

Constructivism-Application in Oral English Teaching to Non-English Majors

Li JIN

Shandong University, China

Abstract

Constructivism holds that the primary responsibility of the teacher is to create and maintain a collaborative problem-solving environment where students are allowed to construct their own knowledge, and the teacher acts as a facilitator and guide. The author briefly describes constructivist theory and its implications for oral English teaching and learning, states the current situation of oral English teaching for non-English majors in China, lists the main problems the students and the teachers face, and suggests some solutions to the problems. Finally, the author introduces her practice in oral English teaching and concludes that both the students and the teacher benefit from the application of constructivism in oral English teaching to Non-English majors. She also believes frequent practice of English in the real world will help the students achieve their goals.

Introduction

To be contributing citizens, productive workers and competent leaders in the 21st century, college students now must be far more knowledgeable about the world, different regions and global issues, as well as have the ability to communicate across cultures and languages. Speaking English can be the first step to clear and effective communication. To achieve this, we, teachers of English, feel a responsibility to guide the students to converse with the people around them in English. The author of this article starts from the theory of constructivism and its implications for oral English teaching and learning, and suggests solutions to the problems the teachers and the students face in oral English teaching and learning in China. Finally, the author believes frequent practice of English in the real world will help the students achieve their goals.

Constructivism

Constructivism (Li, 2005) holds that learning is an active process in which learners construct their own knowledge and understanding. They do not simply mirror and reflect what they are taught or what they read. Learners look for meaning and will try to find regularity and order in the events of the world, even in the absence of full or complete information. Constructivist teaching theory (Li, 2005) holds that the students should be the center of teaching, although we should not neglect the importance of the teacher's guidance. We should use multi-media and Internet, construct real environments, carry on cooperative teaching and lead the students to self-constructed knowledge.

Current Situation in Oral English Teaching and Learning

In foreign language teaching, the four basic skills---listening, speaking, reading and writing---have greatly improved on the part of Chinese students in the past decades. However, these skills have not developed at the same rate. Many students can understand others' English but they cannot express themselves effectively in English. For the majority of students, speaking still remains the most difficult skill to master, which can be reflected in the weak ability to communicate orally in English even after years of study at universities.

According to the renowned linguists, Rivers and Temperley (1978), 45% of communication is carried out through listening, 30% through speaking, 16% through reading and 9% through writing. It can be concluded that communication by mouth and ear is the basic communication of human beings. Thus, speaking is one of the most important skills in language learning.

Learning to speak English is considered to be one of the most difficult aspects of English learning for teachers to help the students. So, how to improve and develop oral English teaching in Chinese schools has drawn the attention of both teachers and educators, and it has become one of the most important issues in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching field today. Although many researchers and educators have tried to put various teaching theories and methods into practice to improve the teaching of oral English, there has not been much progress to date. Thus, it is urgent for teachers of English to conduct research on this aspect, and to find more effective ways to improve it.

Considering the current situation in teaching oral English and its research in China, it was in the fall of 2009 that we at Shandong University saw further reform in college English teaching; that is, oral English has been designed for the first time to be an independent compulsory course for non-English majors, which used to be one part of college English. This reform aims to help non-English majors with their oral English.

Problems for Non-English Majors

For non-English majors, English used to be just one course, but now, with the further reform of college English teaching at Shandong University, the students there have to take two English courses. They will face the following problems:

- 1) Limited time. Non-English majors know the importance of oral English, but English is just a required course for them, not their major. They are limited by time of classroom guidance (once a week, only 2 hours).
- 2) Limited by vocabulary and insufficient input of western cultural background information. Traditional English teaching requires the students to memorize more individual words, phrases or collocations, not the contexts in which they appear, which results in the problem that the students do not know how to express their ideas appropriately with the words they know. And limited cultural background information blocks communication with people from different cultural backgrounds.

- 3) Lack of motivation and confidence. The students are desperately in need of improving their speaking competence, but few of them have an interest in speaking. Chinese traditional education makes the students shy in class and in public. They seldom voluntarily present or share their ideas in class.

Solutions to the Problems for Non-English Majors

- 1) Arouse the students' intense interest in English learning
Language learning is most effective when students' interest, motivation and attitudes are taken into consideration. Students are encouraged to experience the language, learn the language by self-discovery, and participate in discussion and negotiation activities. It emphasizes the role of positive affective states on the part of the students. It advocates a task-based approach to language learning and teaching: learning by doing and by using the language. It incorporates learning strategy development into the classroom instruction.
- 2) Student-centered class with teachers' guidance
Teachers should act as guides and facilitators in English learning; they should provide the students with more real-world situations (Brown, 1994). In class, the students should be given more time to speak; that is, the students should be the speakers in class, they cannot be regarded just as audiences. The teachers should use different kinds of activities to guide and encourage the students to communicate with their peers using their newly constructed knowledge.
- 3) Accumulate the students' vocabulary to help with their oral English
It is common that the students stop in their speeches or communication just because of a word, which they do not know, or they have no English equivalents of some Chinese characters, from which we see vocabulary's importance in delivering English speeches. Therefore, the teachers should help the students find the best ways to enlarge their vocabulary. Learning the rules of spelling and pronunciation and mastering the links between words will help the students to learn more words in their own ways. With a large vocabulary, the students can express themselves better. For instance, they will be happy to "show" themselves and voluntarily share their opinions in class and gain more confidence in speaking in public.
- 4) Make full use of time in class and extend English learning after class
English is a foreign language for the students in China. They do not have a good environment to speak English. It is well known that classroom instruction is the basic form of English teaching and learning, but class time for non-English majors is limited. So, teachers should help the students to make the best use of class time and encourage the students to say what they can say. To those beginning to learn English, they often do not dare to respond to the teachers in English for reasons such as lack of confidence or limited vocabulary. So, the teachers should give immediate feedback for the students' performance in class, which will help them enjoy the success in learning. Then they will be glad to speak more and more in class and in public. With the encouragement of the teachers, the students will continue their oral English speaking even after class. For instance, I often recommend the students to sit in on the lectures of the foreign teachers. The

students learn a lot from them, which broadens their view and makes additions to the lectures in the regular classes.

5) Enhance the students' awareness of target country's cultures

Language and culture usually go hand in hand, which tells us culture is very important in language learning. When you learn English, you must have some knowledge of the cultures in the English speaking world. Only when you know the background culture can you understand the speakers easily and express yourself correctly.

Take us for example. In class, we introduce to the class different cultures and customs of English speaking world in related situations, such as, thinking globally, perceiving culturally, comparing cultural values and adapting to new cultures. After class, every Friday evening, some of my students and I visit the foreign teachers at their home, chatting about what we want to know and we also share what they are interested in. The conversation between us helps us better understand each other and each other's cultures. The students feel relaxed and express themselves confidently.

As we all know, "the aims for English teaching is to train the students how to use the language, yet this kind of ability will more quickly be developed on condition that the students are greatly engaged in the English language learning and immersed in an atmosphere of using the language" (Yuan, 2003). So, in class, English teachers are required to guide the students and make the whole class full of communication. To some extent, the students' attention and interest are aroused and in the meantime, the students' speaking is effectively practiced. As English learners in the classroom, if they show great interest in English learning, they should listen to the teachers attentively and follow the teachers step by step. Then they will be active in class activities and willing to communicate with others. Finally, their speaking ability will surely be improved. On the contrary, students who have no interest in learning English will be reluctant to listen to the teacher and fail to communicate with others, which will cause them to be a stranger to English.

Some measures for arousing students' interest:

- A. News report or extemporaneous speech before class;
- B. Pair work, group discussion, retelling stories, role play in class;
- C. Video and film watching;
- D. Games, such as speedy alphabet.

As the result of more varied methods, the students' ability of speaking along with their engagement with vocabulary, interest, confidence, co-operation ability, etc. are all improved.

Our Practice of Oral English Teaching in Class

The further reform of college English teaching at Shandong University brings out a lot of changes accompanied with new vitality. At the same time, it sets incomparable challenges for the teachers, which requires them to be competent in the newly reformed curriculum. In doing so in our class, the students are improving

their ability in using English. The following is what we have done in our oral English classes.

Now, we're using *Learning to Speak: an English Video Course* (Yang, 2009), published by Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, as our textbook, which consists of eight units, specifically eight topics, each unit including Lesson A and Lesson B.

Lesson A is composed of four parts:

- Part I: Vocabulary Link, introducing vocabulary and offering some information for practice, which is related to the topic
- Part II: Listening, offering some exercises related to the topic
- Part III: Speaking, offering some useful expressions and some exercises related to the topic
- Part IV: Communication, containing comprehensive exercises related to the topic

All the above four parts offered in Lesson A can almost be done in class, which is designed to help students to improve their English listening and speaking efficiently. Following the Communication part, four pieces of Optional Listening are offered, which are arranged from low level to high level.

Lesson B contains two parts:

- Part I: Global Viewpoints: 5-6 people from different countries are interviewed. In this part, students are required to understand what they are talking about and then do the following exercises.
- Part II: City Living: a 5-6 minute video clip, introducing people's real life in the English speaking world. It is not very easy to understand, so this part is divided into three sections to help the learners understand it.
 - 1) Preview, introducing the main idea and some language points;
 - 2) While You Watch, offering 50% script of the video clip and the remaining 50% to be filled in;
 - 3) After You Watch, offering another communication exercise which aims to help improve the learners' fluency in using English with what has been learned in the unit.

After City Living, there is one more Optional Listening.

Thus far we have discussed the textbook we are using now. In the following we shall share how we practiced in our classes with this textbook. Take Unit 3, Book Two, for example.

Part 1 Vocabulary link

Vocabulary is the lead-in to the topic on food. With the offered information and pictures in the book, we guide the students to recognize what is in each picture and ask the students to tell the class its characteristics with English adjectives. Then, use the adjectives to describe each food. When the students learn how to describe each individual food, we introduce more foods and more adjectives, which are close to the students' lives. Then, they can use the information to do pair work or group work to practice how to describe the food they like and why

they like it. The last step of this part is to ask some volunteers to present what they like to eat.

Part II Listening

In this part, we usually listen to the recording twice (we assign the students to preview before class), then ask the students to use the notes they took to do pair work, share the key information they got and later retell the recording in their own words, namely, newly constructed knowledge.

The above two parts usually take up 2 periods, in which we also introduce some restaurant terms and different types of services when dining out. Homework is assigned to review what is learned and preview the remaining two parts: Speaking and Communication.

Part III Speaking skill

I suggest before we take up Part III, we do some revision as usual. We start the new lecture in this way: If I treat you to a meal, I'd like you to give me some suggestions about which type of food you would like, fast food or slow food? This question will introduce how to make suggestions, which is the teaching goal of Part III. Then we can introduce some other ways to make suggestions. Next step is to let students practice how to make suggestions in class.

When time is available, we can ask the students to make a comparison between fast food and slow food. Then we can learn their advantages and disadvantages, which will benefit both our speaking and writing.

Part IV Communication: your favorite food

- 1) Listen to a paragraph.
- 2) Offer some pictures, which are key information in the paragraph.
- 3) Guess the main idea by answering the questions.
- 4) Show the script of the paragraph.

When the students learn the key information and the main idea, they can retell the paragraph, which becomes the way to describe their favorite food and any Chinese food to the foreigners in English.

Since making suggestions is the target speaking skill in this lecture, we make some suggestions to the students:

- 1) When you **describe** Chinese food: name a Chinese dish in Pinyin and then explain the ingredients; flavor/taste; what it looks like; how to make it; history/story behind it;
- 2) When you **introduce** Chinese food to foreigners, it is better not to mention the dishes with the internal organs of animals, which they rarely eat.
- 3) When you **treat or invite** foreigners to a meal, first ask them whether they are vegetarians and what they do not eat, either from their preference or from their own religious beliefs.

After the Communication part, we spend 10-15 minutes to watch the video clip in Lesson B to get the main idea and let the students state their own opinions. The rest of Lesson B will be learned after class by the students themselves.

At the end of this lecture, we ask the students to search the internet for more information on slow food in order to make comparisons with fast food. We assign the students to practice how to describe their favorite food in English after class and expect their presentation next time.

Effects of Our Teaching Practice

With two-semester practice, both the students and the teachers benefit from the application of constructivism in oral English to non-English majors.

For the students, those who used to speak no English in public have developed great interest in oral English and have gained confidence to present in front of the whole class. Those who had been trained in off-campus English training centers before entering the university have played the important roles in group work and class activities, and they are more confident to speak English both in class and after class. In the past year, a quarter of our students (213 students) have taken part in different kinds of English speech contests on campus, and almost half of them have been awarded prizes. One more case worth mentioning is last summer, many students voluntarily signed up for summer exchange programs to different countries, such as the US, UK, Australia, the Netherlands, Korea and Singapore. This demonstrates that students are eager to see the world with what they have learned at home. All these practices do broaden the students' global perspectives.

The students' progress challenges the teachers to improve their English language proficiency and their teaching skills in oral English tailored to the needs of the students. For instance, the roles in class have changed: students become the center of the classroom teaching and learning while the teachers are the facilitators who function as guides. In doing so, the whole class has more opportunity to speak instead of the teachers lecturing in class. To our delight, the students can extend the class activities after class, which is beneficial to the improvement of their oral English proficiency.

Conclusion

With the application of constructivism, the teachers can develop and create various situational contexts for non-English majors. With the guidance of the teachers and the use of multi-media and the Internet, the students can gain more interest in communication with their self-constructed knowledge in real-life situations, where the students can better their speaking skills, practice their cooperation, and improve their English proficiency. At the same time, the teachers can make some adjustments to meet the needs of the students. By doing so, both the teachers and the students can help each other to expand their global understanding. The students, with frequent practice of English in the real world, will find it easy to adapt to any new environment in the world.

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About the Author

Li JIN is an Associate Professor of English in the College English Department, Shandong University, China. She graduated and received her BA and MA degrees in English Language and Literature from Shandong University. She has been to the US and Australia as a visiting scholar and once worked in Holland and Australia as a teacher of Chinese. Her teaching and research interests are in English and Chinese teaching and cross-culture communication. In 1994 and 2009 she received Awards for excellence in teaching. In 1996 and 2010 she got awards for excellence in research. She can be reached at weareblessed@163.com.