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A Comparative Study on the Applicability of the Audiolingual Method and the Oral Approach in Online English Teaching — A Case Study of Child and Adult Learners

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Abstract

The English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education (2022 Edition) and the China English Proficiency Scale both emphasize that language teaching should align with learners' cognitive development and needs. However, traditional English teaching methods often lack diversity and fail to account for age-related differences, resulting in a significant gap between teaching outcomes and the standards. With the rapid development of online education platforms, flexible teaching models and diverse technological tools have offered new solutions to these issues. This study focuses on the online education context, using platforms such as Lixiao Coming and New Oriental as case examples to analyze the application of the Audiolingual Method and the Oral Approach in courses for children and adults. The research finds that online platforms for children predominantly employ the Audiolingual Method, incorporating high-frequency listening input, gamified speech imitation, and other designs that cater to children's visual thinking and interest-driven learning styles. In contrast, adult courses emphasize the Oral Approach, utilizing situational dialogues and task-based teaching to meet the practical and logical learning needs of adult learners. The study reveals the adaptation mechanisms between different teaching methods and learner groups, highlighting issues such as children's "mechanical imitation" and insufficient interaction in adult courses. It proposes a layered integration strategy to optimize teaching methods, offering recommendations for improving online English teaching strategies and bridging the gap between current teaching practices and curriculum standards.

Keywords

The Audiolingual Method; The Oral Approach; Adult Learners

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background

Driven by the digitalization development, the online education industry has flourished. According to the 2023 China Online Education Industry Development Report, the number of online English education users in China has exceeded 400 million, with children and adult learners accounting for 38% and 52% of the user base, respectively, making them the two key groups. At the same time, the The English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education (2022 Edition) clearly states that English teaching should adhere to the principles of children's language development, focusing on cultivating interest and developing foundational language skills. China's standard of English emphasizes that adult English teaching should be communication-focused, aimed at improving practical language usage skills. However, in traditional English teaching settings, a "one-size-fits-all" approach remains prevalent, failing to fully consider the significant differences in cognitive characteristics, learning motivations, and language needs among learners of various ages. As a result, there exists a clear gap between teaching outcomes and the standards.

1.2. Research Questions

Online education platforms, with their flexible course designs, personalized teaching strategies, and deep integration of intelligent technologies, offer new possibilities for addressing the issues mentioned above. Currently, most online education platforms for children rely heavily on the Audiolingual Method, strengthening language input through listening training and speech imitation. In contrast, adult courses tend to favor the Oral Approach, promoting language output through situational dialogues and task-based activities. Does this differentiated teaching strategy truly align with the learning characteristics of different groups? What are the advantages and limitations in practical application? To explore these questions, this study uses the two online education platforms, Lixiao Coming and New Oriental, as case studies to examine the differences in the applicability of the Audiolingual Method and the Oral Approach for children and adult learners, and to analyze the adaptation mechanisms between teaching methods and learner needs.

1.3. Significance of the Study

This study not only helps reveal the intrinsic relationship between teaching methods and learner characteristics in online English education, providing a theoretical foundation for optimizing course design and improving teaching quality on educational platforms, but also offers practical insights for frontline teachers through comparative analysis of teaching strategies for different learner groups. By shifting English teaching from an “experience-driven” to a “scientifically adapted” approach, this study aims to contribute to the realization of the teaching goals outlined in the The English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education (2022 Edition) and China's standard of English. It holds significant theoretical value and

practical implications for advancing the field.

2. Theoretical Framework and Research Methods

2.1. Core Theories

Second Language Acquisition theory provides essential theoretical support for teaching English to children. Krashen's (1982) Monitor Model emphasizes that language acquisition occurs through extensive comprehensible input, and children, during their language-sensitive period, have a heightened ability to capture and process linguistic information. For instance, Lenneberg's (1967) Critical Period Hypothesis asserts that the golden stage for language acquisition occurs from early childhood to pre-adolescence, during which children can naturally and efficiently absorb language knowledge. The Audiolingual Method, with its focus on frequent listening input and repetitive imitation, aligns with the characteristics of children's language-sensitive period and helps them develop language perception and foundational expressive skills in a relaxed environment. An example of this is the Lixiao Coming platform, which leverages children's sensitivity to sounds and images, reinforcing language input through repetitive listening stimuli and speech imitation. This approach complies with the requirements of comprehensible input in SLA theory.

Secondly, communicative Language Teaching aims to develop communicative competence, which aligns closely with the practical orientation of adult English learning. Proposed by scholars such as Widdowson (1978), CLT emphasizes that language teaching should revolve around real communicative tasks, focusing on language use in authentic contexts. Adult learners often study English for clear practical purposes, such as career advancement or academic communication, and are more concerned with the functional and effective use of language. The Oral Approach, with its task-based scenario designs and interactive discussions, enables adult learners to practice language skills in simulated or real communicative settings, addressing their need to use English in daily life and work. For example, New Oriental's online adult English courses, which incorporate role-playing and group debates designed for business contexts, represent a typical application of CLT. These activities help learners enhance their speaking and communication abilities through interaction, thus transforming language knowledge into communicative competence.

2.2. Research Methods

This study selects Lixiao Coming and New Oriental as typical case studies, conducting an in-depth analysis from multiple dimensions, including course design, teaching processes, and technology application. In terms of course design, the study collects and organizes publicly available course outlines and teaching materials from the platforms, analyzing the integration of course objectives, teaching content,

and the use of the Audiolingual Method and the Oral Approach. Regarding the teaching processes, the study observes platform classroom recordings and teacher-centered instructional sequences to explore the specific implementation strategies of teaching methods in real teaching contexts. Additionally, the study examines the technological tools employed by the platforms, such as Lixiao Coming's AI speech evaluation system and New Oriental's virtual scene dialogue features, analyzing how technology supports the application of teaching methods and enhances teaching outcomes. Through a comprehensive analysis of these case studies, the research summarizes the practical models of different teaching methods in online English education for both children and adults.

The study also employs a comparative research method to systematically compare the characteristics of child and adult learners, the application of teaching methods, and learning outcomes. In terms of learner characteristics, it contrasts the differences between children and adults in cognitive abilities, learning motivation, and attention span. Regarding the application of teaching methods, the study compares the Audiolingual Method and the Oral Approach in terms of course structure and instructional activity design. In learning outcome evaluation, the study collects learning data such as speech accuracy, course completion rates, and learner satisfaction survey results from the platforms to compare the actual effectiveness of the two teaching methods across different learner groups. Through multidimensional comparative analysis, the study reveals the adaptability between teaching methods and learner groups, clarifying the advantages and limitations of each teaching method in online English education.

3. Learner Characteristics and the Adaptation of Teaching Methods

3.1. Adaptation of the Audiolingual Method to Child Learners

During the language learning phase, children are primarily guided by visual thinking. They exhibit a high sensitivity to vibrant visuals, rhythmic sounds, and dynamic animated characters, but they find it challenging to focus for extended periods on abstract text or grammatical rules. Their learning motivation is largely driven by interest, with novel and engaging learning formats more effectively stimulating enthusiasm. Furthermore, children have shorter attention spans, typically maintaining focus for only 10–15 minutes at a time, leading to a fragmented learning process (Yang, 2017).

Since its launch five years ago, the Lixiao Coming AI training system and one-on-one live coaching sessions have helped over 800,000 users nationwide improve their English scores by 20–60 points. Most of the platform's students are elementary and middle school students, who, in addition to having more flexible study schedules than high school students, benefit from the Lixiao Coming platform. This approach closely aligns with children's learning characteristics, integrating the Audiolingual

Method throughout the course design and teaching process. For example, in vocabulary lessons, Lixiao Coming employs the Audiolingual Method by having students repeatedly listen to and speak words to memorize them, enabling mastery of the words' pronunciation, form, and meaning. During formal lessons, each stage involves repeated listening and speaking, leading to temporary oral muscle memory. Over 21 days, 10 sessions are designed to review, reinforcing new vocabulary from short-term to long-term memory. Additionally, to address children's attention characteristics, the course adopts a short, high-frequency interaction model, keeping each lesson between 30 and 60 minutes with frequent interactive checkpoints.

3.2. Adaptation of the Oral Approach to Adult Learners

Adults possess developed abstract thinking and logical analysis abilities, enabling them to understand complex grammatical structures and language rules. They are adept at inductively summarizing learning patterns through reasoning. Their learning motivation is highly practical, focusing on clear objectives such as career advancement, business negotiations, and studying abroad. Additionally, adults exhibit strong self-regulation skills, allowing them to create personalized learning plans and allocate study time effectively based on their needs (Yang, 2017).

In this context, the New Oriental Online Adult English one-on-one courses are centered around "full English immersive communication," leveraging the Oral Approach to create a closed-loop model of "contextual input - interactive output - practical application." This model effectively aligns with adults' practical needs in the workplace, daily life, and other areas. In these courses, students communicate directly with foreign teachers entirely in English, with scenarios closely mirroring real-life and work situations.

During interactive segments, the one-on-one communication model breaks the limitations of traditional large classes' "passive input." Foreign teachers adjust the depth of topics in real-time according to the student's language proficiency. For instance, a beginner may discuss daily hobbies, while an intermediate or advanced learner might debate topics like ethics of artificial intelligence. For instance, in a discussion on the impact of social media on workplace relationships, the foreign teacher guides students to analyze specific scenarios, such as the use of emojis in remote work and the boundaries of communication in colleagues chats. This method encourages logical expression through the clash of ideas.

4. Case Comparison and Effectiveness Analysis

4.1. Differences in Course Design

The course designs of Lixiao Coming and New Oriental Online employ the core logic of the Audiolingual Method and the Oral Approach distinctively, creating distinct age-appropriate characteristics.

Firstly, Lixiao Coming employs the Audiolingual Method, with its core logic centered

around auditory input - oral output - muscle memory reinforcement. This approach emphasizes high-frequency, repetitive listening and speaking training to build a strong language foundation for children. For instance, in vocabulary lessons, the system first plays the pronunciation of a word and guides children to imitate it through repetition. This is followed by at least five rounds of practice through activities like word recognition, listening to identify words, and cut-out box games. The aim is to utilize children's short-term memory advantages to form oral muscle memory. This design allows children aged 6-12 to master the sound-form correspondence of 200-300 core words within 21 days. However, some parents have reported that while their children can pronounce the words, they do not fully understand the meaning of the sentences.

On the other hand, New Oriental Online adopts the Oral Approach's full English interactive-driven model, with its core logic based on teacher-centered topics - deep student participation - real-world scenario transfer. This model emphasizes cultivating the ability to respond linguistically in full English communication. For example, in the Business English one-on-one courses, the teacher initiates industry-related hot topics and asks students to express their views, provide data, and respond to probing questions. For example, students can talk about topics such as "What challenges do you think this strategy may face?"to extend the discussion logically. In these courses, over 80% of the lesson time is devoted to conversation, with the teacher intervening only when students make grammatical errors or struggle with expression, offering feedback that prioritizes meaning over form. This "discussion-driven output" design allows adult learners to significantly improve their ability to express themselves continuously in business contexts within 8-12 weeks. However, this approach presents a significant challenge for learners with weaker English foundations.

4.2. Effectiveness Comparison

Lixiao Coming's Audiolingual Method achieves remarkable efficiency in short-term memory. Specifically, third-grade students can master the listening and speaking ability of 100 high-frequency words within an average of 15 days, improving efficiency by threefold compared to traditional classrooms. Additionally, 80% of students can imitate standard pronunciation and intonation. However, this advantage is limited to the language form level. For instance, in the daily conversation test, only 45% of students could combine learned words into complete sentences. This highlights the issue of "fragmented input lacking semantic integration." Furthermore, platform surveys indicate that 60% of parents expect the course to include more situational dialogue training to bridge the gap between "word memorization" and "practical communication."

In contrast, New Oriental's Oral Approach has shown significant effectiveness in improving adults' practical language abilities. For example, participants in the

overseas business negotiation simulation produced an average of 15-20 sentences of coherent English per lesson, a fivefold increase compared to pre-course levels. Moreover, 70% of students were able to apply communication strategies practiced in the course, for instance, how to decline unreasonable requests in English, to their work situations within a month after the course ended. However, this model places high demands on learners' active participation. Specifically, data shows that students who interact with foreign teachers more than three times a week improve their speaking fluency at 2.3 times the rate of passive participants. On the other hand, learners with weaker English foundations may give up learning within four weeks due to frustration, which highlights the threshold nature of the high-output model.

When comparing the design logic of both approaches, the conservative design of children's courses reduces cognitive load through repetitive listening and speaking, using gamification to conceal the nature of lower-order thinking training. This makes it suitable for language initiation stages. In contrast, the challenging design of adult courses drives higher-order thinking such as analysis, evaluation and creation through full English interaction, requiring learners to actively use their existing knowledge to solve problems. This aligns with the adult learning logic of learning for practical application. Thus, the essential difference between the two approaches lies in the focus of children's education on language habit formation, whereas adult education emphasizes language skill application, reflecting the fundamental divide between input-based learning and output-based learning (Yuan, 2006).

5. Challenges and Suggestions

5.1. Existing Issues

The Audiolingual Method used by platforms such as Lixiao Coming can quickly improve children's phonetic imitation skills, but there are notable shortcomings. The course involves repetitive word reading and sentence pattern training, which primarily focuses on mechanical memorization of language forms rather than fostering an understanding of the underlying meaning. For example, many children can fluently repeat English words but are unable to connect these words and sentences to real-life situations, leading to the issue of "understanding commands but not being able to use them" (Yu, 2012). Additionally, the course interactions mostly consist of the teacher or system issuing commands with children passively responding. This lack of authentic, context-rich situations for independent expression makes it difficult for children to engage in spontaneous English conversations after leaving the course environment (Wang, 2003).

New Oriental's adult English courses, which focus on full-English communication, impose high demands on learners' English proficiency and time investment. Learners with limited vocabulary or weak oral skills often experience frustration and may even abandon the course due to difficulty following conversations with

foreign teachers. Moreover, adult learners typically use fragmented time to study, making it difficult to maintain consistent learning schedules and frequency (Zhang, 2007). If the course content does not meet their immediate practical needs - such as helping professionals see the short-term value for their work - they may lose motivation to continue learning, which results in lower course completion rates.

5.2. Optimization Path of the Audiolingual Methods

To enhance the effectiveness of the audiolingual methods, several improvements in course design can be made.

First, incorporating stories can significantly improve the connection between language learning content. Instead of learning isolated words and sentence structures, these can be integrated into simple and engaging micro-stories (Yang & Zhou, 2008). For example, when teaching vocabulary related to colors and fruits, a story could be created, where red apples can talk and yellow bananas can dance. In this context, children first listen to story segments and repeat key sentences.

Then, they engage in a story character, imitating the characters' tones. Finally, they are encouraged to use the vocabulary they've learned to adapt the story's ending. This approach not only helps children learn language but also enables them to grasp the meaning behind it, providing practical significance to the learning process.

Additionally, increasing opportunities for children to make autonomous choices during interactive tasks can foster more active learning. By moving away from a purely passive repetition model, tasks such as choose one out of two or reverse the command can be incorporated into the course. For example, after hearing the pronunciation of a word, children can select the corresponding picture from two options and explain their choice. Alternatively, when the teacher issues a command, children must perform the opposite action and state the correct instruction. These tasks encourage children to think, judge, and express themselves actively, thereby enhancing their language application skills (Pang, 2001).

Furthermore, optimizing the class structure to implement spiral learning can further improve the overall learning experience. One effective approach is the "3-2-1" class structure. In the first stage, three lessons focus on reinforcing the basics through high-frequency repetition and gamified spelling activities. The second stage uses two lessons to apply the learned content in simple scenarios, such as role-playing. Finally, in the third stage, a cross-topic comprehensive task, like creating a short play, consolidates the learning process. This structure allows for a gradual progression from language input to contextual application and, ultimately, to knowledge integration (Wang et al., 2021), significantly enhancing learning outcomes.

5.3. Optimization Path of the Oral Approach

Besides, to improve adult learners' speaking skills, several strategies can be

employed in course design.

One effective approach is to design a laddered difficulty structure for dialogues. For adult learners with limited proficiency, key terminology can be presented alongside English definitions, Chinese translations, and visual annotations during teacher-centered conversations. Additionally, learners are encouraged to use a mixture of English keywords and Chinese short phrases to express themselves, gradually transitioning toward full English communication. Prior to the class, a dialogue script containing core sentence structures can be provided (Vygotsky, 1964), allowing learners to practice through shadowing, which reduces the pressure of interactive tasks in class.

Moreover, it is crucial to focus on learners' practical needs when designing course content. Before the course begins, a questionnaire can be used to assess the learners' career contexts or life goals, such as sales or travel. Based on this information, customized learning themes can be delivered. Each theme should cover three core scenarios and ten key expressions, ensuring that learners acquire practical English phrases in every lesson, which they can immediately apply in real-world situations (Wang, 2003).

In addition to these content-focused strategies, incorporating real-world communication tasks into the course can further enhance learning. For children's courses, a simple communication task can be added at the end of each vocabulary lesson (Hu & Hu, 2019). For example, children could direct their parents to perform actions in English, recording the video as homework. For adult learners, foreign teachers can repeat key expressions used by the learners during conversations and record them, allowing learners to set the recording as their ringtone to reinforce memory during fragmented time. Furthermore, role play tasks relevant to the learners' personal careers can be designed, with real communication tasks incorporated to help them complete the practice (Zhou, 2012). These methods are simple and effective, yet they significantly improve learning outcomes for various groups of learners.

6. Conclusion

This study compares the application of the Audiolingual Method and the Oral Approach in online English education. The results indicate that the Audiolingual Method, through frequent imitation and gamified design, can significantly enhance children's pronunciation skills. However, it faces the challenge of addressing the disconnect between mechanical imitation and real-life application. In contrast, the Oral Approach, which focuses on full English contextual dialogues, can substantially improve adults' fluency in workplace English. However, it requires a higher foundational level from learners and a significant time investment.

In terms of optimization, children’s instruction could benefit from embedding minimal real tasks within the Audiolingual Method. For instance, a family English

micro-scenario could be introduced after each vocabulary lesson, transforming mechanical repetition into meaningful expression. Additionally, employing the storyline integration method can help, such as integrating color and number vocabulary through a micro-story like Rainbow Shop, thus avoiding the isolated word phenomenon. For adult learners, the entry barrier for the Oral Approach can be lowered by providing a core sentence script with image annotations for learners with a weak foundation, while focusing on career-specific scenarios such as sales negotiations and visa communication, ensuring that each lesson generates immediately applicable expressions. To enhance learning continuity, tools like memory card and cross-lesson task integration can be implemented, such as requiring learners to reuse key sentence structures from previous lessons in future ones.

Of course, this study has certain limitations. First, there is a lack of diversity and limitations in data sources. The research primarily relies on the teaching effectiveness data published by the platform, without third-party independent empirical data. Additionally, the study does not cover a wide range of learner profiles and scenarios. Currently, it excludes beginners and intermediate learners, which hinders a comprehensive understanding of the practical application of the Audiolingual Method and the Oral Approach for different educational groups. Therefore, it is recommended that future researchers expand their data collection channels and broaden the scope of their research to include a more diverse set of learner profiles and scenarios.

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