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On Blended Learning and Oral English Communicative Competence

−Taking "Oral English 3" Online Course as an Example

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Abstract—This paper explores the correlation of blended learning and the enhancement of oral English communicative competence based on the teaching of the online course "Oral English 3" and the empirical data elicited from the questionnaire with English majors. It shows that "online / offline + face-to-face" blended teaching and learning mode facilitates students' participation and interaction and develops their capabilities of making PPT presentations, their English thinking, oral expressive and communicative competence, thus effectively improves the teaching quality of oral English.

Keywords—Blended learning; Flipped classroom; Oral English communicative competence

I. INTRODUCTION

Against the 'Big Data' age in the new era, it has become a nationwide hot issue how to cultivate high-caliber English talents with global visions and excellent thinking and communicative competence. In the educational world, with the widespread application of modern teaching modes such as MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses), Micro-courses, SPOC (Small Private Online Course) and Flipped Classroom, 'face-to-face teaching + online / offline' blended learning has become mature and taken a new direction and tendency in its development. Blended learning, varying among courses and differing among students, integrates textbooks, supplementary teaching materials, audios, videos, movie clips, English speech contests and online interaction, provides learners with richer and more vivid learning resources and a brand-new all-round platform to learn English.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW: ENGLISH TEACHING AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF ORAL COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

As early as the late 20th century when the traditional English teaching in China caused big problems such as 'dumb or mute English' and "high scores and low competence", "China Education Daily" compared the teaching to "a never-boiling kettle of water", thus arousing heated discussions in the educational world nationwide. A general survey of the history of foreign language teaching methods shows that different approaches have witnessed educationalists' hard-working endeavors at diverse periods. Approaches like Grammar-Translation Method, Direct Method, Audiolingual Method, Situational Teaching Method, Total Physical Response, Silent Way, Suggestopedia, Communicative Approach and "Post-Methods Era" were advocated and widespread but later on disregarded gradually and some even disappeared [1]. This is because people have been constantly trying to construct a more effective and ideal foreign language teaching approach and they come up with new understanding and new methods in their search and practice. Up until the present, the Communicative Approach is still being practiced in the English world, which originated from Hymes' "communicative competence" (communicative form and function in integral relation to each other) as opposed to Chomsky's "linguistic competence" from the "transformational-generative grammar". Communicative competence refers to all the linguistic competence and non-verbal means available that a person employs to attain the aim of communication. English educators hope that they can enhance learners' English communicative competence by integrating authentic linguistic materials in real situations as well as highlighting more oral practice. With high-level communication increasing in China and with the continual deepening of "the Belt and Road Initiatives", "English Test for International Communication" has pushed the development of English communicative competence to a brand-new pinnacle.

Against the background of computer-assisted teaching, MOOCs, Micro-courses, SPOC, Flipped Classroom and blended learning have become the teaching norm in the information age. The main implication of "Flipped Classroom" is to hand the decisive power to learn from the teacher over to students. Completely different from the traditional teaching mode, "flipped classroom" exhibits all teaching resources like textbooks, assignments, homework, practice, audio-video and relative teaching materials through modern technology so that students can study at their own pace at their own convenient time. Blended learning means "learning which combines online and face to face approaches", according to the Department for Education and Training [2]. "Flipped Classroom" and blended learning are somewhat overlapping in meaning, and both aim at engaging students in a more active way so that they can learn more flexibly and more actively, particularly with better effects. Ma and Zhang found that blended learning in college English

solved the contradiction between limited teaching materials and individual demands, thus facilitating teaching quality [3]. The research by Xi showed that most students acknowledged blended learning and it promoted teaching [4]. Li et al. explored the design of task-based "flipped classroom", with questions being the center. They pointed out "flipped classroom" motivated students' learning interest, enhanced students' abilities in learning, application and cooperation, thus improved teaching effects and realized the effective integration of information technology and higher education courses [5]. This paper, based on the teaching practice of online course "Oral English 3" and the empirical data from the questionnaire with English majors, will explore the correlation between blending learning and the improvement of oral English communicative competence.

III. RESEARCH DESIGN

This paper bases itself on the practice and teaching of online course "Oral English 3" and the empirical data elicited from the questionnaire with 77 English majors in Jiangxi Police Institute. The questionnaire covers the students' learning background and history, the cognition and self-assessment of oral English and communicative competence and the understanding, feeling and benefits from the online course. At the end of the questionnaire, 3 open questions are posed, which aims at students' understanding of the best approach to improve oral English communicative competence, the benefits

from the online course and what additional teaching materials can be added for further course reform. The questionnaire was conducted at the end of the third term, shortly before the end-test, and the author quickly took the time to handle the data, analyze and put them into use. The subjects are the students who have been learning on the author's modules of "Oral English" (1-3), "Intensive Reading" and "An Introduction to College Learning". Because of 1 year and a half contacts, the author knows the students very well.

The research designed 6 questions to draw out the subjects' basic information of English learning (see Table I). The statistics on the Likert Scale show that students regard "speaking" as the most important linguistic skill. Likewise, they confirmed the importance of oral communicative competence, both being the highest and equaling "4.7". Among the skills of "listening, speaking, reading, writing, translation, vocabulary and grammar", 26 students (33.8%) like "reading" most, followed by "speaking" (29.9%), and above one third dislike grammar most (39%). Above one third (37.7%) self-assess "reading" as the strongest and about one third (32.5%) regard "grammar" as the weakest, "listening" being the second weakest. Because the subjects major in English, they are quite interested in learning English (3.7 points), but they do not think highly of their oral English communicative competence, only scoring "2.5" points. Their engagement and participation are just so-so, only "2.8" points.

TABLE I.   SUBJECTS' BASIC INFORMATION OF ENGLISH LEARNING

Interest in learning English	Assessing the importance of "speaking"	Assessing the importance of oral communicative competence	Correlation between oral English proficiency and communicative competence	Self-assessing oral English communicative competence	Engaging and participation in oral English class
3.7	4.7	4.7	4.2	2.5	2.8

IV. EMPIRICAL STUDY: BLENDED LEARNING AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF ORAL ENGLISH COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

A. Practicing Blending Teaching Mode

From September 2017, the author started practicing and researching on the teaching of the online course of "Oral English 3". Totally different from the traditional mode, the oral English teaching comprises 3 main parts: 1. face-to-face teaching; 2. blended learning; and 3. offline learning (see Figure 1). To conduct face-to-face teaching, the author requires the students to prepare for class beforehand. Preparations can be made through searching website materials relevant to the theme to be learned via autonomous learning and make PPT slides. Alternatively, they can prepare their PPT presentations via learning materials including PPT talks, audio-video clips, English Speech Contests, movie episodes etc. provided by the author online. It is not advocated that students take the latter option for preview but it can be done if they are unable to search and get relevant information to prepare their talks. The

basic principal for autonomous preparations for their PPT presentation is to supplement and enrich the knowledge based on the understanding of the theme of the unit to be learned. It is the extension and development of the theme rather than simple repetition of the textbooks.
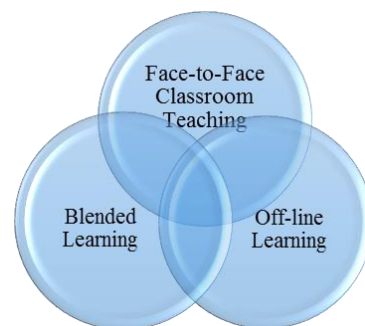

Fig. 1.   Blended Learning Mode of "Oral English 3"

It should be noted that the theme talk is the highlight of each unit (1 unit takes 4 teaching periods). Taking "Unit 6: Ideal Career" as an example. The author uploaded rich online learning resources, including an interview video clip from "The Devil Wears Prada", the video clip of "Summer Recruitment Fair" with 3 university students looking for part-time jobs, 2 audios of "Employment Problem" and "How to Ace an Interview?" and 2 PPT talks, apart from the listening part from the textbook. PPT-1 is about "Career Choices", and the talk covers many factors to be taken into account, including interests, goals, planning, skills, education, preparations, salary and how to talk to those who are doing their ideal jobs and get to know their perceptions, feelings and experiences. PPT-2 introduces the qualities employers look for in employees and gives guidance on how to enrich their knowledge and develop their skill sets, develop their communicative competence and personality. The other important part in the theme talks is "Vocabulary Builder", which is to boost students' confidence to speak. At the beginning when the new unit is taken, students are required to complete the PPT presentation centering on the theme. After 2 periods of learning, particularly after watching the audio-videos and learning the PPT talks online, students are further requested to improve their PPT work, including correcting grammar mistakes and typos and reformatting. At the end, the author uploads the students' PPT presentations onto a special category entitled "Practice" for sharing. The subjects being studied confirmed that other groups' PPT slides played an important referential role when they were preparing for the final oral test.

"Unit 6: Ideal Career" starts with the video clip from "The Devil Wears Prada" when Andy Sachs, a newly graduate, comes to "Runaway" for an interview. Students are asked to discuss why Andy fails the interview and what preparations should be made; thus further discussions continue with "interviews" and "careers". After 4 periods of all-round knowledge transmission and sharing of "careers", students not only have vocabulary to handle the same topic but also have things to talk and discuss further. Students' learning starts from offline independent PPT preparations, face-to-face and blended learning in class and finally offline practice, as a whole cycle is designed to develop their oral English communicative competence.

B. Blended Learning and the Development of Oral English Communicative Competence

As this research shows, students believe that they have benefited most in terms of PPT presentations from the online course of "Oral English 3". They confirm that through completing PPT talks they have enhanced the abilities in computer applications and to make PPT talks, the highest point of "4.58" (see Table II). At the same time, they also believe that learning from other groups' PPT oral presentations and reflecting on the practice work, they have consolidated what has been learnt (the second highest of "4.49"). Preparing PPT presentations also makes students understand what has been learnt more profoundly, and students speak English with more confidence with the aid of PPT slides. Compared with the traditional oral English teaching, students like online course teaching more because of richer resources and broader knowledge (averaging "4.23"). They like blended learning (face-to-face teaching + online / offline learning; averaging "4.2"), and confirm this way of teaching and learning enhanced their oral English communicative competence effectively ("4.22"). The subjects trust that the audio-videos in "Oral English" online course have added to their interest in learning English and improved their autonomous learning abilities. Through practicing and talking more in English, students have overcome the fear to learn English, leading to the obvious improvement of oral English communicative competence. The subjects believe that they show more willingness to talk to their classmates or find opportunities to talk to others in English than ever before, and they spend more time practicing speaking English every week.

TABLE II.   BENEFITS FROM ONLINE COURSE OF "ORAL ENGLISH 3"

Questions	Mean
Through completing PPT presentation, I enhanced the abilities in computer applications and to make PPT presentations	4.58
Through learning from other groups' PPT and reflecting on practice work, I consolidated what has been learnt	4.49
Making use of online sources facilitates the oral English communicative competence	4.42
Through autonomous learning of online sources, preparing PPT presentation and face-to-face interaction, I understand what has been taught more deeply	4.39
To make oral presentation with PPT slides boosts my confidence and assists me in expressing myself in English	4.36
Compared with traditional oral English teaching, I like online course teaching more because of richer resources and broader knowledge	4.23
"Oral English 3" blended learning enhances my oral English communicative competence effectively	4.22
I like the blended learning mode in the online course of "Oral English 3" (face-to-face teaching + online / offline learning)	4.2

Students' answers to the open questions correspond to the quantitative data. When asked what they benefit most from the "Oral English" online course, above half the subjects believe that they have improved their abilities to make PPT oral presentations and quite a good number confirm that they have boosted their competence in thinking and expressing themselves in English. In general, they all think highly of the online course and almost come to the consensus that through "online / offline + face-to-face" blended learning mode they dare to speak English, and communicate with classmates and they have boosted self-confidence and corrected pronunciation. Because the online course is attractive and entertaining, students think that they have enhanced their interest in learning English and increased their abilities in independent learning. The overwhelming majority think the best approach to improve oral English communicative competence is to practice and speak more in English, whether to native-speakers or to their classmates and teachers. Individuals consider watching audio-videos online and imitating is the best option.

Xue found that rote-memory, doing exercises and practicing simulated tests were the principal successful strategies Chinese students adopt in learning English [1][6]. What is inspiring is that this research shows students seem to have abandoned such a traditional learning style that stressed textbooks, exercise-books and simulated tests when asked what they would suggest adding onto the online learning resources. Instead, the majority hope that more video clips, excellent movie episodes and English speech contests will be supplied. In this light, it is self-evident that learners have put higher demands on English learning against the "Big Data" age. In other words, the students in this study wish that they can know more about western cultures and improve their oral English communicative competence in a real sense while taking the oral English course. Individuals hope that more interactive programs will be provided online. Because the current online course of "Oral English 3" is merely a preliminary trial, to increase and strengthen online interaction is undoubtedly an essential part of the course reform.

V. CONCLUSION

Information technology is changing people's life and the education mode at an amazing pace in the new age. Blended learning, the accompanying product, puts students at the heart, and they can complete their learning tasks according to their own interests and personalities at their convenient time and place. This paper takes "Oral English 3" as an example, exhibits the online course teaching that integrates traditional textbooks, teaching supplementary materials, audio-video clips, excellent movie episodes, brilliant English Speech Contests and online interactions. Because of its richer and more vivid learning resources, this research shows that students like this brand-new all-round English learning mode. They confirm that they have benefited a lot from such an online course teaching, particularly they have developed their abilities to make PPT presentations and facilitated their oral English expressive and communicative competence as well as their capabilities of online search and learning. In this light, the online course has effectively boosted students' learning motivation and enhanced the teaching effects. Of course, online course teaching puts higher demands on the teachers in terms of English linguistic knowledge, cultural knowledge and humanistic qualities, and there also exist limitations in teaching resources and environments [7-8], but blended learning can be viewed as having a benign effect on teachers' "discourse hegemony" and students' "aphasia" or silence.

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