



An Innovative Approach to Teaching English Listening and Speaking Skills as a Foreign Language in a Language Lab Classroom

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Introduction

In Taiwan, most students are exposed to English as part of their curriculum in junior high school or even earlier in their lives (Chern, 2002). However, English teaching in primary and secondary education has always put more emphasis on reading and writing in preparation for various types of entrance exams. As a result, most students have difficulty in understanding and speaking English (Cheng, Horwitz, & Schallert, 1999). The problem with speaking English is even more severe because students lack opportunities to speak English in everyday life and the motivation to speak English in public (Tsou, 2005).

If students do not take extra English courses outside the official curriculum, they would only have limited experience in listening to and speaking English before they enter college. Some would not even have the opportunity to receive further training in listening to and speaking English in college due to the limited resources of the college (Liu, 2005). In order to reach a balance between the availability of resource and the general education requirements for all students, some universities offer classes in listening to and speaking English in large groups (Huang, 1998). For instance, a class may consist of up to seventy students in a course for listening to and speaking English at Fu Jen Catholic University. The challenge for the teacher in such a situation is how to best educate such a large group of students.

In order to solve this dilemma, we first need to identify the purposes of a class for listening to and speaking English. The most important goal of a class on English conversation without a doubt is to teach students how to understand spoken English and to speak in English. Another equally important but often ignored goal is to offer



students the opportunity to speak English and gradually feel confident in doing so. Here, we report an innovative approach for teaching English oral and comprehension skills to non-native speakers of English.

Innovative Approach

Two innovative approaches are adopted to facilitate teaching English conversation skills. One of the approaches used is that the students are not first given a lecture on the material used for understanding and speaking English. Instead, the students listen to the material and discuss questions related to the article with their partners first. This approach encourages the students to adopt a more active attitude in learning. During this whole process, the students experience collaborative learning (McKinney & Graham-Buxton, 1993; Oxford, 1997; Storch, 2002).

The other approach used is that all of the students are given an equal opportunity to speak. Whenever they discuss and respond to the questions raised by the teacher, they all speak to a microphone while the recording is on at the same time. In a traditional English conversation class, the students are randomly selected by the lecturer to answer questions or to express their thoughts on a given topic. The disadvantage of the traditional approach is that the students are given very limited opportunities to speak English. In addition, the embarrassment of speaking a foreign language in public may decrease the students' motivation in active class participation (Chambers, 1998; Manolopoulou-Sergi, 2004).

Equipment in a Language Laboratory

In this language classroom, each desk is equipped with a cassette player. The recording equipment facilitates the chances for the students to practice speaking and listening to English when they are in class. The students are told in advance that their oral practice will be played aloud in class. For example, after listening to a recording, students learn to retell what they have heard. When students are doing the oral summary, the teacher simultaneously records each oration. After the recording, the teacher randomly plays some of the summaries to the whole class. Sometimes, the teacher does the recording while students are having pair discussions or group discussions, and later the teacher plays it to the class. In this way, students are pushed to practice speaking English in class. There are penalties if students fail to complete the task. Of course, there is time to practice before the final recording so that the teacher won't embarrass the students.



Material

In order to motivate the students to adopt an active learning attitude, the material must be carefully selected. It should involve a real-life context, be interesting, and be suitable for most students. Take one online listening source from BBC 6-Minute English as an example:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish/general/sixminute>; here, the topics are all related to everyday situations. The audio file, transcript file, and other relevant information are available online, providing sufficient references for the students.

Procedure

The first session of the class begins with a brief introduction of the material to be used on that day followed by a presentation of the course material two times in a row. During the first presentation, the students are instructed to listen to the material carefully without pause. During the second presentation, the students not only need to listen to the material carefully but also are told to take notes of key points and they are allowed to do this at their own pace. This process is used to ensure that the students are able to grasp something from the material.

After listening to the material, the students are given five minutes to discuss the content in English with a pre-assigned partner, and their discussions are recorded. The teacher then randomly plays some of the recordings and explains key points of the content. The students are then asked to record a summary of the content and revise it until they are satisfied with their own performances. The design not only gives every student the opportunity to speak in English but also encourages them to take part in the class actively.

The second session of the class begins with a listening quiz on the content, and the students are given immediate feedback on their quiz results. This design allows the teacher to understand the students' comprehension of the content and allows the students to do a self-evaluation on their listening abilities.

The students are then asked to express their opinions regarding the content and discuss these opinions with their partners. Again, the teacher randomly plays some recordings and encourages the students to give comments regarding the recordings played. This process allows the students to express their opinions in English orally. This ability is different from being able to summarize the content in English orally because the students need to generate new statements in English rather than



repeating what was heard.

Outcome

The main goal of this innovative approach is to improve students' motivation and ability to speak and understand spoken English. Feedback from students showed that this approach significantly increases their motivation in speaking English. The students not only showed reduced fear in speaking English but also became more confident in expressing themselves in English.

Another feedback worthy of mention is that the students enjoy the wide varieties of topics chosen for the class. Some of them also found BBC English interesting as most of the students in Taiwan are more used to American English spoken in films or TV series. These facts showed that class material also played an important role in attracting students' attention (Peacock, 1997).

Conclusion and Suggestions for Future Teaching Practices

This innovative approach is different from traditional teaching and makes it possible for a teacher to teach listening to and speaking English in a large class. This approach has been proven to be beneficial to the students, and it does not necessarily involve more lecturing from the teacher. Instead, the teacher acts more like a facilitator and offers advice whenever needed. By putting less weight on the teacher's role as the sole instructor, the students are more motivated to learn English.

A few more things can be incorporated into this teaching approach to maximize the learning benefits for the students. First, encourage students to discuss about the material in small groups and eventually discuss that with the entire class. Second, prepare some questions related to the listening material for the students to discuss. Third, introduce the use of body language in class. By integrating the above concepts and teaching points with the innovative approach reported above, a teacher can successfully lead English conversation classes of any size.

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