning atmosphere for students, such as friendly smile, gentle voice, and considerate remarks, which could guarantee positive language learning and cheering individual personalities.

(2) Since teachers' remarks and behaviors are of potential educational functions, therefore, teachers need to be considerate and serve as a positive end encouraging end to scaffold students into learning persistently with passion and interests.

(3) Students tend to be successful in language learning as long as they are more conscious to their learning. Therefore, diverse learning activities and creative methods and strategies should be employed so as to achieve fruitful learning outcomes.

(4) Classroom events, especially incidental anecdotes are of great importance to situational teaching and learning, therefore teachers need to be cautious and catch the chances to educate students effectively and properly.

Further researches could expand the numbers and levels of research subjects, concentrating not only on the top students in English but also slow students and students of medium level in the hope to explore more impressive English lessons from students' perspectives. In this case, further insightful suggestions could be gathered and educational contribution to the effective and meaningful English lessons could be realized, which are doomed to form a whole picture of ideal English classroom education from students' vivid authentic stories.

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