

Affective Factors in Oral English Teaching and Learning

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Abstract

This article explores several affective factors which may facilitate or debilitate students' oral English proficiency in college English teaching setting. Some strategies of teaching and learning are discussed and some affective methods in class and out of class are also introduced which can benefit activating the learners' positive affectivity to improve their oral English proficiency.

Key words: Affective factors; College English; Oral English; Teaching strategies

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INTRODUCTION

English as a world language plays a more and more important role in the world's communication. Therefore, college students are required to have high oral English proficiency with the development of the society. But in the language teaching practice in China, oral English teaching has once been a weak point and the target of criticism. Oral English proficiency of college students drew people's attention as early as the beginning of the 19th century and has become an indispensable part in research and practice of second language teaching and learning.

In the recent years, student-oriented instruction and research, learner-related variables and factors in oral proficiency have been investigated and studied. College

spoken English teaching has made great progress. However, disappointedly, we find that Chinese college students' oral English ability remains far less desirable and most of them still cannot communicate effectively. Their five language skills of listening, speaking, and reading, writing and translating are developing disproportionately. Their ability in spoken English is always much lower than their ability in the other four skills. Although they have comparatively good grasp of vocabulary and grammar, even some of them have passed CET-4 or CET-6, a lot of them still can not communicate in English confidently and some of them even can not utter a complete and appropriate sentence. Consequently, it does reflect our students' comparatively low level of spoken English and spoken English teaching and learning is considered to be the most difficult process. Therefore, it is necessary to know how to help develop students' spoken English ability. There must be some factors that have prevented or affected college students' development in speaking ability. What's more, it is very important to know how to offer effective and efficient training to improve students' oral English proficiency in college English teaching setting by making good use of these factors.

1. AFFECTIVE FACTORS

The term "affect" refers to emotion or feeling, the aspects of our emotional beings. The affective domain is the emotional side of human behavior, and it may be juxtaposed to the cognitive side. Affective factors in foreign language teaching and learning refers to two related aspects; one is the individual factors of learners, including motivation, anxiety, self-esteem, etc.; the other is the relational factors among learners and between the learner and the teacher, including teaching method, learning environment, interaction, etc.

According to humanistic psychology, learners should be treated as "a whole person" with both intellectual and

emotional needs. Affective development keeps pace with intelligence development. So neither the cognitive nor the affective has the last word, and indeed neither can be separated from the other. (Arnold, 2000) In the study of oral English teaching, subjective variables of learners weigh more than objective ones. Students may bring less visible things to class: affective needs and personality variables. Whether they are interested in the learning materials and teaching approach will impede or enhance the realization of the aim of oral English teaching. The key element of affective teaching is teachers should consider students' differences and analyze their learning background and design the teaching accordingly. The following is the main affective variables of learners which teachers should consider carefully.

2. SOME AFFECTIVE FACTORS ON THE ORAL ENGLISH PROFICIENCY

In recent years, many researchers in China began to focus on the influence of affective factors on the oral English proficiency of non-English majors. In the past, educators focused more on rational and cognitive development of learners' mind, neglecting the most fundamental element of human behavior. With the progress made in humanistic psychology, what modern educational theories consider more is the emotional aspect of human psyche.

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2.1 Motivation and Attitude

Of all affective factors playing substantial roles, motivation is probably a crucial one for successful language learning. Teachers' teaching effectiveness can be leveled by their skills in motivating learners. Johnstone regards it as a drive directed towards a goal (1999, p.146). Motivation is an inner drive, impulse, emotion or desire that moves one to a particular action (Brown, 1980, p.112). It's known to all that proper motivation will draw learners' attentions and arouse their interests to learn, thus they are more likely to succeed in language learning. Attitude is also a very important affective factor in language learning success. Only those learners with positive attitude will make efforts to find and use a variety of learning strategies. High motivation and positive attitudes might encourage learners to participate more in the class activities and oral practices, which in turn

results in greater success in their language proficiency and competence in language speaking skills.

Because motivation is so important in language learning, teachers should pay more attention to make activities and materials exciting, stimulating, and interesting to learners to enhance their motivation. In addition, the teacher should be very sensitive to attitudes students bring to language learning, helping reverse any negative attitudes and inculcate positive attitudes toward the target culture, the language, and the language learning process (Robin C, et al. 2001, p.52).

2.2 Personality

Personality is another important factor that affects the students' oral English learning. Obviously, students with different personalities may choose different oral English learning strategies. Generally speaking, learners can be roughly divided into the extroverts and introverts. In the process of practicing oral English, the extroverted students tend to be more active in choosing oral English learning strategies than the introverted ones. However, it's not uncommon to see that some students aren't willing to speak English in class or take part in the class activities because of the features of the personality types. Unfortunately, some teachers fail to pay proper attention to their personality types. They just complain about these students and force them to join in, which will consequently cause more reluctance and anxiety of the students in speaking. If the teachers choose to neglect these introverted students, these students will feel lonely and be ignored, which leads to a negative effect on their oral English learning.

Therefore, English teachers should take into consideration students' different personality types, and know more about the affective factor of personality types. They should try to find the proper ways to change the situation and encourage these students to speak English in class. When oral English teachers want to design an activity in class, they should consider both the extroverts and the introverts and strike balance. They should find more effective ways to arouse the students' interests and persuade them to take part in, making the students speak English in class autonomously in class. These activities can be discussion, role play, oral debate and English speech competition. The introverted students should be given more encouragement and acknowledgement to make them feel that they are the center of the class. In this case, the students can gain the sense of fulfillment and increase their enthusiasm in their oral English learning.

2.3 Self-Esteem and Anxiety

Self-esteem is defined as a self-judgment of worth or value, based on feelings of efficacy-a sense of interacting effectively with one's own environment (White, 1959). Brown claimed that no successful cognitive or affective activity can be carried out without some degree of self-

esteem, self-confidence, knowledge of yourself, and belief in your own capabilities for that activity (Brown 2002). Self-esteem represents the degree of one's confidence and belief in himself or herself. From the observation of classroom learning, we can find that learners with high self-esteem manifest more confidence and give more positive evaluations on themselves which will promote their language learning. Some students fail in oral English learning or feel less willing and confident in speaking English in class because they have a low self-esteem. They always keep silent or indifferent in oral English class. Most of their problems are related to low self-esteem. They usually feel unwanted, frustrated and confused because they lack of confidence and give more negative statement on themselves, which will in turn bring about negative effects on their oral English learning.

So teachers should spare no effort to enhance students' self-esteem in oral English practice. They should bear in mind that every learner needs to be respected, valued and appreciated. Teachers will be helpful in the formation of students' self-esteem by convincing the students that they are capable, significant, successful and worthy. That's the first step to create an environment of mutual trust and support.

Anxiety is probably regarded as the biggest affective factor that obstructs the learning process. It is generally acknowledged to be associated with feelings of uneasiness, frustration, self-doubt, apprehension, or worry. Language anxiety is described as fear or apprehension occurring when a learner is expected to perform in the second or foreign language. It has been acknowledged that moderate anxiety can cause man's concentrated attention on learning, whereas, too much anxiety can affects learners' performance and contribute to poor performance through worry and self-doubt. Anxiety is also an important element that directly reduces students' desire of participation, causing declined motivation, negative attitudes and language performance difficulties. Many kinds of language activities can generate performance anxiety. The most anxiety-provoking language activity should be speaking in front of others. Some students do exhibit negative anxiety when they are required to answer questions or take part in some language activities like oral presentations, discussions, or role plays. Usually, students who do not enjoy interacting with others who dislike performing in front of others tend to be anxious when speaking.

Teachers should try to build a relaxing learning environment to ease the students' anxiety. Some activities like playing games, group discussions, role plays, etc. In addition, teachers should treat every student in the class equally, because their impatience or ignorance to students consciously or unconsciously may have a negative effect on the students' self-esteem and cause their nervous or anxious feeling. It is the teachers' expectation and

encouragement that inspire the students to speak English and to communicate in English bravely. More importantly, teachers should not put overt emphasis on language mistakes that the students make. A few inspiring words or even a smile may be more helpful for them to overcome low self-esteem and negative anxiety.

2.4 Cross-Cultural Awareness

Cultural factors are taken as extrinsic factors that play a crucial role in second language acquisition, especially in oral communication. Learner must learn a second culture along with a second language (Brown, 1987). Richards, et al (2000) considers culture involves "the total set of beliefs, attitudes, customs, behavior, social habits, etc. of the members of the particular society". In the communication process, learners not only face the target language, but also the target culture. It should be noted that the term "culture" here dose not only refers to the importance of leaning the culture of the foreign language, but the learners themselves, that is, the learners' traditional cultural values, and their influences on their learning a foreign language. Sometimes, learners may have some cultural obstacles caused by cultural clash between different cultures, such as misunderstanding, confusion and anxiety which will affect or obstruct their communication. This fact has led to English oral learning problems that remain unsolved for long periods of time. Indeed, whenever language teaching and learning is concerned, cultural differences contribute tremendously to the thrust of the discussion and should be taken in to consideration.

In order to solve this problem, the word "acculturation" appears. Brown (1994) puts forward four stages. First, learners should be interested in the new culture. The second stage is the existence of culture shock, which refers to "feelings in the learner of estrangement, anger, hostility, indecision, frustration, unhappiness, sadness, loneliness, homesickness, and even physical illness" when entering into a new culture. The third stage is cultural stress. Learners find it's difficult to adapt to the new culture and learn the new language. They begin to reject their own culture, but have no strong connection with both the native culture and the target culture. When progress is made slowly, learners gradually adapt to the new culture. And the last stage, learners thoroughly involve themselves in the new culture. They can freely use the target language without or with little culture shock.

2.5 Some External Affective Factors

It is known that learning environment has an important effect on students' study. Learning environment has many aspects. For example, fresh air and pleasant temperature in the classroom can make students clear-headed and keep them in a happy state of mind. Therefore, better learning environment can improve teaching and learning results. On the contrary, an unfavorable learning environment can

reduce teaching and learning efficiency. Class-scale is another important environment factor. Leonard S. Cohen considered that teachers and students are usually happier and more active in the small-scale class, and small-scale class could meet students' different demands. So, in order to achieve a more effective oral English learning, class-scale should not be too large.

An other eternal factor that affects students' oral English learning is the lacking of good language learning environment. English is a language used in communications, so a good language environment can effectively promote learning. But for most of the Chinese students, English is a foreign language they learn at school, and mostly, students communicate in their everyday life in their native language. The oral English exam and the exam-oriented education system bring the multiple effects. In some important tests like college entrance examination, college English test and other types of national-level examinations, there is less proportion of spoken English. Test scores and the passing rates are emphasized too much in the exam-oriented education system which do not pay attention to the training of the practical skills of students. At present, the learning environment of oral English for college students is far from ideal and the importance of spoken English does not get enough recognition, which restricts the motivation and the inspiration of college non-major students to learn spoken English.

3. SOME PROPOSALS FOR THE ORAL ENGLISH TEACHERS

English teachers should try to create harmonious atmosphere in oral English classroom. The environment of the class demonstrates a large impact on the students' desire and interest in learning and practice. So it is the basic management task for teachers to achieve order and harmony by gaining and maintaining student cooperation in class activities. Some interesting and dynamic English games, role-plays, small talks, free discussions and drama activities not only make the students have the chance to communicate in English but also enhance their confidence in oral communication skills. Research shows that students, extroverted or introverted, think that they will speak English if there are relaxed and harmonious atmosphere in the classroom. So in class, a teacher's primary duty is to prompt students to think, to participate, to practice in order to gain knowledge. Creating a relaxed and harmonious atmosphere is very important for the Chinese English learners to learn English well.

English learners in China don't have the English speaking environment to practice their oral English. Non-majors seldom have opportunity to communicate with native English speakers in their daily life. Therefore, reading and listening are two important factors influencing

the oral English learning for the English learners who treated English as a foreign language. Teachers should encourage students to read English books or magazines and listen to or watch English programs on radios or TV and surf Internet to get some English materials. By doing so English learners gain access to native English or idiomatic expression and try to use them in their own communication. Besides, some English learners can imitate the native speakers' pronunciation and correct their errors in pronunciation to improve their self-confidence in speaking through listening to some native English radio programs.

Teachers should make students aware that making mistakes can be a learning experience. Errors should also be allowed in the whole process of learning oral English to help students elevate their self-esteem and relieve their anxiety. In addition, teachers should stimulate students through encouragements. Correcting students' mistakes immediately and directly often makes students feel embarrassed or lose face in front of the whole class and will do harm to their self-esteem, whereas, encouraging comments can help students achieve a sense of fulfillment and improvement and to learn from their own errors. While, it doesn't mean that mistakes can be ignored. It is not wise to interrupt to correct mistakes when the students are doing their jobs. Teacher should help students to correct errors after finishing the work or in the conclusion part of the class. Give students proper feedback about the mistakes they just made and provide suggestions. The friendly and effective exchange between teachers and learners and among learners can be further developed.

Effective learning and practicing out of class is also important, which not only contributes to improving students' oral proficiency, but also helps them keep strong motivation and reduce anxiety of learning oral English. English teachers should encourage students to participate in various interesting after-class activities like English corner, English party, English salon, English speech contest, etc. Teachers should help and instruct the learners to set their own temporary goal of learning oral English in order to let students practice oral English autonomously and actively after class and to experience the happiness brought by success. English teachers should also encourage students to make full use of Internet to collect some meaningful information from newspaper, television, Internet or other sources, and then report back in class, because using a target language out of class would be very helpful in those cases where target language is spoken.

SUMMARY

According to humanistic psychology, learners should be treated as "a whole person" with both intellectual and emotional needs. So it is necessary to create an ideal and harmonious environment for oral English teaching and learning. The key element of affective teaching is that

teachers should consider students' differences and analyze their learning background and demand and design the teaching accordingly. College English teachers should encourage students to participate in classroom and after-class oral activities, try to lower their anxiety and enhance their self-confidence, and provide more opportunities for them to practice oral English in and after class in order to help them improve their oral English proficiency.

Attention to affective factors can definitely improve language learning and the effectiveness of teaching, in turn, the affective classroom can contribute in a significant way to educating learners affectively.

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