



The Adoption of Famous Paintings in Oral English Teaching – A Case Study

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Abstract. With the increasing importance of oral English in China, the higher education is paying more emphasis on enhancing students' oral English capacity. While there are a variety of methods in enhancing this ability, such as performing presentations at class, organizing English corners at school, etc., the effects of such practices vary. Besides, with the implementation of foreign language curriculum moral education in recent years, English courses are required to involve both practical skills and moral education, meaning that oral English teaching and learning has become more challenging. It is under this new circumstance that this study has managed to involve famous paintings in oral English teaching. Through a one-year-long qualitative case study, it shows that this new attempt can improve students' spoken English skills as well as their cultural literacy.

Keywords: oral English teaching, oral English ability, famous painting, cultural literacy

1 Introduction

1.1 The importance of oral English

Although it has been widely criticized that English teaching in China is exam-oriented and those students are learning the “dumb English”, it is also clear that oral English is getting more emphasis in the English teaching system [12]. On the one hand, as more and more foreign visitors come to China for tourism, business or other purposes, a competent oral English is a must in order to build a smooth communication. On the other hand, being a lingua franca, oral English plays an important role in “telling Chinese stories to the world”, which can be perfectly combined with the One Belt One Road Initiative [10]. As a “dumb English” learner may no longer be suitable in these tasks mentioned above, it is undoubtedly that oral English shall come to the stage [4].

One example showing oral English's increasing status in the higher education teaching syllabus is the changes of its proportion in the CET-4 and CET-6 training guideline [14]. Unlike the previous training model where students only need to participate in the written tests, more colleges have involved oral English of CET-4 and CET-6 in the

regular college English course, and some universities even set oral English as a compulsory task for students to join before their graduation [11]. Besides, the questions designed in CET-4 and CET-6 are getting as challenging as the one in those international English tests such as IELTS and TOEFL [13]. For example, part three of CET-4 and CET-6, i.e. picture description, is similar to part two in IELTS. In fact, this section is the same as the oral test in the Pearson Test of English. The similarity between these domestic English tests and those international one signifies not only the increasing importance of oral English in college English training system, but also the growing challenges of learning and practicing oral English proposed in front of the students. Therefore, figuring out a proper way to enhance their oral English ability becomes prominent.

1.2 The current state of oral English teaching

In order to meet the requirements of oral English capacity either in CET-4 and CET-6 or those international tests such as IELTS and TOEFL, teachers in college have tried a variety of training methods. Students are required to engage in numbers of oral practices that they may not have experienced before, these include individual oral presentation, group presentation, video presentation, etc. [7]. Meanwhile, the college itself has also played a role in facilitating its students' passion in learning oral English, such as the weekly English corner, the English cultural festival, and oral English competitions, etc.

Although the methods mentioned above have to some extent allowed a certain number of students' oral English scores to be promoted, the general performance remains uncertain. The explanation to this situation, excluding students' English ability per se, lies in the training programs of oral English [3]. For example, some training materials are so outdated that may no longer match the requirements of nowadays' oral English practices either in tests or in daily life. On the other hand, a number of oral English classes over-emphasize the role of presentations in learning. Such monotonous lessons ultimately eliminate students' passion and interests in oral English. To maximize the training effects in these oral English classes, a new method is worth pondering.

1.3 The curriculum moral education and cultural literacy

With the implementation of curriculum moral education guided by the Guideline for the Construction of Curriculum Moral Education in Higher Education, English courses are no longer a place where only English ability is engaged. Instead, curriculum moral education requires teachers to not only teach students how to use English, but also how to improve their morality [6]. There are many aspects involved in the curriculum moral education, among them, cultural literacy is an important element where students are expected to enhance their cultural awareness towards both China and the west [5].

There are various ways to engage moral education in oral English class, which shares some similarities with public speaking, such as utilizing classical readings and quotes from famous people [8]. Classical readings are used before and after oral English practices. Students are usually required to read and take notes based on the classical readings assigned by teacher before performing their speeches. In some public speaking

lessons, students may also be asked to read classical readings after delivering their speeches so as to gain the worth-learning skills in writing a draft or preparing a speech. On the other hand, quotation is a practical skill which is usually used during the speech. Speakers prefer doing that in order to show their connections with those famous figures or to adopt the ideas from them. Both methods can serve the purpose of enhancing students' oral English ability and their cultural literacy, but they both require amount of time to prepare or to learn in advance, i.e. they may not achieve its goal instantly in class.

Pictures, however, offer an opportunity to explore a possible way to improve students' oral English capacity and their cultural literacy. As mentioned before, picture description is usually involved in many English test such as CET-4 and Pearson Test of English, engaging pictures in oral English teaching will enable students to practice this kind of question in advance [1]. However, it is also noticeable that pictures introduced in oral English classes are usually adopted from comics or cartoons. These pictures mainly focus on certain issues in the society, although they themselves also possess artistic values to some extends, it may find difficult to arouse students' cultural literacy by using them.

This study suggests that adopting famous pictures in oral English class can achieve both students' oral English improvement as well as their cultural literacy. From the English capacity perspective, famous paintings can serve the same function as comics and cartoons where students can deliver their descriptive speech. Most importantly, famous paintings involve a variety of social and artistic values. These pictures generally reflect a specific historic event, a social issue, or an idea valued by the author. Such information can arouse students' critical thinking as they may eager to figure out the stories behind the picture, and thus stimulate their interests in exploring the field of humanities. This is the same for cultural literacy as students can learn and appreciate the characteristics of the famous picture itself as well as the value and culture behind it [9].

2 Methodologies and Research Context

The current research is a case study combined with other two qualitative research methods, i.e. interview and observation [2]. This study took place in an oral English class in a university of Guangzhou China. The researcher of this study has taught this class for one semester and thus has gained a thorough understanding of the students. They have attended the courses of College English One and English Audio-Visual Speaking in their first semester, during which they have gained some basic skills of preparing the CET-4 speaking test. However, traditional teaching methods were still adopted in the first semester's oral English class where students were only required to conduct presentation so as to meet the assessment [3], thus modifications would be made in the next semester's oral English class where famous pictures would be included to figure out if they would have significant impacts on the students' oral performance.

The researcher chose three students as the observed target in this study. In order to exclude the possible factors that may affect the study's ultimate result, these three

students shared a similar academic background, i.e. they reached a similar score by the end of the first semester (85-90/100) and they all valued English as an important skill in their future life. Apart from these, the different characteristics shared by these three students are shown as follow (Table 1).

Table 1. Different Characteristics of the Three Students

Student X	Student Y	Student Z
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shy • Good at writing and grammar • Not good at pronunciation and intonation • Only attend the societies in college 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A little bit shy • Pronunciation and intonation are good • Attend societies in college • Sometimes attend social activities outside school at the weekend 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extrovert • Good at using body language • Sometimes make grammar mistakes in writing and speaking • Attend both college and social clubs or organizations regularly

These three students' performance were all fully observed during the oral English class via video recorded in each lesson. Since this was a weekly class, the researcher would examine video every week and recorded specific changes in any of these three students' performance during class, which includes their behaviors when preparing the oral task as well as presenting on the stage. The whole observation lasted for one semester with 16 weeks in this university. The study was separated into three stages, Phase One from week 1-5, Phase Two from week 6-10, and Phase Three from week 11-16. By the end of each phase an interview was arranged to each student respectively where the researcher would ask and record the students' attendance in oral English activities beyond classroom based on their response. The three students had been formerly informed about the purpose of this study and the confidential issues throughout the research process, and they had all consented to join in this study as the observed.

3 Findings

3.1 Students are more actively participating in oral English activities both in and off campus

The three students showed active participation in oral English activities in an increasing trend as shown in Table 2. Before the research (Phase 0) only Student Z joined the English corner in campus while other two had no experience of it. By the end of the 5th week, Both Student X and Student Y had attended the English corner, which can be explained as their willingness to seize another opportunity to improve their oracy so that they could have a better preparation for their presentation in class as Student Y mentioned in the interview.

Student Y: I understand that my oral English is not good, so I think ... Actually, I am afraid of it ... Yes, but I also want to behave better, so I choose to have a try (in the English corner).

By the end of the second and third phase in the study, it is noticeable that these three students had gradually signed their names in different English competitions in campus, and they had also tried to engage in some other activities in the society although the progress here was relatively slower than their in-campus' engagement. It is especially intriguing that Student X, the one who was the shyest among the three, managed to join the public speaking competition in Phase 3 as she believed she had collected enough materials to present in the contest.

Student X: I have got many stories in class, like the stories I learned in the picture ... I think they are useful ... I am not sure about the contest, but I think I can have a try ... And other classmates, they inspired me, also play an important role to force me to join.

It is also interesting to find that Student Z preferred to attend Toastmasters, an international public speaking club that can be found in many cities in the world, after joining the first week oral English class in this semester. He kept this as a hobby and by the end of this whole research he still preferred visiting the club every week.

Table 2. Students' Participation in Oral English Activities in Different Phases

	Student X	Student Y	Student Z
Phase 0	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In campus: N/A • Off Campus: N/A 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In campus: N/A • Off Campus: N/A 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In campus: English corner • Off Campus: N/A
Phase 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In campus: English cor-ner • Off campus: N/A 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In campus: English corner • Off campus: N/A 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In campus: English corner • Off campus: Toastmasters
Phase 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In campus: English corner • Off campus: N/A 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In campus: English debate competition • Off campus: volunteer 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In campus: English corner, English debate competition • Off campus: Toastmasters
Phase 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In campus: English corner, Public speaking competition • Off campus: Volunteer 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In campus: English corner, Public speaking competition • Off campus: Volunteer 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In campus: English corner, Public speaking competition • Off campus: Toastmasters

Generally speaking, it can be found that the adoption of famous paintings in class has aroused students' interests in further improving their oral English. These pictures also served as useful materials for the students to present themselves in class, and even be brave enough to attend the contest.

3.2 Students' descriptive ability has improved significantly

One important feature observed in class is the student's descriptive ability (Table 3). In the past, they were dumfounded about this type of oral question as they were unsure what they could say for 2two minutes. In fact, most of the students preferred to just mention two to three features in the picture without knowing how to further their speeches. Therefore, it is satisfactory to find that, as time went on, the three observed students were able to make progress in their descriptive ability gradually. For example, by the end of Phase 1, Student Y and Student Z had already been able to describe both the general picture and other useful details combined with further explanation in their

delivery. This performance had actually met the time requirement in the test. Further training had also enabled these two students to include more information in their description, particularly for Student Z whom involved mental description in his speech in Phase 3, which was a significant progress in answering this type of question. Although Student X made slower progress in her descriptive ability, by the end of Phase 3 she was still successfully involve explanation in her speech.

Table 3. Students’ Descriptive Ability in Different Phases

	Student X	Student Y	Student Z
Phase 0	• N/A	• N/A	• N/A
Phase 1	• General description	• General description • Color • Plus explanation	• General description • Body movement • Plus explanation
Phase 2	• General description • Color	• General description • Color • Body movement • Plus explanation	• General description • Color • Body movement • Plus explanation
Phase 3	• General de-scription • Color • Body movement • Plus explanation	• General description • Color • Body movement • Plus explanation	• General description • Color • Body movement • Mental description • Plus explanation

Talking about the contribution of famous paintings in their delivery, the three students expressed their gratitude to the color and characters displayed in the pictures.

Student Z: It is much easier for me to know what to say when seeing the picture. You know, sometimes I was amazed by the picture, so I really want to show the details as much as possible.

Student Y: The pictures taught me to pay attention to color ... It is an important part in a picture ... I won't miss it, so everything becomes easier to describe.

3.3 Students’ quotation ability has improved significantly

Quotation is a useful tool applied in oral delivery, especially in a public speech [7]. Many speakers would use quotation in the introduction part of a speech to build connection with the famous figure or prominent idea, and it also serves as a practical way to attract audiences’ attention. The function is similar when quotation is used in the body or the conclusion part of a passage. However, it is not easy for novice speaker to adopt this technique as it requires certain amount of knowledge accumulation [8]. As recorded in Table 4, before conducting the study, it can be seen that the three students have difficulty in using quotation in their speech. The situation has been improved from Phase 1 to 3 as they were willing to adopt quotation in one part or even more parts of their speech, among them, introduction and conclusion are the most popular one. It is

also noticeable that the students believed regular practices with famous pictures had appealed them to research and use more quotations in their speech.

Table 4. Students' Quotation Ability in Different Phases

	Student X	Student Y	Student Z
Phase 0	• N/A	• N/A	• N/A
Phase 1	• Introduction	• Introduction	• Introduction
Phase 2	• Introduction	• Introduction	• Introduction • Conclusion
Phase 3	• Introduction • Conclusion	• Introduction • Conclusion	• Introduction • Body • Conclusion

Student X: I am actually interested in literature, but I didn't know the connection between oral practice and it ... So, I would prefer using some of my favorite quotes from my reading in my speech. Using them gives me a sense of pride.

Student Y: Viewing the pictures provides me a chance to have further research about them, and I think this is a very good way to collect information ... And you know what, some pictures' background information even helps my study in other courses, those art courses.

3.4 Students are more interested in Chinese and western classics

Similar to the previous finding, the three students in this study express their willingness to further explore the Chinese and western classics, which prove that inspired by the famous paintings adopted in the oral English class, students can also improve their cultural literacy.

Student X: It is the first time that I realize the beautiful connection between literature and paintings. Even though sometimes they are not closely linked together, the similar topic and idea shared by both of them motivate me to have further research about them.

Student Y: I was deeply attracted by the cultural conflict between the east and the west when we did the practice using the Thirteen-Hong of Canton. After class I did some research about it and learned a lot about history in the late Tsing Dynasty.

Student Z: There is no doubt that I will continue this type of practice in the future ... I mean the masterpieces teach me another class about the art in the east and the west. I very like them, particular the stories behind them.

4 Conclusion

This study, using a variety of qualitative research methods, shows the effectiveness of enhancing students both oral English ability and cultural literacy by adopting famous paintings in oral English class. It may bring significance to the future English, especially oral English pedagogy as the combination of English-speaking practices and

famous paintings may facilitate achieving the goal of both language proficiency's improvement and curriculum moral education. For further studies, it may be advisable to extend the observed period of the target students so as to further examine more specific changes in students' performance effected by the inclusion of famous paintings. Also, increasing the observable occasions is advisable as this study mainly focused on students' behaviors in classroom. More field research can be conducted in other scenarios such as competitions, social communities, etc. so that a larger picture of students' after-class performance can be obtained.

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