Improving College Students' Speaking Skills with the Assist of Information Technology

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Abstract: With the acceleration of economic globalization and the increase of foreign exchanges in all walks of life, the application of oral English is becoming more and more important. However, college school English education pays more attention to mechanized ways to train students on grammar, as well as reading and writing ability. Coupled with the lack of the authentic language learning contexts, students' speaking ability is hard to be developed. Thus, how to improve the efficiency of college oral English teaching has become a hot issue in the field of college English education. In the times of network information, a great amount of scholars have highlighted the potential values of integrating information technology into English speaking teaching and learning. This paper makes a brief discussion on technological products assist students' speaking skills in college.

Keywords: College English; Information technology; Speaking skills

1. Introduction

With the globalization of the world, many countries have been made enter an era of learning English. As we know, English speaking has been considered as the most challenging part of all the four language skills by second language learners (Macintyre & Gardner, 1991; Kessler, 2010)[3][6]. In so many universities of our country, college English teaching mainly focuses on the training of reading and writing ability. College teachers tend to put more emphasis on vocabulary and grammar teaching, and some even regard these as the whole of college English teaching. In the class, most of time is used to explain the knowledge of vocabulary and grammar, and class practice is also more inclined to let students to do reading comprehension and writing skills training. In this way, it is easy for students to develop into an awkward situation where they can read and understand, but hardly speak. Actually, the study of college English should ultimately serve the development of speaking ability. Therefore, even if the vocabulary is rich and the grammar is accurate, failing to express oneself in a complete, decent, and free language is tantamount to failure to learn the language well.

In the current college English education process, the lack of opportunities for students to communicate in target language is also one of the major drawbacks. Language learning needs a real language environment, while there are few opportunities for our college students to use English to communicate with others. It is difficult to come into contact with the authentic English in their daily study. Although college English classroom teaching provides some original English audio-visual materials, listening comprehension is the main task, and the communication between teachers and students is limited to questions and answers, which makes it difficult to create a real and natural English language environment. Therefore, a large amount of college students cannot use English to express their own opinions and talk about their views. Most students cannot communicate with others in English frequently. Even though some students dare to speak, they are used to organizing English sentences in the way of thinking in Chinese. Additionally, their pronunciation is not accurate, and intonation is not standard. Therefore, effectively improving college students' oral speaking proficiency has been a difficult problem faced by college oral English class for a long time.

However, the need for speaking tests has been ranged from the educational domain to decision making for entrance to higher education and employment. Facing with such tough situation, the development of students' oral speaking ability has been an increasingly hot issue. In recent years, the rapid development of information technology is deeply affecting people's life, work and study. At the same time, the progress of technology has brought unprecedented changes and challenges to the field of

education. Moreover, with the help of WIFI/3G/4G/5G wireless network, various kinds of web-based devices have been applied to all aspects of English teaching and learning. It is inevitable to realize the deep integration of information technology and English education. Hence, exploring the potential power of information technology in English speaking and making full use of web-based products to increase oral fluency can be the core of this paper.

2. Literature Review

For our Chinese students, English as a foreign language, a real language environment is a vital factor to learn English well, especially on the aspect of fostering their speaking skills. However, most colleges and universities in our country are lack of the authentic language environment that can make students have a real experience and help them develop language habits. Nowadays, the wide application of information technology has brought new opportunities for English language teaching and learning. Yang (2002) found that the teaching materials used in Taiwan were often boring and tedious[11], while Wu (2009) further pointed out that an authentic learning environment and learning materials[10], such as audio/video materials (Larsen-Freeman, 2000)[4], are essential factors for successfully acquiring the English language in Taiwan. Therefore, the development of information technology enables students to make use of rich and diverse resources. It not only builds a good communication environment for college students, but also promotes their interests in oral English learning and use.

Under the aegis of mobile devices, more and more personal and learner-centered learning opportunities are fostered through ubiquitously accessible and flexible practices. In other words, mobile learning has become an inevitable trend in second language learning. According to Ahn and Lee's (2016) study, a mobile-speaking application with automatic speech recognition had a positive effect on improving participants' speaking skills, especially pronunciation[12]. Moreover, Liu and Chu (2010) indicated that a ubiquitous environment led to improvement in speaking skills and increased motivation among young EFL learners[13]. As Liakin, Cardoso, and Liakina (2017) concluded that second language learners have the ability to practice their pronunciation via Internet-supported devices, especially with teachers' guidance[15]. In the same vein, Fouz-González (2020) investigated the potential of the English File Pronunciation (EFP) app to help second language learners improve their pronunciation. The results suggested that using mobile applications for perceptual training can be particularly suitable for helping learners improve their perception and production of challenging pronunciation features[16]. For the purpose of making up the shortage of speaking practice in the classroom, using mobile devices has become a powerful solution for college students. There are various kinds of apps can be chosen to help learners to listen, as well as imitate and practice pure spoken English.

The practice of English speaking requires an authentic context and partners to communicate with. Whereas, learners' oral expression in our country often remains ineffective due to insufficient aural and oral practice (Cheon, 2003; Tsou, 2005)[11][9]. One study by Liu (2020) examined the potential of the My English Tutor (MyET) app to help Chinese college students improve their speaking skills[5]. The results indicated that MyET plays a great role in improving students' speaking proficiency, especially on pronunciation. This application can be an effective learning tool to facilitate learners' oral English and build up their confidence. Furthermore, Mostafavi and Vahdany (2016) had revealed that Internet-supported communication contexts hold considerable promise for improving the speaking skills of second language learners, especially for those learners who have been found to experience lower levels of stress when communicating in these environments than in ordinary face-to-face communication[7]. Thus, information technology can help college English teaching to achieve more functional applications, and create a more real and vivid communication space for students.

One study by Wallace (2015) examined the benefits of ASR-based systems in aspect of improving learners' speaking proficiency. The results showed that participants would like to practice their oral English through this approach. It created an anxiety-reduced environment, thereby more speaking opportunities can be accepted by learners[14]. Additionally, voice blogging plays a new role in developing speaking skills (Golonka, Bowles, Frank, Richardson, & Freynik, 2014)[2]. Though limited in number, studies on voice blogging have proved that blogs have potential power on the development of English speaking skills in an EFL context. As noted by Shih (2010), it is a good way to combine traditional face-to-face and blogging activities to improve students' public speaking skills[8]. Results from a blog learning satisfaction survey and interviews showed that students held positive attitude towards this new kind of learning method. Consequently, it is obvious that information technology not only greatly enhance the fun of oral communication, but also students are willing to take the initiative

to communicate in English.

3. Discussions and implications

At the present day, the trend of globalization is strengthening and cross-cultural communication activities are increasing. Therefore, in college English teaching, teachers should not only pay attention to students' English test results, but also need to improve students' speaking skills, so that students can express their ideas accurately in English communication. If students can speak fluent English, they can enhance their personal charm, as well as have a great help for their future employment and have a profound impact on their overall development. In college oral English teaching, part of teachers still use traditional teaching method, whose classroom atmosphere is dull, leading to students lose interest in learning English and get bored in the classroom. However, with the wide application of information technology, English teaching has gained important technical support, which makes the oral English teaching classroom full of vitality. Through the application of information technology, teachers can innovate teaching methods and stimulate students' senses. Thereby students can learn English knowledge more actively and enhance their English speaking skills in such teaching environment.

3.1 Implications for college students

As we known, people in a relaxed and happy state of mind to learn, the effect is far better than under stress. Whereas, for the current situation of college English teaching, the study of knowledge still occupies the main position and students are involved in a kind of anxious, mechanical, tense study condition at all times. Such as the requirement of mastering amount of words, the check of the use of grammar, and the training of reading and writing skills. It is difficult for students to obtain good learning experiences in such high-intensity learning requirements. This is also an important reason why college students' speaking skills has not been significantly improved. While the application of information technology has solved this problem well. It provides more abundant and diversified learning forms, students can gradually transition from the mechanical state of learning to a relaxed and pleasant atmosphere. As a result, students can get a better learning experience, so that oral ability can be significantly improved.

In addition, for our college students, they have been affected by examination-oriented education all the time. It seems that it is enough that only if they can master basic grammar, as well as the writing and reading ability, can get good results in the examination, even in the future. Moreover, when students are asked to answer questions or make oral English expression in front of the whole class, many of them would feel tense and anxious. These inevitably hinder the improvement of college students' communication ability and speaking skills. While the development and progress of information technology provide students with many online learning resources and opportunities. Students can make their personal choices, based on their own needs and interests, to choose proper channels to improve speaking skills. Furthermore, with the help of information technology, students can immerse themselves in the real and authentic contexts, so as to have a better speaking performance. Besides, this measure helps build up confidence and study effectively (Liu, 2020)[5].

3.2 Implications for college teachers

In many colleges and universities, English usually appears as a public course for non-English major students. And their English class teaching is mostly in large class, the number of students in class usually exceeds 50, or even more. It is difficult for teachers to cover all aspects of teaching in such a large class teaching. Moreover, most classroom forms are still teacher-centered, and this kind of classroom teaching flexibility is relatively poor. The large number of students will also bring tension and pressure, which leads to students lack of communication opportunities. Thus, free oral practice can hardly be carried out in the classroom communication. In the context of the widespread use of information technology, teachers can make use of information technology for oral communication method innovation. So that oral communication and teaching need not be fixed in the classroom as before, teachers can use a variety of technical means to achieve both in and out of class practice.

Information technology can also help teachers to create a real language environment and teachers can make use of information technology to help students achieve online-learning. For example, there are many online apps can carry out students' oral practice. The use of Internet-supported devices breaks

the limitations of time and space, especially for college students. Teachers can not only do communication activities in the classroom, but also assign oral tasks online. In the contemporary world, the wide use of network provides more new attempts for teachers' second language teaching, which makes the teaching content more abundant and forms more diversified. Therefore, teachers can flexibly select the specific content of the curriculum materials to conduct English speaking teaching, to stimulate students' passion and interest in communicating with others by using target language. And technology tools can active students cooperate more perfect with teachers. As progress in information technology, educational reform and innovation get the core force to promote. College English teachers should take full advantage of the assist of information technology in English teaching, actively promote college students' oral communication and speaking skills.

4. Conclusion

With the popularity of information technology, the resources of oral English teaching and learning are more abundant, students have more chances and opportunities to broaden their horizons and expand their range of experiences. Furthermore, based on the above study results and discussions, college students' speaking skills indeed can be enhanced with the assist of information technology. Although there are many problems in college English speaking teaching at present, the application of information technology can create favorable conditions for solving these problems, then promote the improvement of oral English teaching quality. Therefore, more energy and time should be put on the investigation of the potential benefits of information technology in college English speaking teaching and learning, so as to contribute to facilitating college students' speaking skills.

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