

A Review of Oral English Teaching Methodologies in Chinese Colleges

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ABSTRACT

As second language (L2) acquisition plays an increasingly important role in modern education, the demand for effective L2 teaching methods proved to be urgent. Nowadays, almost all Chinese colleges offer the L2 course of English, yet the L2 teaching methods vary dramatically. This paper examines the five most popular teaching methods deployed in Chinese colleges. Previous research has primarily investigated their respective properties, based on which we draw a broader view and search for the best method for certain subjects and contexts. As a result, although some of the approaches may have overlapped in the teaching process, they each contributed differently to the study outcome.

Keywords: L2 acquisition, teaching methods, college education, content-based subject

1. INTRODUCTION

English is becoming the most commonly used language to globalization of social, economic, and political activities [1, 2]. In this general trend, a growing number of students worldwide start learning English as a second language [3], and an extensive amount of them come from China [4-6]. In the process of learning English as a second language, Chinese students usually consider oral English as the most difficult aspect [2], embodied in English proficiency tests that their English oral scores are relatively low [7]. Hence, oral English has been a crucial aspect of English teaching [1, 8, 9].

Owing to the importance of oral English, it has permeated every age phase of education in China. Among all age phrases, the learning at college-level is diverse. Students from different faculties have distinct oral English learning environments, letting oral English teaching become complex. In college-leveled oral English teaching, teaching methods play an important role [10, 11], embodied in many aspects of teaching: types of media that teachers use during class, amount of testing, ways to conduct them, and class design, including how much teachers speak and dominate during class, and how much they stimulate students' participation in class [6, 12]. Previous studies have suggested that such teaching methods can affect Chinese

college students' oral English competence. Wen [5] have presented that many productive tasks and activities are involved in output-oriented teaching approaches, and students tend to be more actively engaged in the English learning materials during class. Similarly, the study of Guo and Qiu [9] suggests that students have more opportunities to learn cooperatively in guidance-based teaching mode, such as class discussion and teacher-student interaction. In this way, students could improve their abilities in an all-around way [9, 13]. Hence, under such a circumstance of complex teaching methods, many studies have examined the reasons for this:

1.1. The difference in teachers' language proficiency:

Teachers vary in their language proficiency and use different teaching methods. However, English is commonly included as one main subject in Chinese colleges [14], evidence showing that lecturers of English-related subjects in Chinese colleges tend to have distinctive teaching features when delivering classes [15]. This is consistent with Rao's study [16], arguing that Chinese oral English teachers tend to design their classes based on their English proficiency. Teachers with relatively lower levels of English oral competence have complained that beyond teaching

students English to some extent, they cannot give its thorough explanation [17]. In this case, it is hard to unify the teaching method in Chinese colleges. Additionally, some teachers who lack training in using the communicative-related teaching approach feel challenged in continuing using it [16]. Moreover, some students who are too shy to participate in class discussion do not provide the expected positive feedbacks [16]. Such a phenomenon may cause difficulties for teachers to make decisions about the most appropriate teaching method.

1.2. The disadvantages of traditional oral English teaching styles and the failure of complete transition from the traditional to the modern styles:

Evidence presenting limitations of traditional English teaching styles and the failure of a smooth transition from traditional to modern styles. According to Rao [16, 17], in the 1980s, teachers have realized that the traditional oral English teaching methods of memorization in Chinese colleges fail to give enough support for learners to develop strong oral English competence. As Gu and Liu [18] and Guo and Qiu [19] have found, the traditional style of teaching English is mainly test-oriented in most Chinese colleges. Similarly, little evidence regarding lecturers' passing on college students' application and integration of existing English knowledge has been found in Chen et al.'s research [15]. Such a traditional style may reduce their English language input and output in the Chinese college setting, hindering college students' spoken competence [8, 10, 18]. Given that, many teachers tend to modify their traditional teaching methods to adapt to modern ones [12, 13]. According to Yin [13], some oral English teachers combine videos, texts, and animations to teach, integrating computers and technologies into classrooms. In this way, college students' speaking tasks could be divided into different parts diversely [13]. For instance, pre-speaking part with pictures provided, speaking part with listening materials, additional speaking part with short movies, and home speaking part with pictures [13]. With such assistance of multiple media types, Chinese college students gain an authentic understanding of the scene of the speaking tasks, which helps their oral English learning effectively. Apart from the realistic sense provided to students, Yang and Fang [12] have noted other benefits of multimedia. Specifically, the use of platforms assisting teachers in stimulating college students' interests and inspiring them to participate in class, which increases students' chance to produce English. Nevertheless, problems of this shift of teaching styles have been pointed out by Rao [16] that schools do not have the same access to financial resources used for supporting modern oral English teaching methods. For example, the photocopiers and audio-visual equipment [16]. Thus, it

is still hard to unify the oral English teaching methods in today's Chinese colleges.

Based on the above chaotic circumstances, this paper aims to provide more comprehensive insights into Chinese colleges' current oral English teaching methods. Reviewing previous studies about the mainstream oral English teaching methods in Chinese colleges, five major ones will be presented in this paper: Situational Teaching Method, Task-Based Teaching Method, Problem-Based Teaching Method, Interactive Teaching Method, and Experience-Based Teaching Method. Through reviewing and summarizing the benefits and disadvantages of each main teaching method, it is expected to further assist with teachers' real practices of teaching.

2. SITUATIONAL TEACHING APPROACH

The situational language teaching approach is an approach in which the teacher will create or introduce a specific situation to help learners understand the target language. As one of the most widely applied teachings approaches in Chinese oral English teaching classrooms, it has its root back to the beginning of the twentieth century in England [20]. It is derived from behaviorist psychology, which suggests learning as a "stimulation-response-reinforcement" process [21].

It is characterized by language and emotion since the main function is to arouse the students' emotion by introducing or creating lively situations [22]. This approach requires the teachers to follow several rules while creating the situations: 1) Try to fit the students' intelligence and English proficiency. 2) Try to use real materials that can relate to students' experiences. 3) Try to keep the situations in the whole curriculum connected. 4) Try to increase the degree of difficulty gradually.

Many studies in different contexts have proved strengths of this teaching approach: vivid activities in a relaxed atmosphere can attract students' attention that can stimulate their enthusiasm. Besides, according to Juan, the students' due rights are fully ensured, and the ultimate goal of active learning can be reached [23]. Also, she agrees that teaching oral English with a situational approach can benefit the listening, reading, and writing skills.

Nevertheless, there are obstacles when applying this method to real-life classrooms: 1) Texts might be parsed improperly, which leads to passive participation. 2) The situation may be set unreasonably since it is actually hard for teachers to create or select interesting, appropriate and natural situations. 3) The transfer process among language and meaning might be ignored. 4) The teachers' function will be undervalued sometimes. Also, the learning process will be hard if students are lack cooperative learning ability.

3. TASK-BASED TEACHING METHOD

Task-based language teaching (TBLT) is an interactive teaching approach where students are put into scenarios similar to real-life occasions to learn L2 incidentally. TBLT aims to help students perform a task without explicitly teaching the grammatical structure.

TBLT is rooted in communicative language teaching (CLT), an adjunct teaching method that emphasizes students' language fluency over accuracy [24]. As a stronger form of CLT, task-based teaching focuses on the communicative use of language by mimicking the situations essential for L1 acquisition.

During the interaction, students perform a series of communicative tasks mimicking real-life scenarios. The task is decided into two types, which are target task and pedagogical task. The target task is what happens in real life. A pedagogical task is what is carried out in class derived from the target task. The process of TBLT, therefore, is adapting students to target tasks by rehearsing them. During the task-based teaching process, there're their steps for the instructor to do. In the pre-task planning, the instructor evaluates students' L2 competence and designs the pedagogical task that best fits students' test results. In the post-task analysis, the instructor grades students' performance by fluency and complexity. The number of words per pause measures fluency. Complexity is measured by lexical density. Finally, the instructor provides advice that makes students' self-correction process easier. Feedback plays a significant role in leading students to approaching native speakers' language competence. Because of the favorable authentic condition it creates, TBLT has been proved to facilitate L2 acquisition [25].

The disadvantage of TBLT lies in its emphasis on teaching. There is no formal instruction of L2's grammatical structure involved in TBLT. The fact that students pick up the grammatical rules of L2 merely through conversation is problematic. Students may face an evident lack of morphological rules besides other aspects of linguistic competence.

4. PROBLEM-BASED TEACHING METHOD

Problem-based learning (PBL) is an approach with no actual teaching involved. Students learn by solving problems assigned by instructors in the form of group work. They are asked to distribute each member's role, analyze the problem, present their solution and evaluate each other group's answers [26].

Historically, PBL was born when the need for a more effective teaching method is urgent. Studies found that the standard level of teaching outcome decreasing. There was little room for innovation but raise opportunities for the proliferation of old teaching

methods. PBL was first recorded in the medical class of the Case Western Reserve University in the 1950s and tardily spread its wings to L2 teaching. However, medicine is heavily content-based, but English is a non-content subject. Therefore, using PBL as L2 teaching, the sense of participation plays a more important role than the content [27]. In this aspect, PBL unconsciously performs the target task in TBLT with a deeper degree of authenticity, enhancing students' communicative and thinking skills. Although still in the experimental stage, researchers found that students in the PBL group learned and students in the traditional class do. Moreover, students after PBL presented more critical thinking and became more confident in communication in L2 [26].

The value of PBL is it immerses students into the content. One reason for PBL to achieve students' attention is that the problems are authentic. Authenticity promotes enthusiasm. Another reason is the form of group work puts a heavier burden on each student. Students are not the attendees of the class but the protagonists. Moreover, role-playing makes class fun, eliminating the boredom and "burnt-outs" [28].

However, one disadvantage of PBL is it is hard to maintain the quality of learning. The questions for discussion depend on what happened in reality. There are subsidiary facts that might be lurking. Therefore it might be hard to find a topic that thoroughly fits students' level of knowledge accumulation.

5. INTERACTIVE TEACHING METHOD

An interactive teaching method is an approach where instructors strengthen students' learning outcomes through four cases of interaction. It provides the conditions for speakers to work together and influence each other. The central idea of Interactive teaching is to accomplish a deep conversation among all members. It is applied in social science subjects, especially in business classes. During the interaction, students jointly do critical analysis, discussion to solve problems. Ideally, they end up establishing a mutually supportive relationship with both the instructor and classmates.

The methodological innovation involves role-play, brainstorming, case study, and discussion. There are minor differences that divide the four types of interactive teaching. Roleplay is highly student-centered. It allows forming skills that are difficult to acquire under ordinary learning conditions. Brainstorming stands out in liberating students mentally. It urges them to produce a maximum number of ideas in a tight time [29]. Case-study aims to contribute to future studies with current data. Various interesting examples can be found to help students project the consequence of their resolutions and find the

optimal answer for their questions. Discussion calls for a certain achieved level of logical reason. It is unique in following conventional procedures. For example, the instructor must first propose a controversial topic, and topic consolidation is crucial in ending the discussion.

Although interactive teaching has proven effective in overcoming students' fear of presenting their own opinions and promoting creativity and critical thinking, it can also put those introverted into dilemmas. Therefore students face a bigger challenge than classes of other forms. The psychological challenge is sometimes too hard to overcome.

6. EXPERIENTIAL TEACHING METHOD

In China, the experiential teaching method refers to an approach in which learners can acquire the target language by experiencing real or simulative activities. It is regarded as an effective teaching method in college English teaching programs [23]. It comes from experiential learning, which encourages reflective and active learning. The language skills can be developed by the experience of working on some specifically designed tasks.

Features of this teaching method are as followed. Sonja has cited Rogers in her study, saying that experiential learning is self-initiated, learners' cognition of exploring, reaching out, and comprehending is from their inner mind even sometimes the stimulus is from outside. This can help with the student's attitude, the personality even. Students need to engage actively with their own past learning experiences and reflect on the future [30]. Another feature of this teaching method is that it can easily adapt to different curriculums dominating by other teaching approaches. The task-based, project-based learning can easily become experiential when some reflective and supportive transfers are added.

With the features above, the main benefits of this teaching method are: 1) The motivation is improved to contribute to holistic learning goals. 2) Compared with the authentic task-based teaching method, it can provide some communicative language learning opportunities and other practical skills like interviewing or videotaping.

Despite the benefits mentioned above, there are several reasons why this teaching approach has not become the mainstream one. Firstly, it can be time-consuming for teachers to create a comfortable atmosphere while asking appropriate questions to encourage reflection. Secondly, in a Chinese English learning classroom, the students can easily slip into their native language during the activities. Last but not least, when the students are not accustomed to teamwork, it will be hard for teachers to conduct communicative activities.

7. CONCLUSION

As English oral teaching methods in Chinese college classrooms are under chaotic circumstances for a long, this study has provided a review of the main five teaching approaches: the situational teaching approach, the experiential teaching approach, the task-based language teaching, the problem-based learning, and the Interactive teaching.

It is observed that situational teaching is most commonly adopted in tourism oral English teaching since role-playing and routine designing is more suitable to students in this major. In contrast, the problem-based teaching method is reported to be initially used in medical science English teaching classrooms. In the meantime, problem-based learning mainly focuses on group work, which might lead to difficulties in applying it to other kinds of English teaching classrooms. As for experiential and situational teaching, they are designed for high-level English teachers. And the business and economic oral English teaching classrooms can adapt almost all the teaching approaches mentioned above. When it comes to learning English as a second language, the task-based and interactive teaching approaches have been the most widely used methods. They offer a native-like English-speaking environment.

Based on all the pros and cons of each method mentioned in this paper, we provide some understanding for teachers in Chinese college English oral teaching classrooms, in which they can select applicable methods for a different context, and even combine the approaches, thus creating a most appropriate method for specific majors.

Although the review of the main oral English teaching approaches has a theoretical value on the Chinese college oral English education, there remains much work to be done, such as investigating other age groups or other countries' oral English teaching approaches, as well as finding out whether it is worth the effort to build an integrated oral English teaching system.

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