

On Oral English Teaching for Chinese English Majors from a Constructivist Perspective

LIU Ping^{[a],*}

^[a] Foreign Languages College, Qufu Normal University, Shandong, China.

* Corresponding author.

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Abstract

Oral English teaching is not satisfactory and many teachers face a problem of considering how to develop learners' oral English proficiency. Thus, to find ways of systematically and practically improving oral English teaching, the paper, chiefly based on constructivism, investigates both the current situation of and problems in oral English teaching for Chinese English majors, and provided suggestions for teaching oral English course.

Key words: Oral English teaching; English majors; Constructivism

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INTRODUCTION

Scholars both at home and abroad explored the application of constructivism chiefly in the field of foreign language teaching and learning at a broad level. Yet few of them touched on its application to the teaching of oral English. And it is the very reason that the researcher decides to base the research on the theory of constructivism. In this study, how to effectively foster learners' oral English abilities in the educational practice from a new perspective – constructivism is to be discussed for the purpose of offering suggestions for oral English teachers and learners as well.

1. CONSTRUCTIVIST VIEW OF TEACHING AND LEARNING

Piaget noted from his research that children's cognitive development passed through a fixed sequence, and the pattern of operations that children can perform may be thought of as a level or stage, which is defined by how children view the world (Schunk, 2000). Thus his theory is based on a series of stages passed through by learners.

Bruner extended aspects of Piaget's theory and proposed three different modes of knowledge representation: the enactive, the iconic, and the symbolic modes, which needed to be taken into account by educators. Bruner tried to relate his ideas on cognitive development to what takes place in classrooms, and he offered advice on topics such as the structure of the curriculum and ways in which learners could be motivated and helped to remember what they had learned. From Bruner's point of view, teachers should try to seek a balance between teaching aspects of the target language and development of the learners' abilities to analyze the language, to discover principles and concepts, and to learn from their errors.

The remarkable Russian psychologist, Vygotsky has influenced modern constructivist thinking more than other theorist. Vygotsky's most widely known concept, the zone of proximal development (ZPD), refers to the layer of skill or knowledge which is just beyond what the learner can cope with currently. It is defined as the distance between the actual developmental level determined by problem solving and the level of potential development determined by problem solving under guidance or in cooperation with more competent peers. In the ZPD, a teacher and learner work together on a task that the learner could not perform independently because of the difficult level (Schunk, 2000). Working together with another person, either an adult or a more competent peer at a level that is just above

a learner's present capabilities is the best way for the learner to move into the next layer (Williams & Burden, 2000).

A common application of Vygotsky's theory involves the concept of instructional scaffolding. It refers to the process of controlling the elements of a task that are beyond the learners' capabilities in order to let them concentrate on those they can grasp quickly. Another application is reciprocal teaching, which "involves an interactive dialogue between a teacher and small group of students. Initially the teacher models the activities, after which the teacher and students take turns being the teacher" (Schunk, 2000, p. 246). In Vygotsky's view, reciprocal teaching stresses social interaction and scaffolding in students' development of skills. Finally, an important application relevant to Vygotsky's theory is peer collaboration. Working on tasks cooperatively is an effective way for enhancing learning especially when each of the cooperative groups has assigned responsibility.

Constructivism challenges one current belief that maintains the transmissibility of knowledge in education today. It asserts that knowledge should be constructed by each student individually. Hence, the art of teaching has little to do with the traffic of knowledge, and its fundamental purpose must be to foster the art of learning (Glaserfeld, 1995). Accordingly teachers' task has changed to orienting learners' efforts at construction. And what's more, constructivists hold that there is never only one right way of teaching, and a fixed teaching process could not be produced. In 1995, Glaserfeld maintained that constructivism cannot tell teachers new things to do, but it may suggest why certain attitudes and procedures are fruitless or counter-productive, and it offers a congenial theoretical basis for the development of imaginative teaching methods.

From the constructivist point of view, learning is essentially personal and individual, and an individual's understanding of the world is constantly being reshaped as he or she adapts existing knowledge to new information (Williams & Burden, 2000). And the ways in which individuals view the world and their perceptions of themselves within a learning situation will play a main part in their learning and constructing of knowledge. Phillips (2000) expounded, constructivist ideas have been of great interest in many areas of education.

2. METHODOLOGY OF THE RESEARCH

Testing and teaching are so closely interrelated that it is virtually impossible to work in either field without being constantly concerned with the other (Heaton, 2000), so the first investigating procedure was to compare the recent two years' results of the National Band-4 Examination and those of the Spoken English Test for English majors in three universities, Qufu Normal University, Shandong

Normal University, and Yantai University. The researcher made comparison between these results for the purpose of getting a general idea about learners' oral abilities. The comparison consists of two parts: first comparison was between the results of the National Band-4 Examination and those of the Spoken English Test of seniors and juniors separately; and the other one was made between the results of Spoken English Test of seniors and those of juniors.

The questionnaire used in this research was designed by the researcher with reference to O'Malley & Chamot's (2001) questionnaires. All of the questions were formulated in Chinese hoping that the participants can have a better understanding of these questions. And Likert Scale was applied when designing the questionnaire, and a five-point scale from 1 = SD (strongly disagree), 2 = D (disagree), 3 = U (undecided), 4 = A (agree), to 5 = SA (strongly agree) made the data analysis more convenient.

In addition, the researcher chose two sophomore classes randomly from each of the three universities mentioned above in Shandong province. And each class was observed for two class periods. Compared with other methods of data-collection, "interviews are more personalized and therefore permit a level of in-depth information gathering, free response, and flexibility that cannot be obtained by other procedures" (Seliger & Shohamy, 1999, p. 166). So once after the observation, the researcher interviewed the six observed teachers, including one foreign teacher, two young Chinese teachers, and three experienced ones.

3. DISCUSSION OF THE RESULT

3.1 Oral English Abilities

Data analysis shows that the passing rate of the National Band-4 Examination is higher than that of the Spoken English Test for English Majors (Figure1). In other words, the learners do better in the written examination than what they do in the spoken test. Oral English teaching, consequently, needs more attention and improvement.

The Spoken English Test results of juniors are more satisfactory than those of seniors. Details are shown in the Table1. It is noticeable to mention that the close correspondence among mode, median, and mean of both seniors and juniors means that the samples of the two groups' trends toward normal distribution, that is, the two samples are representative. The standard deviation (S.D.) for seniors is actually .688 and for juniors .535. The more varied group has the higher S.D., so juniors' results are relatively similar. It is, therefore, a more homogeneous group. Moreover, their mean score is a little higher. Thus most juniors' results are higher than seniors'. In addition, the fact that juniors' mean is a little higher than seniors' indicates that learners' oral abilities are improving. However, the fact that two groups' means are both lower than the pass point shows that the entire level of learners'

oral English is rather low. The learners' oral English abilities, thereby, need improvement. Consequently, it is necessary to improve the teaching of oral English.

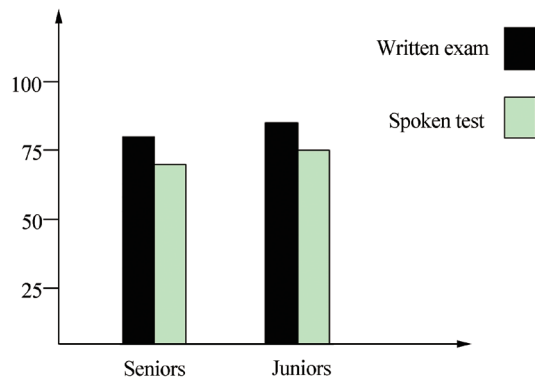


Figure 1
Seniors' and Juniors' Results of the National Band-4 Examination and Spoken English Test

These tests results provide some information about the English majors' oral abilities, and furthermore they can have a backwash effect on the oral English teaching. The analysis of the collected data gives us the idea that the English majors' oral abilities are not satisfactory. More than 80% subjects passed the National Band-4 Examination, but among them at least 10% cannot pass the Spoken English Test. In fact, most of them passed the test in scores slightly higher than the pass point. And few subjects' performances were outstanding. Compared with their written examination results, the subjects' oral test results, moreover, are a little behind. The oral English teaching, consequently, needs more attention and improvement.

Table1
Seniors' and Juniors' Results of the Spoken English Test

	Standard deviation	Mean	Median	Mode
Seniors	0.6878	1.6	2	2
Juniors	0.5345	1.76	2	2

3.2 Learners' Activeness

As in every other field of human learning, in second language learning motivation is the critical force determining whether a learner embarks on a learning task, how much energy he may devote to it, and how long he can persevere. The results of the questionnaire survey show that 54.43% subjects are learning English for the purpose of getting a satisfactory job after graduation, and 48.1% subjects' motivation is to communicate in English. Moreover, 22.8% learners want to learn English well in order to have academic discussions with foreigners. And the findings of questionnaire survey is that 88.61% subjects still want to learn oral English even if it is not an obligatory course, and their purpose is not to pass the Band-4 Spoken English Test for English majors. The

finding, therefore, suggests that the English majors are intrinsically motivated for learning oral English.

And the following analysis will consider sustaining motivation. Data obtained from the observation show that only about 14% observed English majors are particularly active in the oral English class. In addition, about 30% observed learners contributed actively to discussions in groups while they would be reluctant or remain silent when they are asked to perform individually as volunteers. These facts indicate that though most English majors have strong reasons and positive attitudes for learning oral English, a large proportion of them did not actually make decisions to do it and sustain the effort.

About 86.8% subjects approve that they should take on the main responsibility for their oral English learning. Moreover, among the subjects, 74.68% think that diligence plays a more significant part than aptitude does in oral English learning. And about 67% of them stand for the view that those English majors whose oral English is not good need to make efforts for improvement. These data imply that the majority of the subjects assert that they should be responsible for their learning chiefly, and they are crucial factors for successful oral English learning. However, about 47% subjects take the devoid of appropriate oral English learning environment as the main reason for why learners could not obtain good oral English, and more than 60% subjects take it for granted that if the teacher's oral English is not satisfactory then learners cannot achieve a high level of oral English. This indicates that some learners still hold an inappropriate or inexplicit belief that who determines the success of learning.

The analysis shows that some learners complain that lack of appropriate learning environment in China may cause their unsuccessful oral English learning; nevertheless, they are not willing to create good learning environment for themselves in every possible way. Their behaviors reflected that they did not realize their critical role in meeting with the success of learning, and thus it is necessary for them to regulate their beliefs about who determines the successful oral English learning.

In addition, the majority of the interviewed oral English teachers pointed out that a small portion of students are not very active in class, and they tend to use Chinese instead of English when they have difficulties in expressing themselves in English. Those learners do not carry the responsibility for creating appropriate oral English learning environment, and even not grasp the chances for practice provided by teachers.

The results indicated that 79.7% of the subjects confirmed that to fix long-term and short-term learning objectives is of great importance for learning oral English. Selecting effective learning strategies is proved to be significant for oral English learning by about 92% subjects, and about 67% subjects approve that it contributes greatly to the learning to reflect the effectiveness of strategies

regularly. Besides 83.5% subjects hold the view that it is important to find out the weakness and try to overcome it. Finally, self-evaluation is regarded to be very necessary for the successful learning by about 74.6% subjects. These data demonstrated that most subjects hold the self-management belief in the process of oral English learning, which may have a positive impact on their study.

The above analysis implied that most learners hold the belief of self-management. The research on their practical self-management also has been done by means of questionnaire. Among the questionnaire subjects, there are about 34.1% who have their own oral English study plans besides the teachers' assignment, but only about 12.5% subjects actually examine to what degree they have carried out the plan. And 34.18% subjects prefer to think about why they would take part in a certain learning activity, that is, to identify the purpose of the activity. After accomplishing a certain task, about 55.3% of the subjects think more and try to find out more effective ways of doing it. With regard to the comparison of different learning methods, about 43% subjects compare the advantages and disadvantages of various methods before they choose a suitable one for their learning. After contrasting the data analysis of self-management belief and that of the self-management, it makes it clear that the learners' self-management belief is not consistent with their practical self-management. Only a few English majors could fulfill the self-management in their oral English learning process, though they admitted that it would have a positive influence on their study.

3.3 Learning Abilities

For the purpose of improving pronunciation and intonation, about 50.6% subjects listen to the tapes recorded by English native speakers repeatedly. Furthermore, 75.95% subjects make efforts to imitate correct pronunciation and intonation in order to identify the differences and then obtain improvement. When communicating in English, about 45.5% subjects try to use new words and phrases that they have learned as many as possible consciously, and about 81% subjects may use body language such as gestures if they have difficulties in expressing themselves.

The researcher's observation demonstrated that some learners apply such strategies in their oral English learning process. Many observed learners use new words and phrases that teachers taught them when they speak English, and when there are difficulties in expressing themselves in English, they use body language such as gestures. The above analysis indicates that some English majors are possessed of knowledge of foreign language learning strategies, and that they can put these strategies into practice. This, consequent, will support their oral English learning efficiently.

From the questionnaire survey results, we know that 32.9% subjects personally think they often try to seize

opportunities to answer questions and take an active part in learning activities in oral English class. Besides some subjects may seek practice opportunities after class. For instance, 41.77% subjects practice oral English by means of speaking English to themselves. In other words, some learners not only practice oral English with others but also practice by themselves. However, there are merely 16.5% subjects who attempt to start conversations with their teachers and classmates in English as far as possible outside class. In the interviewed teachers' opinion, about 25% learners may try to grasp opportunities to answer questions and play an active part in learning activities in class; after class, however, less learners attempt to start conversations with teachers in English. Thus, it requires further initiative and activeness for English majors to practice oral English.

The researcher also has carried out the investigation on the English majors' social strategies by the way of questionnaire. About 41% subjects may ask for corrections from others when they speak English. In respect of cooperative learning, nearly 65% subjects assert that they would accomplish learning tasks assigned by the oral English teacher in effective cooperation with partners. But actually less subjects, about 30% acknowledged that they would take an active part in group work such as discussions in class for the purpose of improving oral English. When meeting with problems in the process of learning oral English, almost 32% subjects may discuss them with friends and teachers. Generally speaking, the investigation results obtained from observations and interviews correspond with that obtained from questionnaire survey. The researcher noted that in oral English class 60% observed English majors more or less could complete teachers' assignments efficiently with the cooperation of their partners. Nearly 28% observed learners contribute actively to discussions in the group of three or five persons for practicing their oral English. Some interviewed teachers stressed that there were a few students who often talked with them about the oral English learning problems. Furthermore, most of the interviewed teachers advised and encouraged their students to ask for corrections when speaking English. And those teachers claimed that some of the students did follow their advice in practice.

3.4 Learners' Affective Factors

The investigation results of English majors' self-confidence in oral English learning revealed that nearly 55% of the participants acknowledge that it is difficult to acquire successful oral English learning, and almost 65% subjects realized their potential in learning oral English. Concerning self-confidence in oral English learning, about 59% subjects are confident of acquiring proficiency in oral English. 32% subjects thought that they had obtained a fairly high proficiency in oral English. Finally, oral English learning gives a certain amount of

subjects some pleasure. Generally speaking, no less than 40% subjects feel confident of success in oral English learning. Consequently the self-confidence may have positive influence on their learning. However, it is of great significance for the learners who are confident in oral English learning to sustain their self-confidence and those who have no or less self-confidence to build it.

Investigation has been done on English majors' anxiety about oral English learning by means of questionnaire. The results concealed that no less than 40% subjects show willingness to speak English voluntarily not fear of making mistakes. And almost 45% subjects admit that they are a little nervous when they are asked to answer questions, because they are afraid that they cannot speak very well. In addition, for nearly 20% subjects, a sense of anxiety comes over them when it is time for oral English class. Moreover, about 30% subjects are in fear of their oral English study. When speaking English 40% subjects feel anxious, for they are afraid that others would laugh at them for their imperfection. More than 40% subjects are always worrying about their success in oral English learning.

3.5 Learners' Evaluation of and Suggestions for Teaching

Even though over one half subjects did not think little of the teaching content, teaching means, and teachers' roles, more than 60% subjects hold that the current teaching method adopted by their oral English teacher is a little ineffective. We can infer from the above analysis that there still exists problems in current oral English teaching, though it has experienced some reforms.

In order to obtain information on suggestions for improving oral English teaching, the researcher has inquired into learners' suggestions by the way of questionnaire survey. And the results reflected the subjects' tentative suggestions from their point of view. Nearly 88% subjects expected that the oral English teacher would base on the teaching conditions and students' characteristics to establish a suitable teaching model fitting in with their own situation. With regard to measures of teaching, no less than 90% subjects assert that it is essential for oral English teachers to select and use flexible measures to stimulate learners' initiative and activeness so as to foster their autonomous learning abilities. Moreover, the teaching materials are expected to not only be vivid and authentic, but also correspond with our Chinese actual situation by about 80% subjects. Almost 86% subjects claimed that providing opportunities and creating contexts for oral English practice are considered to be more important than merely teaching some commonly used sentence patterns. With respect to teachers' roles, 90% subjects suggest that being a guide, they are expected to construct good learning environment for the purpose of promoting learners' oral English. Above all, over 80% subjects desire for actual learner-centeredness in the teaching process.

3.6 Teachers' Roles

More than 80% interviewed teachers asserted that teachers should play various roles such as guide, facilitator, and materials provider, etc, and they are following the principle in practice. And about half questionnaire participants hold the view that teachers are playing different roles in the teaching process. While the class observations show that although most observed oral English teachers do not only play one role in the teaching process, actually few of them play various roles according to class activities.

Furthermore, nearly all interviewed teachers maintained that it is greatly important and necessary to bring learners into the center of the oral English teaching and learning. And most of them asserted that they have followed the rule in the teaching practice. However, the fact more than 80% questionnaire subjects desire for real and further learner-centered teaching indicates that some oral English teachers do not fully conduct learner-centered teaching, or at least their learner-centered teaching is not in keeping with learners' expectation. And after class observations, the researcher found that few and even no teachers could really put the learner-centered teaching into practice. Thus, the above analysis indicates that most oral English teachers have established the belief of learner-centeredness, but few of them made their teaching learner-centered in practice. In class, it is still teachers that keep the ball rolling; and learners remain passive. Oral English teachers do not really accomplish the change of roles, for they are still staying at the center place in the teaching process.

3.7 Classroom Learning Environment

Among the questionnaire participants, about 60% admitted that their oral English teachers adopted various measures to inspire learners' activeness, and provided many chances for practice. And nearly 90% participants expect teachers to provide more opportunities and create authentic situations for practice instead of merely teaching some commonly used sentence patterns. So, although teachers have provided opportunities for oral English practice, many learners still require more opportunities and authentic situations for the purpose of promoting their learning. Almost all interviewed teachers asserted that they provided many opportunities for oral English practice. And this is consistent with their performance in class, just as the observations revealed. More than 20% questionnaire participants admitted that they felt anxious when it was time for oral English class. And 25% participants do not have definite attitude. In addition, when speaking English more than 40% subjects show anxiety for being afraid of making mistakes or being laughed at. These questionnaire results manifest that the class learning environment is a little inappropriate for promoting students' oral English learning, because learners do not feel relaxed when speaking English in class. Thus, it is greatly important and necessary for teachers to create

appropriate and relaxed learning environment in order to alleviate and dispel learners' anxiety and to promote their oral English abilities.

3.8 Self-Evaluation of and Suggestions for Teaching

Most interviewed oral English teachers claimed that they often reflected on their own teaching and evaluated the effectiveness regularly. And most of them maintained that the current teaching for English majors is not satisfactory. The teaching materials are less authentic than what is required. And the current teaching method adopted is not very effective. More than half of them pointed out that they are playing different roles according to the learning activities in class. Moreover, several teachers asserted that they often reflected on their own teaching process, examining the fulfillment of teaching plans regularly with the aim of appraising the teaching effectiveness. Finally, a few claimed that they had adopted the learner-centered approach.

Besides, the interviewed teachers offered their suggestions from similar aspects as well. Almost all the interviewed teachers hold the view that it is necessary to improve oral English teaching. Most interviewees are not satisfied with the effectiveness of their current teaching method. In addition, in their point of view, the teaching materials they are employing at present are less authentic than they are expected to be. Some of them stressed that a qualified oral English teacher should possess not only the qualities and capabilities common to all English teachers, but also good spoken English and high ability of adapting themselves to changes in class. They ought to play different roles, such as guide, facilitator, counselor, etc, according to activities in the teaching process, since different teaching settings involve teachers in different kinds of roles. In short, most interviewed teachers contend

that it is crucial for oral English teachers to establish the belief of learner-centeredness and conduct the teaching accordingly.

CONCLUSION

From the constructivist perspective, this study focuses on how to make improvement in oral English teaching and learning at the theoretical level. More researches are necessary to explore the practical implementation. Some micro-level researches should be continuously investigated so as to help us accomplish efficient teaching and learning of oral English. They may involve such aspects as effective teaching approach, teaching materials, instructional strategies, and learners' adjustment and change in belief and role, etc.

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