

Stop Being Worried, Just Speak Up

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Abstract

English learners acquire standard and colloquial English for several educational and personal purposes; however, most ESL teachers have neglected the importance of acquiring spoken English (Engkent, 1986). This study examined whether or not using multiple interventions to deliver colloquial English in the classroom is beneficial for ESL students to develop both their formal and informal oral language skills so that they are able to use them interchangeably when needed. Findings in this study showed that students who were more active and had low affective filters were more likely to build their confidence in speaking than those who were shy, lacking confidence, or not ready to participate in class. In addition, it was also found that ignorance of speaking errors hindered students from improving their oral proficiency. Incorporating group activities was an effective way for ESL students to acquire colloquial English.

Keywords

Oral English skill; CLT; English language learners.

1. Introduction

English has been viewed as an international language around the world, especially in the field of business and education (Boyd, Ariail, William, Jacson, Sachs, & McNeal, 2006). When people from different countries are doing their business overseas, the common language they use is English. Additionally, in the field of education, most textbooks that professors use in higher education level are mostly written in English and are used in both English-Speaking and non-English-Speaking countries, like China, for example. Additionally, medical and research journals are mostly written in English. In order to develop students' English proficiency, the educational administrations in most non-English speaking countries, such as China, have assigned English as a required subject from the elementary levels to the first year of college. Consequently, it is expected that an English Language Learner (ELL), who has studied for many years, should have a strong proficiency in English. However, those who acquire English as their second or third language, are usually taught English through the Classic Method, where teachers mostly focus on grammatical rules, paradigms, which are related to the form of nouns and verbs, and vocabulary memorization, as the basis of developing the writing skill by translating from one language to another. It is interesting and no surprise that the language that students acquire in class is mostly standard, formal English rather than colloquial.

The social environment could be set up for ESL students by presenting a certain amount of the most commonly used spoken English terms every week, as a way for students to practice spoken English so as to help them become more active participants in the English-speaking community. As a result, the focus of this study is to implement group activities, presentations, and role plays for adult ESL students, which primarily focus on the spoken English, more specifically in a speaking and listening class since the spoken English is often used in speaking. Through selecting various spoken terms and providing authentic, real-life social environments to develop students' oral proficiency, I expect students to have more opportunities to practice how to use spoken English appropriately.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research Questions

This study aims to create a comfortable environment for English Learners to acquire colloquial English terms. It is expected to research following research questions:

1. How can we develop English Language Learners' Oral Communication skills through the delivery of authentic, spoken English lessons?"
2. How does the speaking environment affect English Learner's attitude towards speaking in English?
3. Whether the affective filter make an impact on English Learners' emotion while learning to speak English?

2.2. Research Subjects

This study was conducted in Class 1 of English major of 2020 grade at Dongguan City College, Guangdong Province, China. This Viewing, Listening, and Speaking course is one of the compulsory courses for English majors. It aims to develop students' multi-abilities of viewing, listening and speaking skills. At the beginning of the semester, students will be divided into groups of 5-6 people, and students are required to practice in each group activity assigned throughout the study.

2.3. Instruments

This data was collected from the class observation, field notes, video recordings, and final assessment. In order to be more credible, the data collection and data analysis used the triangulation method (Mills, 2006), which was collected and analyzed the data through reviewing audio/video recordings, taking the field notes and analyzing students' final assessment. By using this mixed-methods approach and the qualitative methodology (Mills, 2006), which is that the data is collected from a variety of materials in class and to analyze my data. The qualitative data was collected from (1) the field notes I took in each class and (2) the contents of videos of group activities the quantitative data was collected from the final assessment. The final assessment activity was to assess students' ability of expressing themselves based on a topic in the different contexts.

2.4. Findings

Throughout the teaching, the results led me to discover two findings in this study, i.e. real English acquisition through different contexts, and the benefits of small-group activities on learning students' learning.

2.4.1. Real English Acquisition Through Different Contexts

As we discussed the reasons why ELLs should acquire spoken English, Ellis addressed that "Learners have to learn when it is appropriate to perform a particular language function and also how to encode it. They frequently experience problems with both, addressed in Ellis's book (Ellis, 1994, p.23)." In addition, Ellis also mentioned that advanced ESL students also have a problem of forming requests and expressing their apologies in an appropriate way (Ellis, 1994, p.24). The most important finding demonstrates that students could acquire spoken English through different contexts. Several researchers indicated that learning through contexts is an important strategy for English learners to acquire English effectively, especially knowing how and when to use English in different situations (Brook, Boyd, and Moore, 2003). While students are acquiring English, any context-embedded learning materials, which teachers provided in class, provide them with an authentic context to practice spoken English in class. Why is learning through situational contexts so important for ELLs? Spoken English is used in our daily lives, and English speakers use it to interact with people in social contexts. If ELLs acquire

spoken English through context-embedded lessons, they could apply the language to any similar social contexts outside the classroom. In addition, students have more opportunities to practice spoken English in the situational contexts, which teachers provide. Through the practice, teachers could also observe students' learning and see whether or not they are able to apply the language appropriately. Once teachers found that students were unable to do so, they could provide students with more situational contexts to help them understand and apply spoken English accurately. Thus, not only could students acquire spoken English effectively, but teachers could also have the opportunity to observe students' learning.

2.4.2. The Benefits of All-group Activities on Learning Students' Learning

In class, it was common to see students go in a silent period and also had low self-confidence. Self-confidence is indispensable to a learning process for those who acquire English or other foreign languages. Self-assurance brings ELLs courage to speak in public as well as an opportunity to accept making errors in public (Lin, 2008). With lower confidence or lack of language, ELLs are not willing to speak in their learning period and this leads them into a silent period. For example, some students did not participate in any group discussions. Even though there were many reasons why students did not speak and participate in class, there was a big possibility that they were in a silent period. The results showed that they were uncomfortable to speak in public, and their limited English proficiency was one of the reasons they did not speak during the interview. Putting them into groups in order to reduce their fear of speaking in public is a good strategy in an ESL classroom (Richard, 2005); however, this strategy did not work for these particular students.

2.5. Significance

This research provides an evidence that the CLT method brought some advantages and disadvantages to the class. First, I did not correct my students' speaking errors when speaking in order to reduce their classroom anxiety and fear of giving a presentation in public. Without correcting their errors, students were not worried to make errors and felt comfortable making errors. In fact, it was hard for me not to correct their errors in class and keep silent. In the meantime, my students reduced their anxiety of speaking and became open, which means they did not feel anxious and felt more comfortable to give a presentation in public so that their confidence in speaking generally rose. However, reducing their anxiety was not the main goal in phase one. Even though students became more confident and spoke more in class, it did not mean that they improved their oral proficiency, as balance between fluency and accuracy were both required.

2.6. Limitations and Suggestions

2.6.1. Limitations

Throughout the study, several limitations are found and addressed as follows:

(1) Use of first language

There are a couple of limitations I had during Phase I and II. The first limitation is that I could not always have my students speaking English in class because they preferred to use their first language. All my students speak the same language, which made it difficult to control or limit the use of their first language. This limitation would interfere with my students' improvement of their speaking skills since they could easily revert to their first language. Even though some of my students tried to speak English in the group discussions, other students still responded by speaking their first language. As a result, the language my students used to discuss was their first language.

(2) Class size and classroom culture

The class size was a relatively big class, where the class included fifty-two students. Since the class was quite big, it was hard for me to collect data within a specific focused group of students.

After observing and teaching for the whole semester, I noticed that the data I collected was scattered throughout for every student. Thus, I was unable to collect my data with a focused group due to students' multi-level proficiency. Instead, I was looking at all students as a whole and collecting the data, which showed my students who improved their oral proficiency through the two phases. Meanwhile, the classroom culture also affected students' learning as well. Like the first limitation, students' first language, the classroom culture in this class was not developed well. Even though I encouraged students to speak English with their classmates and provided extra points for those students who spoke English in class, students still spoke in their first language more than in English. Thus, it was a challenge for teachers to create an English-speaking classroom culture in this class.

2.6.2. Suggestions

Even though the main purpose of my study is to develop students' speaking proficiency by delivering spoken English, I expected to see their abilities of utilizing these idiomatic expressions either in or after class and also measured whether or not they could interchangeably use idiomatic expressions. However, my students were struggling with using a verb and speaking with a complete sentence in Phase I. It was insufficient for me to develop their oral proficiency by only delivering spoken English in my study. By looking at the graph, Figure 1, the process of improving oral proficiency that I learned and developed for my study, students have to develop their grammatical competences first before they acquire discourse and sociolinguistic competences. Without having basic grammatical skills, students could not improve their oral proficiency efficiently. The reason is that the grammatical skill is the very basic skill for communication. Research pointed to the importance of acquiring pragmatics and grammar at the same time; otherwise, the language could not be understood (Rita, 2001). Even though I delivered idiomatic expressions as well as other spoken terms by using the CLT, my students did not improve their oral proficiency with a significant progress. Therefore, delivering grammatical lesson for practicing speaking skills is essential for students as it will reduce the speaking errors while expressing themselves.

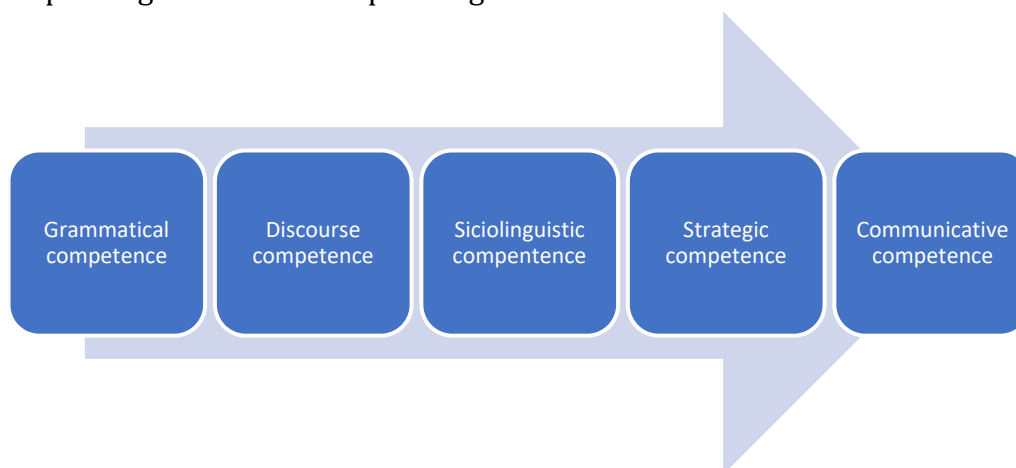


Figure 1. The process of improving oral proficiency

3. Literature References

English oral communication skills have become as important as other English skills nowadays (Barbara, Bonnie, Curtis, Dean, Elery, Gray, Motrose, & Neil, 1976). No matter where people are travelling, studying, or doing their businesses abroad, the common language, which people often use, is English unless they are able to speak the local language. The gap between academic proficiency and oral proficiency of ESL students might be very large. In addition, there are more and more ESL professionals who are aware of the importance of delivering spoken English in an ESL classroom. Therefore, ESL professionals are currently providing more speaking

opportunities for their students in class, such as group discussions and individual or group presentations in order to help ESL students improve their oral skills. For most English Language Learners (ELLs), they feel that their fluency and accuracy of oral speaking skills is not as equal to their academic English proficiency. In other words, although the academic English proficiency of ELLs is at the advanced level, their oral English proficiency is often not at the same level as the English taught is limited to academic language rather than language used in social contexts as well as at workplaces.

3.1. Communicative Language Teaching

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) was mentioned by Larsen-Freeman (2000) in her book, *Techniques and Principles in Language Teaching*. "Communicative Language Teaching aims broadly to apply the theoretical perspective of the Communicative Approach by making communicative competence the goal of language teaching and by acknowledging the interdependence of language and communication (Larsen-Freeman, 2000, p.121). For English teachers, the goal of CLT is to teach authentic language, which is used in various contexts. In order to develop students' communicative competence, teachers can use games and activities because these activities offer students more chances to practice speaking with real communicative features. In fact, developing communicative competence is more difficult than building academic language proficiency because communicative competence is delivered by very simple terms at first. Thus, only the simpler speaking forms will be introduced in the beginning, and then ESL teachers will gradually bring in more complex forms after ELLs completely acquire and internalize these simple speaking forms and are able to produce correctly by themselves (Nunan, 1987). Meanwhile, teachers should also take the responsibility to create various speaking environments for ELLs and push them to use the target language, English, in their speaking, and students should feel comfortable to speak within these environments (Larsen-Freeman, 2000, p.125-128).

In addition, according to research by Richard (2005), when ESL teachers try to develop the communicative competence for students, errors should not be over corrected. However, providing positive feedback on their speaking errors would be an appropriate way to help them correct their speaking errors instead of correcting their errors directly, like word rewards. Most students are afraid to speak out by using the target language, English, because they are worried about making mistakes while speaking in front of their peers so that they are not willing to speak English when their errors are over-corrected by their classroom teacher and over-correction usually increases their affective filters. In the process of developing communicative competence, the first aim is to establish students' speaking fluency by providing them with the appropriate situational contexts. Even if students probably will make errors in their speaking, teachers can take notes about their errors and give the notes to students later on or teachers also can give feedbacks right after students' utterances.

Brown (2007) proposed four main characteristics of CLT. First, the grammar should not be the main focus because the purpose of Communicative Competence focuses on building up students' oral skills and helping them overcome their fear of speaking in another language. Additionally, ELLs are able to engage in the pragmatic, authentic, and functional language use for meaningful purposes. On the other hand, in order to maintain ELLs engaged in language use in a meaningful way, fluency is more important than grammatical accuracy while fluency and grammatical accuracy are viewed as complementary components under the communicative techniques. Last but not least, ELLs are expected to be able to use the language productively and receptively in social and casual contexts of a communicative classroom. Basically, the discussion and instruction of grammatical rules is almost neglected in a communicative classroom while teachers use the CLT method because the main purpose of CLT is that teachers are trying to develop students' speaking fluency. However, for nonnative speaking teachers, it was hard to

build students' oral competences with accuracy and fluency in a communicative classroom. Furthermore, Brown (2007) also mentioned that, "Dialogues, drills, and rehearsed exercises and discussions of grammatical rules are much simpler for some nonnative speaking teachers to contend with" (Brown, 2007, p.242). Therefore, this may be the reason why English learning primarily focuses on the very traditional method and students are only equipped with high intermediate or advanced English skills on reading and writing sections. For most nonnative English teachers in non-English-speaking countries, they are unable to instruct in English so that most English classes are focusing on the grammar-translation method, which is that ELLs are asked to memorize numerous vocabulary and grammatical rules so that students are able to translate the whole text word for word.

Based on research by Richard (2005), the CLT approach has been widely implemented in classrooms since the 1990s. Basically, ELLs learn English through classroom activities. For instance, acquiring English is viewed as developing a good habit in this CLT approach. While ELLs acquire English under the CLT approach, they, at the same time, are building their foundation of oral English skill through classroom activities. According to Richard (2005), the "good habit" can be developed by the correct language output rather than through making errors. The current CLT method minimizes the memorization of dialogs as well as drills. These traditional methods are hardly seen in the CLT classroom; thus, interactive and communicative activities play an important element in CLT classroom because students are able to participate and practice via assigned activities by teachers. Meanwhile, the role of teachers is seen as a facilitator or a monitor rather than a model of correcting students' errors.

4. Conclusion

This study findings shows that CLT has brought advantages and disadvantages when teachers are developing students' speaking proficiency. If students' speaking errors are not corrected by teachers, their anxiety of speaking in public would get too high. In fact, with no fear of making errors, students will be willing to speak up in class. Once they speak up, teachers will have an opportunity to provide feedback. While developing students' speaking skills, teachers should take a role of facilitating ongoing speaking activities and guide students to the right track towards the learning goal of lessons. Students, in conclusion, have developed their confidence of public speaking as well as the ability of teamwork and critical thinking.

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