Principles & Strategies for English Corner Construction at Universities

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Abstract

English corner activities have been included in the framework of second EFL classroom at many universities in China and regarded as one of the various meaningful activities in addition to teaching plans and activities required by the curriculum. English corner has the characteristics of natural environment, cooperative relationship, relaxed atmosphere, autonomous selection and large amount of practice. Based on communicative functional theory, constructivist learning theory, input hypothesis, output hypothesis, affective filter hypothesis as well as the exploration and practice experience of Hubei University for Nationalities, this paper proposed three general guiding principles and ten specific implementation strategies that were tested and verified by means of questionnaire and interview in which 356 students participated. At last five suggestions were put forward to solve the existing problems for English corner construction at universities.

Key words: English corner; Guiding principles; Implementation strategies

INTRODUCTION

It is pointed out in *College English Curriculum Requirements* that "the objective of college English is to develop students' ability to use English in an all-round way, especially in listening and speaking, so that in their future work and social interactions they will be able to exchange information effectively through both spoken and written channels, and at the same time they will be able to enhance their ability to study independently and improve their cultural quality so as to meet the needs of China's social development and international exchanges" (Higher Education Department of the Chinese Education Ministry, 2004). As for the development of students' comprehensive application ability, particularly listening and speaking competence, it is far from enough to depend upon the limited classroom which often fails to provide students with sufficient time and space to practice English. Hence college English learning is supposed to be extended beyond the classroom. Hu (2004) proposed that in the Chinese EFL environment, only those who are able to get the best value for simulation or creation of the favorable EFL learning conditions (i.e. the second classroom) can achieve better teaching effect.

Scholars from other countries outside China also recognized this kind of out-of–class EFL learning. For example, Bialystok (1981) stressed the importance of learning strategies outside the classroom and defined four of the EFL learning strategies, among which functional practice strategy referred to all behaviors that employed language to communicate. Huang & Naerssen (1987) investigated Chinese students and found that the participants with strong oral English competence employed the functional practice strategy more than others in their EFL out-of-class learning when talking to their classmates or native speakers of English. Pickard (1996) chose 20 Germany learners of English as participants to examine their after-class learning strategies. Result indicated that although the students practiced English outside the classroom mainly by passively listening to English broadcast and reading English newspapers, they all claimed that they would make full use of the oral

practice opportunity so long as they seized it. Murray & Kojima (2006) made a case study of good English learners' out-of-class learning methods from the narrative perspective and found that it proved to be an effective way to create small-scale target language practice community in native environment. At last the authors pointed out that English learners were supposed to look for clubs and interest groups that might supply them opportunities to communicate in the target language so as to learn more effectively outside the classroom.

English corner which mainly allows EFL learners to talk and communicate with each other proves an important component of out-of–class learning (namely second classroom) and one of the effective means. All the papers with no exception who dealt with second EFL classroom activities highlighted the role of English corner (Deng, 2007; Sun, 2000; Wang, 2005; Zhou, 2000). Nevertheless, students, teachers and administrators from many universities fail to realize the significance of English corner activities. Accordingly, involvement in English corner is far from enough and the role of it has not been apparently revealed. In addition, most of the preceding relevant researches focused on the significance and description of effect but failed to propose practical and effective suggestions for English corner activities at universities.

1. DEFINITION AND CHARACTERISTICS OF ENGLISH CORNER ACTIVITIES AT UNIVERSITIES

Gao (2009) defined English corner as regular parties which were organized within China by EFL learners and aimed to practice oral English in public places. Jin & Cortazzi (2002) considered English corner as an informal way of practicing English with typical Chinese characteristics. Martyn & Voller (1995) assumed that English corner activities might be the best example of Chinese EFL learners' independent and autonomous learning, as many big cities had at least one English corner and the majority of Chinese universities had their own English corners, most of which had not any organizations.

Within the scope of colleges and universities, after so many years of reform and development, English corner activities have been included in the framework of second English classroom at many Chinese universities and regarded as one of the various meaningful activities through directing and organizing students in addition to the teaching plan and activities required by the college English curriculum. Generally speaking, English corner tends to provide students with richer and more flexible environment for language acquisition and practical application of English.

English corner has the following characteristics:

a. Natural environment. Compared with the classroom where one student speaks, others simply listen and teachers make comments, English corner supplies more natural and favourable surroundings for students to participate in speaking simultaneously, which increases the probability for them to begin to talk;

b. Cooperative relationship. Students go to the English corners for the same purpose of practicing oral English and thus identify each other to a great extent. They help each other and make every effort to cooperate so as to achieve the goal of talking to each other. In reality, traditional Chinese values also think highly of learners' cooperative learning (Littlewood, 1999);

c. Relaxed atmosphere. In the English classroom, many students are reluctant to speak and express their own ideas because they are afraid of making mistakes and losing face. At the English corner, however, such worries will be greatly decreased due to the absence of teachers as evaluators and the accompaniment of groups of students with the same roles, thus anxiety and tension will also be obviously relieved;

d. Autonomous selection. In the classroom students can not decide or choose what teachers teach and in most cases they are in a position of passively accepting what they are taught. In contrast, at the English corner students may actively choose interlocutors and topics and become active so that their desire and interest in participation are greatly increased;

e. Large amount of practice. Compared with the serious insufficiency of listening and speaking practice due to the limited time of English classroom and the comparatively greater number of students, English corner may provide much larger scale of opportunities for language practice. And accordingly the amount of both input and output is increased, which is of great significance for the development of students' overall language abilities.

2. THEORETICAL BASIS AND SIGNIFICANCE OF ENGLISH CORNER CONSTRUCTION AT UNIVERSITIES

2.1 Communicative Functional Theory
Both Hymes (1972), the creator of communicative functional theory, and the linguists Halliday (1973) & Brown (1994) observed that language learning had to be obtained in the process of communication by means of language and when learners employed authentic language to achieve meaningful communication in certain specific social context. According to Brown's criteria, classroom teaching had to aim at developing students' communicative competence (Zhou & Jiang, 1999). Davies & Pearse (2003) supposed that successful communicative activities based on communicative teaching mode should be various and could greatly increase individual language learner's language practice. Communicative teaching approach deems that the

purpose of language learning lies not only in acquiring language competence, but also communicative one. Hence it emphasizes the fact that teaching activities should be students-centered and that learners are to be directed by teachers and acquire linguistic abilities through imitation, practice and communication. Similarly, Wang (1996) held that the essence of English teaching was communication, and the most important situation in English teaching was communicative one. Zheng & Wei (1997) made investigation of learning strategies and found that many students liked to learn English by using it. In Chinese college English teaching, opportunities that are offered to students to communicate in English in class are limited since there are simply a few periods a week as a rule and because of large class size. Therefore it is essential to make every effort to create favorable environment for communication which may play a prominent role in fostering students' linguistic communicative competence.

2.2 Constructivist Learning Theory

Constructivist learning theory (e.g. Vgotsky, 1978) emphasizes student-centered activities and believes that students are the subjects of cognition and active creators of knowledge meaning, while teachers play the roles of organizers, directors, helpers and promoters. The theory stresses the importance of learning situation and proposes that learners can master and learn how to apply the knowledge acquired only when they are positioned in authentic situations, obtain experience and knowledge as much as possible in real communicative tasks. In addition, it is suggested that students acquire knowledge not through teachers' teaching but in certain situation, namely social cultural background, with the help of others (including teachers and learning partners), necessary learning materials and through the creation of meanings. The theory suggests "learning in solving problems", situation teaching, sufficient communication, cooperation and support and design of learning environment (Feng, 2006; Yu, 2006; Zhang, 2002). At present, however, due to China's limited teaching resources and conditions, it turns out almost impossible to realize classroom English teaching which conforms to constructivist theory. The most effective solution is to extend the classroom in terms of time and space and construct second classroom. As it does not need to be limited in numbers of teaching periods, space and time, second classroom may create more favorable language learning and application environment. As one of the most important activity forms, English corner exactly accords with the constructivist learning theory and the teaching concept evolved from the theory, achieves the goals of learners' participation, creation of language situation, communication, cooperative learning and knowledge construction in real tasks.

2.3 Input and Output Hypothesis

According to Krashen's (1981; 1982) input hypothesis, language acquisition occurs only when learners have sufficient contact with comprehensible input. Swain (1985) pointed out that students' output was important in that it might supply input for other students, test their own hypothesis with regard to linguistic forms, promote the automation of linguistic knowledge and increase conversation skills. Spolsky (1989) also proposed that result of language learning to a great extent depended upon the amount and type of contact with the target language, namely whether learners had had sufficient contact with authentic target language. Shu (2006) deemed that language learning, in particular foreign language learning, needs large amount of input and practice. The point is that in EFL classroom teaching is limited in time which is in many cases dominated by teachers' lectures. Hence input and output in class only can not satisfy students' needs for foreign language learning. English corner may supply wider space to ensure students' sufficient amount of comprehensible input and even output.

2.4 Affective Filter Hypothesis

Affective filter hypothesis proposes that language input has to become absorbed through affective filter. One important factor that affects language acquisition is affective state which refers to anxiety and relaxation. In other words, the more anxious the learners are, the more obstacles they will have to face and the less they acquire, otherwise they obtain more in language acquisition. Chomsky once said that in the process of learning, the more anxious, the less successful (Li & Wang, 2005). Under the traditional EFL teaching mode in China, limited by teaching mode, coursebook contents, and classroom atmosphere, students' affective filter layer is easily increased so that they are psychologically in a state of anxiety, fear, escape and have very little space for comprehensible language input. English corner activities are practiced at students' own will and in happy and relaxed atmosphere, which may be beneficial to decrease students affective filter layer, help them better absorb and intake the comprehensible input.

2.5 Significance of English Corner Construction at Universities

Many linguists believe that the best environment for second language learning is the authentic and natural one. In formal classroom teaching, no matter how students practice, what they obtain is nothing but explicit language knowledge and can not naturally transform it into implicit one that is needed in communication. In China, as it is hard to provide sufficient amount of natural language environment, it is essential to create such favourable language learning surroundings. Ebert & Jessup (1996) proposed the conditions that favourable language learning surroundings should supply, namely opportunities for

learners to interact each other so as to create meanings, authentic listeners and tasks, opportunities to have contact with and produce a variety of language and chances for learners to be given sufficient time in order to form their own views and get sufficient feedback. In this sense, English corner activities allow students to be in language environment which is close to natural one and acquire language skills and overall application abilities through language practice so as to achieve beneficial results.

In short, the necessity and significance of English corner construction at universities can be revealed in communicative teaching approach theory, constructivist learning theory and teaching concept and various second language acquisition theories. Gao's (2009) tracking study of English corner at a Chinese coastal city found that the significance of English corner also lied in that it supplied social situation (social community) with cohesive force and offered learners opportunities to have sense of belonging, share experience, ideas and feelings, encourage and support each other so as to promote autonomous learning and even self-identification recognition, which conforms to the conclusion arrived at by Xiao, Xu & Zhang (2011) that social sense of support and collective sense of belonging in English learning exerted significant effect upon autonomous learning ability. Accordingly it seems to be of great importance to appropriately manage English corner at universities and allow it to play well the role in developing students' listening and speaking competence and overall EFL application abilities, and increasing their autonomous learning abilities and comprehensive culture attainment. Zhou (2000) pointed out that the key of practice stages for extracurricular activities was how to maintain them and increase their vitality.

3. EXPLORATION AND PRACTICE OF ENGLISH CORNER CONSTRUCTION AT HUBEI UNIVERSITY FOR NATIONALITIES

Being well aware of the significance of English corner construction, in the past few years the author of this paper has been greatly involved in the English corner at the university where she works. Based upon the practice experience, she has explored a set of guiding principles and implementation strategies as for how to organize English corner activities at universities and at the same time she detected some drawbacks and problems to be solved.

3.1 Guiding Principles and Implementation Strategies for English Corner Activities

Wang (2000) pointed out that when organizing second classroom activities, the most important principle was to arouse and increase students' interest in learning, which meant a psychological tendency that students had to select, approach and explore some unknown things with pleasure in order to learn. Interest is a kind of practical intrinsic

motivation. Yang (2004) proposed four principles that managed second EFL classroom, namely creating a teaching management system, setting up a special administrative committee in charge of planning second classroom, forming a comparatively stable teaching team with rich experience so as to direct second classroom activities, encouraging students' participation and strengthening the evaluation of second classroom activities. Similarly, Deng (2007) put forward some principles for extending and increasing classroom teaching vitality and practice principles that could meet different needs.

Based on the above-mentioned theories and practice experience, the researcher of this paper integrates the characteristics of English corner activities at universities with the results of questionnaire and interview and proposes the following three general guiding principles for English corner activities: a. Increasing propaganda, encouraging students' participation and student-centered oral practice; b. Normalizing managing system and construction of teachers; c. Arousing students' interest, satisfying different needs, increasing the variety of activities, attractiveness, cohesiveness, affinity and rationality.

Under the guidance of the three principles, specific implementation strategies can be categorized into the following: a. Increasing propaganda, setting up special places and encouraging students' participation; b. Relying on students' team, forming teams for oral practice partner training and establishing a set of administration regulations; c. Professional teachers' guidance and making clear the different roles of teachers and students; d. Student teams choosing topics, writing and printing the topic sheets to ensure participants' interest in the topics themselves; e. Combining discussion with free talk to satisfy students' different needs; f. Combining regular activities with special subjects to increase the variety of English corner activities; g. Inviting foreign teachers to participate to increase the attractiveness of English corner; h. Setting stages of global activities to increase the cohesiveness of English corner activities; i. Increasing its affinity by means of encouraging, communication and awards with individuation; j. Increasing its rationality by timely investigation, summarization and regulation.

In this research the following questions are to be answered: a. Are the above-mentioned principles and strategies appropriate and beneficial for the goal of effective English corner activities? Does it really play prominent role in developing students' listening and speaking competence? b. Are these principles and strategies followed in the practice of English corner activities?

3.2 Research Design

Following the above principles and strategies, the researcher organized and participated in the English corner activities at Hubei University for Nationalities for 4 semesters (2011.9-2013.6) , during which the researcher participated in the oral practice activities for two or three hours each

week, observed and interviewed students so as to obtain the first-hand information. In June, 2013 she issued questionnaires to collect relevant data. The 25 questions in the questionnaire covered 10 aspects of the implementation strategies, among which were single choice and multiple choice with 5 point Likert scale. 356 questionnaires were released and 335 were returned with 326 valid. At the same time, the researcher chose three representative students, observed and had deep interviews with them to know their general evaluation and satisfaction level of English corner activities organization. The basic personal information of the three students is listed in Table 1.

Table 1
Basic Personal Information of the Three Students

Students	Sex	Grade	Major	Initial purpose for participation in English corner activities
A	Male	2011	Engineering	Like English and enjoy the feeling of communicating in English.
B	Female	2010	Liberal arts	To prepare for the oral test of IELTS.
C	Male	2012	Chemistry	With poor oral English, and introversion, just come and have a look to see if there is any chance for me to improve.

3.3 Data Analysis and Discussion

3.3.1 Increasing Propaganda, Setting up Special Places and Encouraging Students' Participation

For more than once the researcher of this paper heard that some students claimed that they began to like oral English and English classes after they went to the English corner for the first time. For example, the following was student A's feedback: "I am very much grateful to my teacher for offering me the chance to practice oral English here and start my sweet journey of English learning". In other words, our task is on the one hand to try hard to well organize English corner activities so as to attract participants' continuous participation and on the other hand to push other students to experience the activities, since it is the starting point of all. In this sense propaganda seems to be of significance.

In the questionnaire there is an item "how did you get the information about English corner activities", 10% of the participants chose "posters", 20% "internet", 9% "teachers", 41% "other students", 16% "topic sheet", 4% "other means". It can be obviously seen that propaganda can be realized through various means, and the participants' comments on English corner activities prove to be the most important one. As for the item "do you think there has been sufficient propaganda for English corner", only 52% of the participants chose "Yes, strongly agree" or "Yes, quite agree", indicating that we should do more for propaganda or publicity, such as choosing more reasonable time and places for playbills, making better use of internet resources to give general introduction to the activities and weekly topics, urging teachers to inform their students of the relevant information in class and encourage their participation, increasing the amount of information on topic sheets and making them become effective ways of publicity.

In addition, it is a good way itself for publicity to set up special places for English corner activities, or set up a monument and decorate it in open gardens for students to feel that the visible facilities of foreign culture activities are very close to them, which helps arouse students' enthusiasm for participation. In the autumn of 2010, the university set up a place named "English World" near the lake where surroundings are graceful, there is a path, garden, groves of bamboo, stone benches, tables and veils, revealing that the school authority attaches great importance to college English second classroom activities as well as students' enthusiasm about the development of EFL overall competence. The researcher interviewed many a student who claimed that the newly built places brought participants relaxation, pleasure and sense of belonging. Students A, B and C also admitted that they liked the new English corner which encouraged and attracted students to participate in the activities.

3.3.2 Relying on Students' Union, Forming Teams for Oral Practice Partner Training and Establishing a Set of Administration Regulations

As for the organization subject of second classroom activities, faculties and students' union of foreign languages have been greatly valued. Hubei University for Nationalities chose student association "I like speaking English" (Oral English Association) as support to organize English corner activities. After many years of running, Oral English Association has selected some students with good oral English, devotion and cooperative awareness as training assistants (TA) and have had them well trained. The training assistants have weekly discussions before each activity to determine the topics of a certain week and write topic sheets. During the activities they accompany all the way, participate in and organize different dialogue groups, and offer necessary direction and linguistic assistance. After the activities, they have to collect feedback information, summarize in time and finish the activity report of the week. In reality these training assistants play the role of oral practice partner training.

For the item "in free discussion, each TA organizes and leads a group. Do you identify this model ", 85% of the participants chose "Yes, strongly agree" or "Yes, quite agree". The item "TA has to assist group members to overcome psychological and linguistic obstacles so as to begin to talk. Do you agree to this form", 88% chose "Yes, strongly agree" or "Yes, quite agree". As for the item "are you satisfied with the TAs that you have had

contact with", 75% chose "Yes, very much satisfied" or "Yes, quite satisfied". From these data, it can be seen that participants in general recognize the role of TAs and the relevant administration regulations.

As direction teacher from school of foreign languages, the researcher also approves the TAs and encourages the administration practice, including offering more opportunities for advanced oral English training and issuing evaluative certificate at the end of each semester. The fact is that through communication with TAs, the researcher has become aware that most of them participate in partner training teams because they love oral English or English corner, or for the sake of having their own organization and communicative competence improved. In reality, student A & B chose to join in the student association and became members of the partner training teams after they had participated in the English corner activities for a period of time.

3.3.3 Professional Teachers' Guidance and Making Clear the Different Roles of Teachers and Students

Sun (2000) pointed out that in second classroom activities, professional teachers and staff members played very important roles. Similarly, Xiong (2007) believed that the essential problem of students' out-of-class English learning in higher institutions in Hubei province lied in that they lacked professional direction and were universally in anxious and sick state of mind. As one of the most typical second classroom at universities, English corner activities are in urgent need of teachers' professional direction. For the item "do you think it necessary for professional teachers' direction in English corner activities", 93% participants chose "quite necessary" or "necessary", indicating that participants recognized the direction role of teachers.

As direction teacher of English corner activities at Hubei University for Nationalities, the researcher summarizes her own duties as the following. *Before the activities*, she has to discuss the general plan and operation project with student team leaders (including publicity, budget, activity design, award issue and TA training), examines the weekly printed topic sheets and makes necessary alterations. *During the activities*, she has to have a general observation, organize and chair or participate in a group discussion, and when necessary, answer students' questions or supply language support so as to obtain first-hand feedback information. After activities, she has timely discussions with students' association leaders with regard to some urgent problems in the activities, determines specific solutions and examines the weekly news report and has it published in the university's weekly newspaper.

In addition, special attention should be paid to the respective roles of direction teachers and students, which is dynamic. Teachers' roles should vary from dominator to director and finally counsellor, while student participants' role should vary from passive to interactive and at last active roles (Wang, 2000). At the initial stage, teachers

organize students to join in the activities. After a period of time when students become aware of the forms and methods, they are simply directed by teachers and become more active in the activities. In due course of time, when students have benefited from the activities, and their interest has been aroused, they are permitted to organize themselves at their own will and teacher's role may be accordingly shifted to counsellor, or even an ordinary participant. In a word, teacher changes his/her role so that students can become active, conscious and actively participate in, organize English corner activities, and regard them as their own needs. In other words, when students become active and teacher changes into a counselor and even merely a participant, English corner activities become mature. In the questionnaire, for the two items "do you think students should play the role of subjects in the English corner activities" and "do you think that you yourself play the role of subject in them" 100% students chose "Yes, strongly agree", revealing that the principle of "student-centeredness" proves to be correct and practical and that the organization of English corner activities tends to be mature at Hubei University for Nationalities.

3.3.4 Student Teams Choosing Topics, Writing and Printing the Topic Sheets to Ensure Participants' Interest in the Topics Themselves

At Hubei University for Nationalities, English corner activities employ the theme-based approach, and choose a topic each week. Shu (2004) pointed out that the topic of classroom was an important factor to arouse students interest, and that appropriate topics might attract their attention. The researcher of this study also observed that whether the English corner activities were welcome or not were also directly related to the choice of topics. If there is no fixed specific topic, English corner will lack organization system and cohesiveness. Some beginners will feel quite at a loss and simply do not know what to say. On the other hand, however, if the fixed topic is not welcome, students' interest in dialogues will be greatly decreased. Student C once said, "Previously I had been always afraid that I would have nothing to say if I went to the English corner and I assumed that most probably we would talk about grade, speciality and hometowns, nothing more. But when I came to the English corner, I found that specific topic had been given on the topic sheet with reference paragraphs and expressions. I became relaxed and feel quite at ease. "

The topics for English corner activities are completely selected and determined by students' association in universities. Sometimes they combine the current affairs with hot topics and spend every effort to make it accord with students' interest so as to attract more students to participate in the activities, for the researcher believes that no one else but students are well aware of their own needs and interest, which conforms to Shu's (2004) view that as there were differences between teachers and students in

terms of cognition of classroom activities, teachers were supposed to be aware of students' needs and respect their choices. Topics are announced through playbills and internet ahead of time to allow students who are willing to practice oral English at the English corner make some preparations so as to avoid cancelling the idea of participation for the reason that they are not sure of the unknown topics and difficulties to face. When topics are determined, members of students' association write topic sheets, have them revised by teachers and at last print them (in most cases 299-400 copies, just depends, e.g. bad weather and test week). Each participant has a piece of topic sheet and may refer to it any time they like. As for the contents that topics should cover, the researcher has also made some effort. At last, she decided to adopt the methods of offering topics, introducing paragraphs and thinking about the theme and relevant expressions, which was in a sense creative and obtained through continuous investigation and interview with participants of the university.

In the questionnaire there was an item "we choose different topic each week and issue topic sheets to determine the topic content. Are you satisfied with this kind of form", 76% participants chose "strongly agree" or "quite agree". For another item "are you satisfied with the topic choice for this semester (harmonious society, idolatry, the coming of spring, April Fools Day, digital products, differences between males and females, IELTS, psychological health and debates) ", 72% chose "strongly agree" or "quite agree". The researcher still remember that in the week when the topic was "Differences between Males and Females", organizers presented some pictures for the male and female students of each group to observe and describe what they had seen and then had a discussion about sexual differences. The discussion full of interest and pleasure lasted long than ever before. In addition, the researcher often urged the participants to offer topics for the next week for the sake of options. Students A, B and C all agreed on this point, declaring that it was necessary to determine topics, also practical and effective for students' association to choose topics and that preparing and issuing topic sheets proved to be sincere and well done. Student C said that he would bring his topic sheet back to his dormitory and share it with his roommates, as in them there was good language knowledge and questions which set people thinking.

3.3.5 Combing Discussion With Free Talk to Satisfy Students' Different Needs

We advocate that English corner is combination of topic discussion and free talk. In other words, the whole activity is not necessarily limited to the weekly topics, it may start with the topic so that discussion can go on smoothly. In the middle of the discussion, participants may automatically shift to other topics and have free talks.

In the questionnaire for the item "do you think it reasonable of topic discussion and free talk", 98% of the participants chose "strongly agree" or "quite agree". This result revealed that students had different needs and that the combination of the two did satisfy students' different needs. For example, student A said, "I enjoy the feeling of speaking English and I have many friends at English corner. We usually have discussions about the weekly topics first and then shift to free talk about what we are interested in". Student B said, "In oral test of IELTS, candidates are often urged to express their ideas on certain topic. So I simply regard topic discussion at English corner as simulation exercise, as IELTS may involve various topics. I also actively join in other groups for free talk to get more opportunities for emergency exercise". At the same time, student C said, "I hope that I can focus on the weekly topics to avoid awkward silence. In short, English corner does offer students a practical place to speak and use English in real life so that they may practice language in comparatively natural environment and through co-operations and acquire the English language in relaxed atmosphere and through large amount of input and output. It can well satisfy students' needs and realize the function and goal of English corner to combine topic discussion with free talk according to students' characters, linguistic competence and motivation to participate in the English corner activities.

3.3.6 Combining Regular Activities With Special Subjects to Increase the Variety of English Corner Activities

The same type of activities may decrease students' interests, therefore we make every effort to increase the variety. Besides the routine topic discussion and the follow-up whole activities, we regularly choose some special subjects which are designed according to task-based teaching approach and the requirement of six components designed by constructivism, namely developing situations, asking questions, building bridges, organizing groupings, arranging exhibits and inviting reflections (Gagnon & Collay, 2001; Feng, 2006).

For example, we had a special issue "Going Abroad", and invited students who had succeeded in their application and also some teachers who had studied or worked abroad. The theme was clear-cut. Students who intended to study abroad came to the topic discussion and free talk and claimed that they did benefit a great deal from them. The topic was started with the characters in textbooks, with whom the participants were familiar; and aroused active and enthusiastic participation. Participants had group discussion and preparations and exhibited them, full of interest, creation and laughers. For the special issue "Christmas Night", we invited foreign teachers who were teaching at Hubei University for Nationalities to talk about Christmas customs, shared Christmas stories and took the lead in singing Christmas songs, playing games, dancing in groups with hundreds of participants listening, asking questions, singing and dancing. The whole English corner became a sea of happiness. For the special issue "English Contest", we printed and issued various topics

and invited foreign teachers and students to form groups and finished the tasks by means of contest which aroused more interest and enthusiasm.

For the item "Do you think it necessary for special subjects and issues at English corner" 89% chose "quite necessary" or "necessary". For the item "Do you think special subjects and issues can increase the variety and attractiveness of English corner" 93% of participants chose "strongly agree" or "agree", indicating the necessity and practicality of special subjects and issues and that a variety of activities can allow more students to experience the attractiveness of English corner to a greater extent so as to internalize their linguistic knowledge in natural language environment.

3.3.7 Inviting Foreign Teachers to Participate so as to Increase the Attractiveness of English Corner

Foreign teachers' participation makes it possible for students to hear pure English pronunciation and have contact with more original expressions so as to create more natural language environment, increase the attractiveness of English corner activities and permit students to get to know more about foreign culture, customs and practices and widen their visions through communication with native speakers of English. We have been inviting foreign teachers and students to join in the English corner activities, which prove that English corner is a typical public place where people communicate with each other merely in English.

For the items in the questionnaire "Do you think English corner should invite foreigners to participate" and "Do you think foreigners' participation may increase English corner's attractiveness", 100% responded positively to the former and 95% to the latter, indicating that students approved the effectiveness of foreign teachers' participation. The challenge and information gap caused by talk with foreigners, their outstanding quality, continuous encouragement, dedication and enthusiasm all aroused great interest in participants who benefited a great deal from communication with foreign teachers. Nevertheless, from interviews we also got to know that some students thought that there were too few of foreigners. It was often the case that a large number of students surrounded a foreign teacher and most of the students simply had to listen and few opportunities were offered for them to express their ideas. Student B said, "In oral test of IELTS candidate has to be faced to face with foreign examiner, so I hope to get similar opportunities at English corner. However, although it is impractical to talk to foreigners alone, large amount of listening and small amount of speaking have made me become more familiar with foreigners' pronunciation and intonation and hence decrease the fear and anxiety within me." Student C said, "Previously I have never had talks with foreigners and have benefited a lot from listening to others at English corner. Foreign teachers are generally humorous, patient and talk a lot about American social customs and

practices. Next time I will try to understand more and participate more."

3.3.8 Setting Stages of Global Activities to Increase the Cohesiveness of English Corner Activities

If English corner activities are limited to individual group discussion, they can not reveal their own cohesiveness, and relevant topics can not be shared and summarized on a larger scale and be reference to each other. To make English corner become a more inspiring and global open classroom, we have been setting the global stages after group discussions, which conforms to Shu' (2006) proposal that EFL teachers were supposed to provide students with platforms on which learning products were displayed. For the item "do you think that setting the global stages helps increase English corner's cohesiveness", 74% chose "strongly agree" or "quite agree", which confirmed the concept of "global stages".

At the initial stage, global activities started with inviting participants to stand in the middle and focus on the weekly topics by giving lectures. Generally speaking, foreign teachers and students and students with very strong oral competence spoke actively and applauses exploded from time to time. Gradually some students who lacked experience of public speech were also eager to try, and continuously encouraged by organizers and the atmosphere, began to muster up their courage and participated in the English corner activities, which meant the first step to public speech and valuable experience of English learning and life itself. For quite a long time this kind of activity form had achieved very good effect. In the interview, the researcher was told that for many a student, this stage increased their self-confidence and helped them obtain sufficient courage to participate in English corner activities. Later, however, as more and more students came to English corner, sound effects seemed to be poor and many students could not follow the speakers.

After a period of attempts and observation, we determined global activities as "You speak and I guess: English word guessing game". The basic mode was that organizers prepared a series of English words (write them on a board, make a slide and play them with a computer). A student saw the words and explained them in various ways in English until one of the audience accurately pronounced and spelled the word, was offered a souvenir in return as well as the opportunity to explain the next word and so on. As the distance between speaker and listener was as close as possible, there was no longer the problem of sound effect, multiple participations became possible. To be frank, no one had expected that this form would be welcome to such great extent. Many students held their breath, thought hard and cheered when participated in the activity. As far as we know, many students glanced at their watches even before the group discussion ended and expected the oncoming of word guessing game. If there was no guessing game on a certain day, students would be extremely disappointed.

Such form of activity is so welcome because it conforms to several basic principles such as being interesting, intellectual and practical. In other words, guessing game brought students relaxation and happiness, full of freshness and competition, helps maintain the interest instead of anxiety and intensity. The meaning and explanation of some words were unconsciously kept in the memory. The frequent practice in the guessing game is actually the linguistic strategy needed in natural communication or to make oneself understood. Once explanation or guessing is successful, students may obtain sense of achievement, experience happiness and become more interested in English learning, thus a virtuous circle occurs. The activity of guessing game may provide reference for future design and planning of English corner activities.

3.3.9 Increasing its Affinity by Means of Encouraging, Communication and Awards With Individuation

Psychological research reveals that relationship between teachers and students directly affect students' learning mood. Hence it is of great significance for them to communicate and understand each other. Xiao, Xu & Zhang (2011) found that college teachers and their students were deficient in emotional communication and suggested that English teachers were to attach great importance to this kind of communication and actively directed them to practice cooperative learning and varied out-of–class learning activities so as to improve students' sense of social support and belonging in English learning and create favorable environment for the development of EFL autonomous competence. The researcher herself saw with her own eyes some teachers communicate successfully with students through the platform of English corner. In reality on such relaxed occasions it proves to be easier than in the classroom for effective communication between teachers and students. In the course of English corner activities, students play the role of subjects, while teachers merely serve the students in a cordial and friendly way and help students to obtain the best state of mind. In relaxed and pleasant language practice, teachers may become encourager, director and promoter through their cordial manner and lively humorous language (Li & Wang, 2005). To make full use of English corner and communicate with students in a friendly way may offer students warm and powerful encouragement and increase their interest in English learning. In other words, communication and encouragement may increase the affinity of English corner. In reality, the researcher has noticed that those who went to English corner every week gradually regarded it as an important part of their college life. Student B left a message after her graduation, "I miss English corner very much. It's just like my second home. I am very much grateful to my teacher's encouragement, thank you." In the questionnaire there was an item "do you think teachers' encouragement and communication may add affinity to English corner", 82% of the participants chose "strongly agree" or "quite agree".

English corner at Hubei University for Nationalities has been awarding those prominent participants (public speakers, group representatives, successful guessers, etc.) some souvenirs such as English reading materials and bookmarks. For the item "Do you think it necessary to award those excellent participants" 55% chose "quite necessary" or "necessary", 28% chose "not necessary" or "quite unnecessary", which accords with the result of interview. Many students thought that they participated in English corner activities for the sake of interest, not awards. However, 55% welcome such way of award. Hence awarding has been going on up to now. We have the awards improved in the hope that they encourage not only participants for their excellent performance, but also those who have not awarded will participate in the oncoming activities. On each bookmark there is an English seal "Practice makes perfect", on the inside cover of each reading material the researcher writes a few encouraging lines such as "Where there is will, there is a way". From the interview, the researcher found that participants of English corner liked this kind of awards with individuation very much, claiming that they could increase the affinity of English corner. Some students even came to participate in English corner activities for the sake of such awards.

3.3.10 Increasing its Rationality by Timely Investigation, Summarization and Regulation

Directors and students' association are supposed to summarize, investigate and make necessary adjustment as far as the various activities at English corner are concerned. Through investigation we can clearly get to know students' needs, suggestions, organization, ideas for the model and improvement, etc. , which directly provides foundation for the next stage so that the objective of English corner can be more clear and satisfy students' needs as much as possible.

English Corner at Hubei University for Nationalities attaches great importance to the tenth point. Teachers as counsellors and student association made full of each activity and communicated with participants, asked for their advice and many a time released small-scale questionnaires to examine the relevant information. For example, if demonstration stage after the group discussion failed to achieve the expected effects, we took students' suggestions into consideration and had small-scale public speech delivered by demonstrators. All members of TA listened to them, offered comments, selected the best speaker and awarded him/her, which was completely different from the previous model. After a period of time we would try to confirm the effectiveness of the new model by means of questionnaire. For the item "What do you think of the alteration of the recent stages of demonstration (from public speech to small-scale speech listened and commented by TA members) " 63% of the participants chose "strongly agree" or "quite agree", revealing that the new model was recognized but not to a

very great extent. Hence in due course of time we made some adjustments as well as investigations. Students A, B and C once talked to the researcher about English corner's characteristics, including paying special attention to participants' needs, making timely and active adjustments and proving to be democratic and flexible.

At present, we have accepted the suggestions proposed by some participants such as "playing some background music", "at the initial stage TA members might help demonstrate topics and illustrations", "increasing the number of group members", "asking for help from foreigners as much as possible" Suggestions received but not yet accepted are "practicing in different ways according to their oral English proficiency so that students with comparatively low proficiency will not be too much silent", "putting some chairs for temporary use since long standing may affect students' performance", "there should be various and interesting forms such as drama or play". These proposals do have values of reference and indicate participants' concern for the development of English corner activities. Hence we will make every effort to realize them after sufficient exploration and integration.

3.4 Problems and Suggestions

From the above discussion it can be seen that there still exist some problems for the English corner activities at Hubei University for Nationalities. Accordingly the following solutions might be beneficial.

a. See to it that foreign teachers and students participate in the activities each week. At present we mainly invite volunteers of foreigners, sometimes they are absent for some reason or other. The suggestion is that the university authorities take participation of the English corner activities as one part of foreign teachers' job as well as students' out-of-class practice and pay the teachers in return so as to ensure that foreign teachers take part in the activities on regular basis.

b. Mobilize Chinese EFL teachers to participate in the activities in turn. At present there is insufficient participation of EFL teachers in the English corner activities. There is need to mobilize them to participate more, making it clear that it is a good opportunity to communicate with students and strengthen the teacher-student relationship, which is beneficial to the improvement of teaching effect and students' interest in English learning.

c. Encourage more students to participate in the activities. It is necessary to combine the quality and quantity of participation with students' academic grades. In addition, faculties or classes can be on duty in turn so that more students participate in the English corner activities.

d. Set evaluation mechanism for the English corner activities. For the time being, students take part in the English corner of their own will. In the future, teachers as counsellors and student association may negotiate with Teaching Affairs Office, plan and administrate English corner activities within the framework of second classroom, which should be the next problem to discuss about and solve.

e. Ensure the fund and hardware facilities. For example, the previously-mentioned amplification system, temporary chairs, the implementation of some special schemes, the invitation of special guests, awards and etc. all need support of fund. Sufficient fund and hardware facilities may guarantee the English corner activities.

CONCLUSION

In the questionnaire for the item "will you show further concern for similar activities or participate in them next week", 95% respondents chose "yes"; for the item "do you think organized English corner superior over comparatively unorganized one", 86% chose "strongly agree" or "quite agree"; for the item "do you think participation in the English corner activities may increase your interest in English learning", 92% chose "strongly agree" or "quite agree". It can be seen from these data that students are on the whole satisfied with the forms and effects of English corner activities at Hubei University for Nationalities. Wang (2000) once pointed out that those who were interested in EFL learning would do it with great interest and benefited a lot from it. It is the most important thing and function to increase students' EFL learning interest. English corner activities have apparently done this.

For the item "do you think participation in English corner activities an effective way of EFL second classroom learning", 87% of the respondents chose "strongly agree" or "quite agree". For the multiple choice item "what do you benefit most from English corner activities", 72% chose "improving oral English", 68% "improving listening comprehension competence", 63% "improving social and communicative competence", 34% "making new friends", 32% "obtaining new information", 28% "getting to know American and British culture," 3% chose "relaxation and entertainment". Some students had notes of their own such as "improving team cooperation spirit", "increasing my courage", "increasing my self-confidence" and even "increasing my enthusiasm and interest in EFL learning". Hence it can be concluded that participants have a healthy and rational cognition of the positive significance and effect of English corner activities. The principles and strategies are on the whole appropriate and can effectively serve the goal "good English corner administration", play the role of developing students' overall application competence such as listening and speaking. During the course of English corner activities, we have been followed these principles and practiced the relevant strategies.

Under the guidance of three general principles and in the practice of the ten specific strategies, English corner at Hubei University for Nationalities has gained more and more popularity and reputation. More and more students come and participate in it and express their praise and fondness of it. Representatives from Hubei University for Nationalities

even participated in the English corner activities, interviewed the organizers so as to learn from them.

In future we have to continue to follow the three principles, practice the ten specific strategies, improve them and solve the urgent problems, attract more students to join in the activities so as to take English corner activities as the main part of second classroom for college English, develop students' EFL overall application competence, improve their autonomous learning abilities and overall cultural qualities.

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