Exploring the Possibility of Applying "Immersion Theory" to College English Teaching in China

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Abstract

The Hungarian-born American psychologist Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi's "Immersion theory" was introduced to and wildly accepted by many Chinese English teachers. With the fast development of science and technology of our country, more and more Chinese English teachers are abandoning their traditional "chalk and talk" teaching methods, attempting to apply "immersion theory" in their English teaching. They utilize "smart classrooms", multiple online teaching platforms and various social media APPs to create an immersive learning environment. The "intrinsic motivation" and "extrinsic motivation" of most students have been stimulated as a result of these attempts.

Keywords: immersion theory, English Teaching

1. Introduction: "Immersion theory"

The Hungarian-born American psychologist Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi who was famous for his study on genius and creativity was taken as the father of "Immersion theory". The theory emerged in the late 20th century, and the full explanation and complete definition can be found in his book *Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention (1996)* in which he studied 90 men and women who possessed publicly recognized creativity and influenced their own culture significantly. He found a number of his subjects suffered a parental loss though most of them are from normal families and experienced normal childhoods. [i]

His experiment proved creative people have got a distinctive characteristic: the capacity to experience "flow". The psychologist defined "flow" as the timeless and total involvement of individuals in the activity with which they are engaged.

> "Persons experiencing a flow have a sense that their abilities are only just equal to the challenges at hand, and they become caught up in the creative process in order to achieve their goal. Notably, Csikszentmihalyi adduced the possibility that some creative people pursue flow as a form of escapism, insofar as immersion in the creative process provides them with feelings of comfort or control. The concept of flow can also be likened to what psychological researchers have identified as 'intrinsic motivation'—that is, a motivation arising from intense autonomous interest in the work at hand. This is complemented by 'extrinsic motivation,' which stems from a desire to fulfill goals that have been established by another person or organization. "[ii]

This psychological theory soon spilled out to many other fields. It is especially popular in the teaching and training field. With the development of virtual reality technology, immersion theory has been widely used in flight training, military training and medical training throughout the world. In China, the application of "immersion theory" to college English teaching was now very popular among Chinese English teachers.

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2. Current situation of English teaching and the application of "immersion theory"

Beijing Institute of Petrochemical Technology (BIPT), like many other Chinese colleges, is the college with strong academic traditions and high performance standards. Back to a few years ago, college English teachers of BIPT utilized very traditional teaching methods in their over-crowded class of more than 60 students. The classroom used to be huge with a teacher standing in the front, lecturing to the whole class with the help of Power Point. When the teacher asked questions, the students raised their hands to answer the questions. Without accurate statistical data, the teachers can only judge how and what to teach according to their experience. The teacher was literally playing the dominant or manipulating role in class while the students were obedient followers who seldom interacted with or challenged teachers. Of course, the results of these old-school teaching methods were far from satisfactory. As far as the academic performance, the students might be good at reading and writing, but performed not very well in speaking and listening.

With the development of technology and improvement of the education information level, the above mentioned situation has been transformed completely. The teachers utilize "smart classrooms", multiple online teaching platforms and various social APPs to create an immersive learning environment. Chinese English teachers attempt to apply Csikszentmihalyi's "immersion theory" in their teaching. "Intrinsic motivation" of the students has been stimulated as the students get the drive to learn for their own sake. English learning has become an enjoyable and effective experience that the students expect to repeat. "Extrinsic motivation" has been complemented as the students find their study has not been manipulated by the teachers and textbooks, and they can really enjoy the freedom of learning.

2.1 "Smart classrooms" in Chinese colleges

To begin with, the concept of "smart classrooms" has become popular in China. "Smart classrooms" are digital classrooms and future classrooms. A "smart classroom" is usually composed of teaching system, LED display system, personnel attendance system, asset management system, lighting control system, air conditioning control system, door and window monitoring system, ventilation system and video monitoring system.[iii]

"Smart classrooms" in Chinese college help in giving birth to a new form of education which is totally different from the traditional ones. In the smart classrooms, the teachers no longer play the dominant role, while the students take part in the whole process of teaching. Students preview in advance before class, study in class, interact with the teachers, discuss in groups and take tests at any time. With accurate information and statistical data, teachers can quickly grasp each student's learning situation and give targeted guidance. The results of the teaching assessments will be more scientific too. In short, "Smart classrooms" apply modern means to cut into the whole teaching process. "Smart classrooms" are simple, efficient and intelligent. Meanwhile, they are helpful to develop students' independent thinking and learning ability.

2.2 English teaching platforms in Chinese college

What's more, many online teaching platforms help Chinese English teachers with the creation of immersive environment. English teaching platforms such as "We Learn", "U Campus" and "FIF Oral Training" have been widely used and accepted by Chinese students. These autonomous interactive learning platforms are successful for the integration of online courses, learning resources and online assessments. These platforms emphasize the dominant position of the learners. Knowledge is not simply transmitted to learners, but constructed by learners themselves in the whole learning process. Learners can participate in interesting online courses, receive special trainings to acquire certain language skills, and download learning materials for offline learning. At the same time, the needs of English teachers were taken into account. The platforms give the full play of the teachers' functions of online counselling, real-time monitoring, and collecting statistics and so on.

In addition, Chinese colleges also encourage teachers to use "MosoInk", a new innovation of cloud class invented by Beijing MosoInk Information Technology Co., Ltd.. "MosoInk", as a powerful digital publishing and mobile education platform, allows the students to register their attendance to the classes in cloud, and allows English teachers to upload different learning materials in PDF, words, MP3, MP4 and so on. For instance, in "MosoInk cloud class", teachers can upload English news from China Daily or CGTN so that students can learn English while listening to the news. They can also upload clips of classic American dramas to let students learn English in a relaxed mood.

Of course, to ensure "MosoInk" and the other teaching platforms effectively bring immersive English learning experience to the students, teachers' selection, deep processing and supplementary explanation of learning materials are extremely significant. In particular, the learning materials uploaded by teachers should take into account the students' actual English level. No one should "immerse" the "green hand swimmers" into the deep water area. Nor should "experienced swimmers" practice repeatedly in shallow water.

2.3 Social media APPs in English classes

Finally, social media plays an important role in the application of "immersion theory" to English teaching in Chinese colleges since mobile phone has become a necessity for Chinese students. In the practice of College English teaching, "Wechat" is one of the most popular social media APPs in China. Students and teachers can communicate in English through "Wechat" in and after class. Tiktok, or DOUYIN is also used by lots of teachers and students. Tons of English video clips can be found in these APPs. That is why English teachers need to spend time and energy to screen, select and recommend English learning materials to their students. The plight of Chinese students in English learning used to be caused by their lack of learning materials. Today, the major difficulties are caused by over quantities of miscellaneous learning materials. Therefore, the teachers should turn the "sea" of English learning materials into a "swimming pool" with appropriate depth so that the students can freely "immerse" in it and train repeatedly.

2.4 Applying "immersion theory" in BIPT

English teaching in BIPT is a case in point. Based on the results of College Entrance Examination and Entrance English Grading Examination, freshmen in BIPT are divided into A-level (quicker) classes and B-level (slower) classes. For most BIPT students, no matter they study in A or B classes, English learning can be an enjoyable and effective experience for them. Teachers use "MosoInk" and other English teaching platforms such as "We Learn", "U Campus" and "FIF Oral Training" to upload teaching and learning resources to assist students to preview the texts, participate in classroom tests, classroom discussions, group learning and so on. The students can take on line courses and use computer to practice English in every possible ways such as memorizing words, practicing pronunciation, listening to audio, watching video, writing compositions and doing exercises and etc. The students' writing and translation can be automatically corrected and scored. Meanwhile, teachers use the "Smart classrooms" to deliver the courses. "Wechat" and "Tiktok" APPs help students learn English anytime and anywhere.

Csikszentmihalyi says, "Enjoyment appears at the boundary between boredom and anxiety, when the challenges are just balanced with the person's capacity to act."[iv] In terms of the choice of the learning materials, teachers can't choose too difficult ones which lead to anxiety, nor can they choose too easy ones that lead to boredom. For instance, BIPT teachers encourage students to watch English movies and TV dramas that meet their own English level. Teachers do not choose long films that often take 2 to 3 hours, nor do they choose gunfight films with little dialogues. Teachers also exclude medical films with too many professional terms. Even best sellers like *Harry Potter,* which students prefer, are not best learning materials in the eyes of some teachers. After all, the vocabulary in *Harry Potter* is huge, and some terminologies are even created by J.K. Rowling. These terms are not that practical in our daily life. In fact, *Friends*, popular American television sitcom that aired on the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) network from 1994 to 2004, was the most common and popular learning material for A-level students. One episode of *Friends* is usually 20 minutes, with refined and learners-friendly languages. B-level students practically begin with a 5 minute episode of *Peppa Pig*. Though it is an animation, the vocabulary of it can reach about 4500 words, which fully meets the requirements of the College English Test Band Four (CET4) in China. What is more, there are normally no English subtitles for the TV series watched by A-level students, while subtitles are provided to B-level students. The selected episodes should be convenient for students to listen, imitate and practice repeatedly.

Thus, in English classed, BIPT teachers create an immersive English learning environment, encourage students to actively participate, explore independently, share wisdom and promote the internalization of students' knowledge.

3. Conclusion

In short, "immersion theory" created by psychologist Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi in late 20th century has been reinvigorated in College English classes in China thanks to the development of new teaching information technology. Students are no longer dominated or manipulated by the teachers and the textbooks.

Most of them are experiencing "flow" which Csikszentmihalyi describe as "being utterly absorbed in something for its own sake because it is enjoyable and you feel effective."v Not surprisingly, Chinese teachers will encounter many problems and need to overcome them. It also takes time to analyze students' academic performance and all kinds of feedbacks. Therefore, further evidence-based inquiry will be made and the opportunities for researchers to contribute to this issue are many.

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[i] Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention (1996)*

[ii] https://www.britannica.com/biography/Mihalyi-Csikszentmihalyi

[iii] https://baike.so.com/doc/7002345-7225227.html

[iv] Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow, Rider(1992/2002)*

[v] Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow, Rider(1992/2002)*