SPOC-based Spoken English Teaching: Design and Practice

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Abstract. Recent years have witnessed the fast and steady growth in the research on the integration of technology and education. The study proposed a SPOC-based spoken English teaching model.1531 students participated in the teaching practice, learning online and practicing in classroom. Then, five students had an interview from which their feedback on the model was gathered. Results of the study reveal the model can be optimized through diversifying lecture videos and standardizing assessment system. To make the model work more efficiently, students are encouraged to improve their autonomous learning ability and adapt themselves to the model. It is suggested that researchers incorporate technological achievements into EFL teaching.

Keywords: SPOC; spoken English teaching; constructivism; Chinese postgraduates.

1. Introduction

With the increased availability of the Internet and application programs in the last two decades, academics and teachers have persistently integrated information and communication technology with teaching. Using MOOC technology is one of their strategies to organize teaching in different ways. MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) were initially introduced in 2006 and viewed as a popular learning mode to widen access to education. Nevertheless, MOOCs opponents strongly criticize their high dropout rates [1]. In 2013, the concept of SPOC (Small Private Online Course) was proposed by University of California Berkeley Professor Armando Fox. He argued that it is an online course used locally with on–campus students as a supplement to face-to-face classroom teaching, increasing instructor leverage, student throughput, student mastery, and student engagement [2]. As education pioneers, Harvard University and University of California Berkeley started to create SPOCs to assist teaching for on-campus students in 2013. Since then, SPOC-based teaching practice and the research on it have grown exponentially in various subject areas all over the world. With focus on Chinese non-English major postgraduates, the present study will present a SPOC-based spoken English teaching model, analyze how it works in practical teaching and find out in what ways it can be optimized.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Constructivism

The concept of constructivism has had a profound and lasting impact on various disciplines, particularly education. A number of learning theories and teaching methods derive from it. The researcher outlines constructivists' views about pedagogy from the following aspects: learning process, roles of teachers, learners, and assessment. According to Brown, Collins and Ackerman, learning is regarded as an active process where learners should learn to discover principles, concepts and facts for themselves [3, 4]. It puts the emphasis on the importance of students' autonomous learning ability. During learning process, teachers play a significant role in motivating and assisting students. David Jonassen identified three major roles for teachers to support students in constructivist learning environments: modeling, coaching and scaffolding [5]. The activities in a learning process should be student-centered. Learners who have different skills and backgrounds should collaborate in tasks and discussions to arrive at a shared understanding of the truth in a specific field [6]. When a learning cycle ends, constructivists think students' performance is not only evaluated by testing but also by their work and their points of view.

2.2 SPOC-based Teaching

In China, He Bin and Cao Yang took the lead in doing research on SPOC. They pointed out that SPOCs combine high quality MOOCs with face-to-face instruction and concluded six advantages of SPOC from the case study of UC Berkeley SPOC Software Engineering [7]. Then Chen Ran and Yang Cheng developed a blended learning model based on SPOCs, using the case of the course C Language Programming Design [8]. For Chinese non-English major undergraduates, some scholars reconstructed college English classroom by integrating SPOC, mobile learning and social communication into classroom teaching and learning [9].For English majors, SPOC-based translation teaching model was proposed to provide some new insight into the reform of translation teaching [10]. However, the application of SPOC in English as a foreign language teaching in Chinese universities is still limited. Even less research has been done on how to use SPOC technology in spoken English teaching for Chinese non-English major postgraduates. The researcher attempts to rely on SPOC technology and design a spoken English teaching model based on constructivism.

3. Design

Based on the previous research and achievements, the teaching team proposed a SPOC-based spoken English teaching Model shown by figure 1.
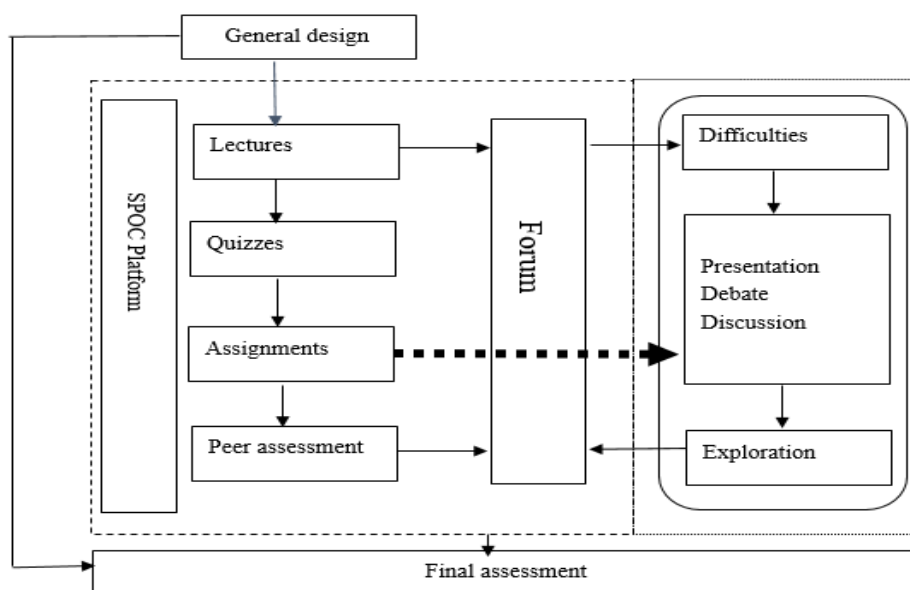

Fig.1 A SPOC-based Spoken English Teaching Model

It is clear from figure 1 that the model puts emphasis on three parts: SPOC-based online course, in-classroom teaching and assessment system. The activities online involve watching lectures, taking quizzes, doing homework, assessing peers' homework and posting in forums. In-classroom time is spent discussing and debating with peers and teachers. Assessment system is used to check if students get good results from online course and in-classroom practice. When students watch lectures, take quizzes and get feedback immediately, they know in what aspects they need to improve themselves, thus improving autonomous learning ability. When they grade peers'homework, disscuss in forums or in a classroom, they collaborate with each other to achieve a shared learning purpose. These are aligned with the theores of constructivism regarding learning process and relationships between learners. To help them perform better, teachers' roles change in different learning environments.

3.1 Design of Online Course

The online course is designed and created based on the textbook named Multi-angle English for Advanced Learners compiled by the teaching team. It relies on the SPOC platform provided by the

Chinese University MOOC, a leading MOOC platform supported by Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China and Net Ease, Inc. It consists of seven modules: announcement, scoring system, teaching calendar, lecture videos, documents, quizzes and assignments, and discussion forums.

Lecture videos includes six units developed from the following topics: education, music, culture, film, the Internet and dictionary. For each unit, three filmed lectures are presented: topic introduction, critical thinking, and pronunciation / conversation skills. Students are expected to have a good command of topic-related expressions in lecture 1, learn to look at problems from different perspectives in lecture 2, correct pronunciation and improve conversation skills in lecture 3.

Quizzes are designed to check whether they understand the lectures and attract their attention to important information. The platform can give rapid feedback to students via autograding. They have the opportunity to resubmit answers to improve on their previous score and increase mastery. The course sets hours of assignments every two weeks, and the assignments are either evaluated in classroom or by students' peers online.

Forums are the kernel of the online course. Students ask questions and share experiences in forums. They are required to post at least six times in a semester. In order to develop their critical thinking, the teaching team chooses debatable topics. For example:

Some people believe listening to Mozart may make children smarter, yet some others argue that listening to Beethoven might also have the same effect. Some even say that any form of scientific study would lead to similar results. What's your opinion? Please state your reasons in detail.

3.2 Design of Classroom Teaching

The in-classroom teaching consists of three tasks: 1) Pre-class task: Teachers update online resources and make announcements on a regular basis. They are also requied to watch lecture videos, post in forums, comment on students' ideas, and collect the questions raised by the students; 2) During-class task: A. Teachers give detailed answers to the typical questions collected from the SPOC platform and the classroom; B. Teachers assign students to groups according to their grouping preferences. Students practice the oral topics given as their assignments in the online course through a presentation, a discussion or a debate; C. Teachers help students explore the topics at a deeper level ; 3) After-class task: Students are required to modify what they perform in the classroom and do more topic-related reading. The in-classroom time focuses on student-student interaction and teacher-student interaction.

3.3 Design of Assessment System

Based on constructivism, the assessment system employs formative assessment and summative assessment. Formative assessment refers to a range of formal and informal assessment procedures conducted by teachers during the learning process in order to modify teaching and learning activities to improve student attainment [11]. It is commonly contrasted with summative assessment, which seeks to monitor educational outcomes, often for purposes of external accountability [12]. In the design, formative assessment involves students' performance in classroom, which is evaluated by themselves, teachers and peers, and their online performance assessed by SPOC platform and peers. When students grade their peers' recording, they follow the grading system: fluency and coherence (20 points), good ideas and clear logic (20 points), lexical resource (20 points), grammatical range and accuracy (20 points), and pronunciation (20 points). At the end of the semester, students have a spoken English exam. Final assesment consists of attendence, performance in classroom, performance online and spoken test.

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Research Questions

How does the model work in practical teaching? In what ways can the model be improved?

4.2 Participants

Participants included 17 teachers who have taught non-English major postgraduates for more than 10 years and 1531 first-year non-English major postgraduates from 17 academic schools, including School of Automotive Engineering, School of Management, and School of Art and Design. The students have a similar language background and 65 percent of them have passed College English Test Band 6, a national English as a foreign language test in China. The students completed the teaching cycle in approximately 14 weeks. They had two face-to-face classes (90 minutes) every two weeks.

4.3 Instruments

4.3.1 SPOC Platform

The online course is based on SPOC platform provided by the Chinese University MOOC.When students log into the system and start to learn, all the information about how long or how often they watch teaching videos or how many times they post in forums is saved in the system. Subsequently, researchers can monitor and analyze students' learning behaviors online through these statistics.

4.3.2 Group Interview

An interview was used to investigate the students' feedback on the teaching model. According to their final assessment, five students were chosen and invited to have a group interview online for about three hours. They answered the questions and gave reasons and some relevant examples from their own knowledge or experience. Given the learning data from the SPOC platform, main questions were designed as follows: 1) Would you list some possible reasons why some students did not watch lecture videos? 2) What do you think of lecture slides for the course? 3) Do you think are quizzes and assignments useful and interesting? 4) Are you willing to connect with you peers in forums? 5) How does SPOC-based teaching affect your learning? 6) Would you offer some suggestions for our teaching ? The chatting record was saved for analysis.
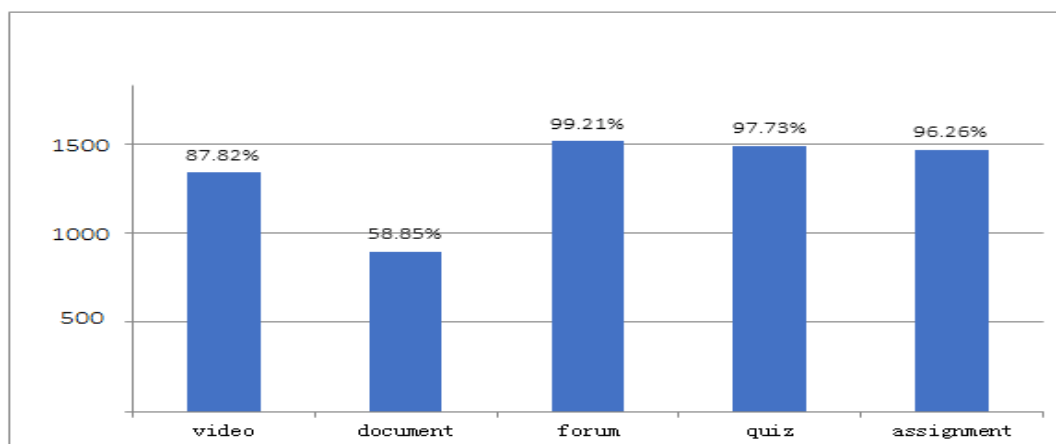
4.4 Results and Discussion

Fig.2 Learning Data from SPOC

Figure 2 shows out of all the students who enrolled in the course, 87.82 percent of them persistently watched the lecture videos while 58.85 percent of them clicked on lecture slides for the course. Only 2.27 percent of the students did not take quizzes occasionally and 3.74 percent of them failed to upload their assignment or grade their peers' homework once or twice. Most strikingly, nearly all the students were engaged in the interaction of discussion forums. It is indicated that students were more interested in user forums, quizzes and assignments and less interested in lecture slides.

An analysis of the interview results provides a bigger and clearer picture of what happened in practical teaching. The use of SPOC technology strengthens EFL teaching: A. it is flexible and available everywhere; B. it makes students have the course at their own pace; C. it makes them access

to different teaching styles; D. it preserves classroom time for more spoken English practice. Nevertheless, the learning data and interview results also revealed some problems and provided practical suggestions to improve the teaching.

(1) Design lecture videos in a diversified way.

Some students said they did not watch all the videos either because SPOC lectures are not that interesting, always presenting a teacher talking in front of the camera, or because it was quite hard for poor listeners to understand the teachers without the help of subtitles. However, others claimed if they always watch videos with captions, what is the right time they start to practice listening? It can be seen that different modes of presentation are needed to be developed to diversify videos.

(2) To a large extent, grading system decides how students behave in a learning process.

Although almost all the students were active in community interactions in forums, some of them said they were driven by the grading system. One of the reasons why a minority of students did not watch videos sometimes is that it was not an evaluation indicator. Besides, a small group of students argued their recording was given a low score by their peers. These illustrate that postgraduates are concerned about scores mainly because they have a clear and practical attitude toward learning. The assessment system should be designed in a more objective, sensible and fair way.

(3) Students are encouraged to be responsible and autonomous.

The majority of the students preferred quizzes because they took them several minutes to click on the right answer and get feedback which helps them identify mistakes instantly. It can be seen that auto grading is an effective strategy for autonomous learning. Some students said when they had difficulties posting in English in forums, they had slightest ideas about how to solve the problems. Some students complained the time and effort required exceeded what they were ready to commit to a course. In addition, they failed to upload their assignments for various reasons occasionally. Even worse, some students missed deadlines of quizzes and assignments one or two times due to their tight schedule or great pressure from their research projects. It is found that higher performing students are more self-motivated, self-disciplined and have a good attitude to learning.

(4) Students need to change their ways of thinking and adapt themselves to this way of teaching.

Some students said they need more guidance on texts in the classroom, which were regarded as reading materials outside the classroom. But if teachers explained texts in a spoken English class, there would be less time available for speaking practice. How do we reconcile these two facts? Teachers can offer guidance on texts to students in alternative ways, such as answering questions online, or sending them lecture notes. They need to understand SPOC-based teaching is fundamentally different from traditional classes.

5. Conclusion

The paper has given an account of the widespread use of SPOC technology in education. It presented a SPOC-based spoken English teaching model, analyzed students' learning behaviors and their attitudes to the application, and optimized the model on the basis of students' feedback. The results show that 1) the use of SPOC technology strengthens EFL teaching; 2) the model can be optimized through diversifying lecture videos and standardizing assessment system; 3) students are encouraged to improve their autonomous learning ability and adapt themselves to the model. On account of the limited size of the interviewees and method adopted, there is still room for improving the design of the study. Further research could be done in the following areas: teachers' feedback on SPOC-based English teaching model, relationships between teaching model and teaching results, and reliability and validity of final spoken test. The present study provides a new understanding of SPOC-based spoken English teaching model and some implications for integrating technological achievements into EFL teaching.

Acknowledgements

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