On the Feasibility of Applying WeChat to China’s Independent College English Listening and Speaking Teaching

Jiawen Wang*
Zhuhai College of Jilin University, Guangdong, Zhuhai, Guangdong, China

ABSTRACT: This study aims at proving the feasibility of applying WeChat to China’s college English teaching and learning. The study shows that students in independent colleges receive inadequate training in English class, and lack autonomous learning ability after class. Therefore their listening and speaking skills are not satisfactory, but students generally believe that it is necessary to improve these two skills. WeChat is an instant messaging App which has a wide range of features. It is widely used by college students, many of whom are very eager to take participation in learning activities based on intelligent terminals. WeChat is suitable for teachers to extend the traditional classroom into after-class learning, to supervise the students, providing assistance, feedback, and evaluation to students work, so that to create a positive atmosphere of learning English. Therefore, it is a desirable platform to support teaching, and it is feasible to apply it to English listening and speaking teaching.

Keywords: WeChat; English listening and speaking teaching; independent college

1 INTRODUCTION

China’s independent colleges are mostly private-owned and application-oriented. The objection of college English teaching is, therefore, to cultivate students’ English application ability. However, at present most independent colleges highlight the development of specialized courses and neglect and even cut down the English teaching hours. For the lack of autonomous learning abilities and the absence of real English teaching and learning environment, most students in such schools do not have effective English communication skills. For this reason, we need to explore new methods and new ways to change the situation. Recently, the advancement and popularity of mobile terminals make it possible for the students to have mobile-learning and the WeChat, as an APP in mobile phones, is wining prevalence in college English listening and speaking teaching.

2 AN OVERVIEW OF WECHAT AND ITS APPLICATION IN ENGLISH LISTENING AND SPEAKING TEACHING

2.1 Functions and features of Wechat

WeChat was created by Tencent Technology Company in January 21, 2011. The App is free to download and use. It is widely used by college students, many of whom are very eager to take participation in learning activities based on intelligent terminals. WeChat is suitable for teachers to extend the traditional classroom into after-class learning, to supervise the students, providing assistance, feedback, and evaluation to students work, so that to create a positive atmosphere of learning English. Therefore, it is a desirable platform to support teaching, and it is feasible to apply it to English listening and speaking teaching.

| 1. instant communication | a. one to one (one-to many or many to many) communication |
|--------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|
|                          | b. receive and send message (text, picture, audio or video message, website) |
|                          | c. video chat                                           |

| 2. networking            | Set up a friend circle to upload and share message     |
|--------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|
| 3. public platform        | Release or push information to specific users; support secondary development |

WeChat is convenient and supports real-time messaging. As long as there is a mobile phone, people can use it and enjoy the features of public platform with low cost. The communication of the users and the upload and download of messages go without the limitation of time and location. You can have a private

*Corresponding author: 65528312@qq.com
talk to one person or have a group talk with other students to discuss one topic.

WeChat also supports a wide range of forms of message. The users can easily send text message, images and voice messages; they can even shoot a short video and send to others simultaneously. Also, all the chatting records or information are safely reserved on the servers, which can be reviewed in spare time. Therefore, compared with the traditional text message service, WeChat talking is more engaging and novel.

The WeChat public platform brings many benefits to the users. The Number of public platform is countless and they focus on different fields. The learners can search for and subscribe the ones that are related to their study. Every public platform has its own subscribers and will send useful information or resources to the user’s cell phone directly without any delay.

In a word, the learners can use it to learn English at anytime and anywhere with overwhelming convenience.

2.2 Literature review on the studies and application of WeChat-based English teaching

As a tool for mobile-education, WeChat has the potential of boosting education reform in higher education. In the past decade, the topic of “English teaching based on WeChat” has gained much attention of scholars and teachers. There are numerous popular English learning WeChat public platforms these days, such as “Fluent English in Speaking”, on which the users can learn English by playing games, and “Daily English”, which sends audio and video English learning materials to learners to improve their reading, writing and translation skills. Nevertheless, the research is far from enough when compared with the application of WeChat on other fields.

When searching literature with the keywords “WeChat” and “English Teaching” on China’s national knowledge infrastructure project website (CNKI), the author finds 62 articles, most of which concentrate on the exploration of WeChat-based English teaching model and autonomous learning model, as well as the learning and teaching effect of using WeChat. Most researchers hold a positive attitude towards it. Miao (2016) holds that the new model of college English learning can increase the learning flexibility, and can assist students to build a better autonomous learning and cooperative learning atmosphere. The study of Zhao (2018) shows that the interactive learning of WeChat can emphasize the communication between teachers and students and can set new standard for teachers in traditional classrooms. Zhang Kexin (2017) applied WeChat to the design of College English Writing Class, and carried out an empirical study on the teaching. It is believed that WeChat can help to build a virtual writing classroom, can facilitate the distribution of electronic teaching material and let students play the main role in class.

However, there are not so many studies of WeChat-based English listening and speaking teaching in private-owned independent colleges. Therefore, this paper tries to make an empirical study to explore the need and feasibility of this new teaching form, hoping to take relevant strategies to improve college English mobile teaching and learning.

3 THE STUDY

This study first explores the current situation of English listening and speaking teaching in independent college, and tries to identify the problems and then survey the students’ needs of WeChat based learning, attending to prove that it is feasible to use WeChat on English teaching.

3.1 Research questions, objects and methods

Through questionnaires and interviews, this study tries to answer the following questions: 1) What is the current situation of listening and speaking teaching in independent colleges and How about the college students listening and speaking abilities? 2) How do college students use WeChat? 3) What are the students’ needs of learning English based on WeChat?

This study adopts a convenient research method by selecting non-English majors from Zhuhai College of Jilin University (an independent college in which the author works) as subjects, including freshmen and sophomores majoring in computer science, Logistic management, medical chemistry and tourism management. The research group makes two kinds of questionnaires—one is about the current situation of English listening and speaking teaching and learning in independent school; the other is about students’ requirement of WeChat-based teaching. 104 questionnaires are distributed, of which 98 are valid. SPSS and Excel are used to make data statistics.

3.2 Result and Analysis

3.2.1 The current situation of English teaching and the students’ abilities

After the questionnaire and review, we have the following findings:

| Question                                         | Minimum | Maximum | Mean  | Std. Deviation |
|-------------------------------------------------|---------|---------|-------|----------------|
| How do you think about your listening and speaking ability? | 2       | 5       | 3.86  | .831           |
| Are you satisfied with the current English teaching situation? | 1       | 5       | 3.20  | .812           |
| Do you practice English in class?               | 1       | 3       | 2.19  | .554           |
| Do you practice English after class?            | 1       | 3       | 2.29  | .561           |
| Do you think it is necessary to carry out English listening and speaking activities before and after class? | 1       | 4       | 2.03  | .872           |
(1) College students’ English listening and speaking ability is generally poor. In the first question, “the current situation of college students’ English listening and speaking abilities”, the options have 5 levels, namely, “very good”, “relatively good”, “ordinary”, “not good” and “very bad”. In SPSS statistics, the options are assigned 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 point respectively. The result shows that the mean value is 3.86, which is close to 4, so it demonstrates that the general English level of students is close to “not good”. No subject choose “very good”; 64.11% of the students think that their listening and speaking ability is “not good”, and 18.85% believe their oral English “very bad”. In general, the current college students’ English listening and speaking ability is not satisfactory.

(2) The listening and speaking teaching cannot fully meet the students’ needs of learning. The second question is about the students’ level of satisfaction towards English teaching. The options are “very satisfied”, “relatively satisfied”, “just so so”, “less satisfied” and “not satisfied at all”. In SPSS statistics the options are assigned 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 points respectively. The result displays that the average answer of the subjects is 3.20, close to 3, which means that the majority are not so satisfied with English teaching. Only 1.02% is “very satisfied”, and the number of “relatively satisfied” and “less satisfied” accounts for 22.43%and 25.78% respectively.

In the subsequent interviews, students generally think that English listening and speaking teaching hours are not enough. They are required to attend class only once in a week or once in two weeks, which lack continuity and consistency. Some students complain that they even do not know who the speaking teachers are. To complete the teaching task, the teachers put emphasis on the reading and writing training and neglect listening and speaking. Also, in a limited period of time, the teachers cannot make the class interesting as well as informative, let alone to take the individual needs of students into account.

(3) Students seldom practice listening and speaking or participate in relevant activities in and after class. The main reason is that they have high level of speaking anxiety, and lack confidence. They are also short of autonomous learning ability and the school is not providing effective supervision and guidance in after-class learning.

Question 3 and 4 ask how often the student practice oral English in class:

|                      |               |
|----------------------|---------------|
| A. I feel nervous and anxious | 35.71%        |
| B. I think the time for on-class oral practice is limited | 18.37%        |
| C. I am not interested in speaking English | 23.47%        |
| D. I think there is no chance for me to speak because the students are too many. | 22.45%        |

It can be seen from the result that the reasons for the lack of oral practice in class are mainly related to the students’ anxiety and classroom teaching arrangements. Most of the independent college students do not have a good foundation of English, which causes them to feel anxious. Anxiety may exert great influence on language learning, especially on listening and speaking (Wang, 2017). Therefore, how to turn boring oral practice into an interesting activity that everyone would like to participate in and reduce their anxiety is a problem to solve in spoken English teaching.

The reasons why students are unwilling to practice oral English after class:

|                      |               |
|----------------------|---------------|
| A. I would like to spend more time on my specialty rather than on English | 40.81%        |
| B. There is no practice platform and atmosphere | 23.47%        |
| C. Nobody supervises me to practice | 32.65%        |
| D. Other reasons | 3.06%         |

As can be seen from the table above, 40.81% students do not pay much attention to English learning, because they think the school does not highlight English learning so they can also neglect it. Therefore, it is urgent for the college to create a positive atmosphere of practicing English on campus. About 33% of the students rarely practice English because of the absence of supervision. The students in independent colleges are generally short of learning autonomy. With the continuous reduction of class hours, how to effectively supervise them after the class and how to cultivate their learning autonomy and establish an effective autonomous learning mode is also a problem faced by the English teachers.

(4) The fifth question is to find out students’ attitudes about the necessity of carrying out English listening and speaking activities before and after class. The options are divided into five levels by the necessity degree from high to low, and are assigned with 1 to 5 points in SPSS statistics. The mean value is 2.03. Nobody chooses “not necessary”, 34.33% of the students choose “very necessary”, 29.35% of the students choose “relatively necessary”, and 33.33%of the students choose “necessary”. Thus, the learners believe it is highly necessary to carry out English listening and speaking activities before and after class.

3.2.2 The college students usage of WeChat and their willingness of WeChat-based teaching and learning

(1) In the aspect of intelligent mobile devices, 97.99% of the students have intelligent mobile phones, 89.88% of whom have registered their WeChat accounts. All
the students believe they understand the basic function of WeChat and are skillful in using it.

(2) When asked what you would do using WeChat, 51.02% of the students use it for socializing; 55.10% use it for entertainment and only 22.44% use it for learning. As for the use of English public platform, 23.47% of the students say they have subscribed relevant services, but the rest 76.53% say they never tried such learning form. This demonstrates that most of the college students are not very familiar with the WeChat-based learning style and learning resources.

(3) As for the willingness of using WeChat to practice speaking and listening, 33.43% of the students say they like it very much and 43.32% say they would like to use it. They believe that “WeChat is an App I use every day. It is so easy and convenient that even when I stay in bed I can also learn English”. Some believe that “practicing English on WeChat platform can avoid the embarrassment of face-to-face communication, and can reduce anxiety. Therefore I am willing to participate”.5.05% of the students are not willing to use it, considering it “not systematic to learn English on WeChat and will not bring any real change”. Generally, the college students are willing to accept English listening and speaking materials and carry out relevant activities through WeChat.

(4) On the purpose of learning through WeChat, 46.94% of the students hope to use WeChat to improve spoken English, while 35.79% would like to improve their listening ability. Therefore, the demand for learning is large. In the design of teaching system, speaking and listening training can be regarded as the core, while vocabulary and reading can be seen as the supportive part, which can satisfy the purpose of most people.

| Vocabulary | Speaking | Reading | Listening | Writing | Others |
|------------|----------|---------|-----------|---------|--------|
| 36.12%     | 46.94%   | 40.81%  | 35.79%    | 13.26%  | 4.08%  |

(5) On the expectation to the learning resources on WeChat platform, 60.06% of the students expect the content to be interesting, such as games and virtual communication. Meanwhile, 54.08% of the students hope the learning can be divided into various levels with individualized designs, so that all the learners of different levels can participate in it. 44.9% hope the resources can help to open their eyes and 37% hope the resources to be practical, being relevant to their professional courses. Only by knowing the students’ need, can we design a better platform to realize the expected teaching effect.

|  |   |
|---|---|
| A. Highly interesting | 60.20% |
| B. Have different levels | 54.08% |
| C. Horizon-broadening | 44.89% |
| D. Be relevant to professional fields | 36.73% |
| E. Highly theoretical | 11.22% |

4 THE ANALYSIS OF FEASIBILITY OF APPLYING WECHAT TO COLLEGE ENGLISH TEACHING

The above research shows that the in-class English teaching and after-class English learning in independent colleges are not integrated together. The in-class teaching is not effective and the after-class practice lacks supervision and autonomy. As a result, it is not easy to help the students to learn and practice English systematically and to develop a good habit of learning English. The students are anxious about speaking English, and they do not exert much attention to English learning because of lack of interest. However, most students are showing great passion for the new model of learning English based on intelligent mobile devices. Therefore, it is constructive to apply WeChat to English teaching as a supportive device.

Firstly, the WeChat platform can help to establish an effective evaluation and supervision system, extending the traditional class to after-class learning, to solve the problem caused by inadequate teaching hours and students’ autonomy. If there is not enough time to finish an oral practice in class, the teachers can urge the students to complete the task after class by setting up a group chatting room or assign a task through the WeChat platform. On this platform, it is easy to check whether the students have finished the work or not, since they can upload their audio or visual homework easily. In this case, the students will not be lazy because they do not want to lose point. The teachers can also evaluate students’ work and provide feedback to it. Through this method, an in-class and after-class evaluation and supervision system can be established to prolong the learning time and cultivate students’ autonomous learning ability.

Secondly, WeChat Platform can serve as a tool to provide supportive teaching after class. Some students complain that they lack a platform for practicing English after class. WeChat can provide such a platform, on which they can obtain English learning resources relevant to their classroom learning, and practice English with their classmates. The students can interact with their teachers and also other learners. The teachers can answer students’ questions by sending text message, pictures, voice message, launching group talk or video chat. The students can also have a discussion on a certain topic whenever they like. In this way, a favorable English learning atmosphere can be built up.

Thirdly, WeChat can enrich the teaching content and teaching form, to make the English teaching and learning more appealing. Some WeChat platforms provide various speaking practice activities, such as puzzles or work-guessing games. These activities and the wide range of resources vitalize the traditional classroom, and can improve students’ passion of practicing English. It also helps to reduce the learning anxiety, and improve classroom efficiency and effect.
At last, the WeChat-based listening and speaking teaching can meet students’ individual needs and improve their learning motivation. The teachers can acquire the students’ feedback on WeChat, and analyze different learners’ problems to work out a teaching plan which may suit every student’s need. The learners can also choose the suitable learning resources and practices according to their levels and situation. In this way, we can improve the learning efficiency and teaching quality, to achieve better results.

5 RESEARCH PROSPECT

The idea of WeChat-based English teaching is in line with features of English language acquisition and meets the need of current college English teaching. It has a strong feasibility, and is a short-cut to improve the current situation of listening and speaking teaching in independent college. However, like the technologies in the past years, WeChat is only a tool, and it is not sufficient to improve the listening and speaking ability of college students. When using WeChat, the teachers should first have a deep insight into the students’ need, and then make relevant teaching plans and strategies accordingly. They should also design activities according to the teaching plan, students’ level and topic of the unit, so that to complete the teaching objection (Zhang, 2017). Therefore, how to effectively use WeChat in listening and speaking teaching, how to establish a constructive teaching model based on WeChat is the topic that deserves further study.

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