Exploration on Oral English Teaching Based on Intelligent Oral Platforms

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Abstract. Oral English Teaching has become increasingly important based on the needs of both society and students. In this context, many oral learning and teaching Apps and oral teaching platforms has been developed. This study explores the application of intelligent oral platform in the teaching of oral English in College, which provides meaningful implication for the oral teaching practice in the college.

Introduction

Oral English teaching, one essential part of the College English teaching Curriculum, is to cultivate student’s practical language ability. Compared with other skills, however, Chinese college students’ speaking skill is relatively weak. According to the report in 2016, in mainland China, IELTS examinees are developing unevenly in listening, speaking, reading and writing and oral skills are the weakest link. Therefore, there are great expectations of the English communication skills of Chinese English learners. To cater to this demand, college English teaching has been undergoing unceasing reforms, especially in oral English Teaching. With the development and innovation of modern network technology, dynamic learning based on the network is affecting traditional English in both breadth and depth at a rapid pace. The ubiquitous network resource platform not only provides students with a large number of real English learning materials, but also builds a union for students and teachers. The learning platform makes up for the deficiency of classroom interaction and guides college English teaching towards cooperation, autonomy and openness. In this paper, we are going to present a teaching practice based on the oral intelligent platform, with the aim to explore the benefits, possible problems and hence the implications of the digital oral platform on College Oral English Teaching.

Research Background

Improving Student’s Communicative Skill is the Urgent Demand for Both Students and Our Society

With the intensification of globalization and China’s increasing influence in the world, the current society urgently need professionals equipped with skillful communicative abilities. While, as we mentioned above, oral skills of most Chinese learners are relatively weak, compared with other language skills. It is not surprising if we come into the English learning classroom. Directed by the exam, in most teaching practices, teachers tend to focus on reading, writing, and listening development to improve students’ performance in various tests, which normally do not compulsively include the evaluation of oral aspect. Realizing the weakness of students’ oral skill, some reforms take place on various English tests such as CET-4 (College English Test Band 4), and CET-6 (College English Test Band 6). Since 2016, all those who sign up for CET-4 and CET-6 written examinations are eligible candidates for CET-4 and CET-6 oral test, and which means both oral and written scores will be reported. As a national exam held by the department of higher education of the Ministry of Education, this reform undoubtedly guides college English teaching to focus more attention on oral English improvement.

In addition, most college students show their strong desire to improve their oral skill. Based on a
survey result recently conducted among 1300 college students, spoken English has been voted as the most expected course they would like to select.

This result reveals that for one thing, students of today have great expectations to improve their oral skills, and also indicates that they are not satisfied with traditional college oral English teaching. Therefore, it is essential to do some reforms in college oral English teaching to satisfy the needs of both our students and our society.

Network-based Technology Has Been Widely Used in Language Teaching, Which Has Become the General Trend in Education Development

IT development has had a great impact in terms of computerized classroom. Network assisted language learning (CALL) takes advantage of network potential, integrate and design digital teaching resources, take virtual communication as the platform, provide open and creative learning style for students (Xie Shengliang, 2008:2). Since the 21st century, more and more foreign language teachers showed great interest in CALL and relevant research results emerged endlessly. Payne & Ross (2005) proved through the experiment that the language produced in intelligent chat is conducive to the formation of oral cognitive mechanism, which indirectly improves learners’ oral English ability. Wichadee (2017) adopts hybrid teaching by combining traditional classroom and online learning, to achieve the optimization of teaching effect. This hybrid teaching helps learners strengthen the connectivity of learning content and the interaction among students through a variety of learning.

The widespread application of mobile terminal technology in teaching has become the general trend of education development. Voice teaching and video teaching of various WeChat groups, have become popular learning tools for many students, due to its convenient, timeliness and powerful instant communication functions. At the same time, a variety of educational APPs have emerged in large numbers. Thanks to them, students can effectively obtain the required learning resources without relying on computer screens. Moreover, coupled with attractive social functions, such new technologies and new media has produced a huge boost for English teaching Reform. With the introduction of mobile terminals into the classroom, students' participation in the classroom, after-school exercises, and effective feedback have been integrated. As a result, students instead of teachers become the dominant role of the classroom learning and their efficiency of English learning has consequently improved. In addition, the timely use of mobile terminals in teaching no longer restricts learning and communication to the classroom. The mobile terminal has rich network resources, and students of today are quite familiar with the use of these resources. With the help of the wide range of mobile terminal communication objects, students can enter a wider learning space to improve their language proficiency.
Under such a background, it is an important attempt to utilize mobile terminals or technology based language platform to adapt to college oral English Teaching in the ubiquitous learning environment.

Our Research

In order to meet the needs of students’ oral improvement in the new era, optimize the teaching effects of college oral English teaching, we adopted the MYET Intelligent language learning platform into our teaching mode.

MYET

MYET English listening and speaking auxiliary teaching system has been developed by many senior experts in the field of computer speech recognition and computer speech teaching for English listening and speaking teaching. With the help of computers and the Internet, it provides teachers and students an effective learning and teaching platform. Through its specially designed intelligent speech analysis system (ASAS), MYET English listening and speaking assistant can analyze and compare the English spoken by the learners from the four aspects of pronunciation, tone, rhythm and light and heavy stress, pinpointing exactly which word, which syllable in the sentence has problems, and how to effectively improve these deficiencies. Through this way, we can help students to improve their oral and listening abilities through independent learning. In addition, MYET also provides detailed and comprehensive learning records and oral problem analysis reports to teachers. The information not only helps teacher get a clear mind of students' learning progress, but more importantly, based on that, teachers can adjust their teaching objectives for different levels of students, and effectively evaluate students' academic performance. Last but not the least, with the open design concept of MYET, teachers can integrate the teaching materials and handouts into the "MYET English listening and speaking auxiliary teaching system", provide more practicing opportunities to students, which, by great extent, extends our class time and classroom.

Based on the teaching resources and evaluation methods we have now, we hope to blend MYET into our teaching organically, so as to realize the optimal utilization of resources, promote the innovation of oral teaching mode and methods, and benefit both teachers and students.

Through this teaching practice, we tend to explore the benefits of blending the intelligent language learning platform in oral English teaching, and the possible problems that should arouse our attention in practice.

Research Methods and Objects

We selected 40 non-English sophomores as the participants of this teaching practice. Before this research, they have studied college English in one class with the same teacher for two semesters, which means they are familiar with their English teacher, classmates and college English teaching. One more to be specified is that they are from a B-level class, neither the top group students, nor the low level students of the English learning.

Firstly, students are tested on the MYET platform to show their oral ability. The test result revealed the problems of students are poor fluency, nonstandard pronunciation, and single intonation with a lack of changes. To investigate the root of these problems, a survey was conducted about students’ difficulties of oral English learning. From the questionnaire and interview, we get to know that the obstacles on their improvement of oral English mainly include: the short of professional instruction on oral English learning, limited in-class oral exercise, less-motivated autonomous oral learning after class, and most importantly, less knowledge on how to improve their oral English.

Based on these findings, we designed our teaching practice by making use of the following functions of MYET Intelligent language teaching platform.

First, Scientific and efficient self-learning function helps students effectively improve their oral and listening ability.

Rich and abundant language learning resources are available on MYET platform for students’
autonomous learning outside classroom. Students can easily follow the instructions of the learning procedures, independently finish the practice. We assigned daily task for them and gradually, they learn more and practice more under the instruction of the platform. For those who are less motivated for autonomous learning after class, the utilization of the platform guides and pushes them to learn and practice step by step. Practice makes perfect and undoubtedly more practice means improvement of their oral abilities.

Second, the powerful and easy-to-use teaching management function updates teachers the information of students learning, which directs them to adjust their teaching design and realize individualized teaching guidance for students of different levels.

Keeping track of students learning is an essential work for teachers to assure their teaching efficiency, while it is not an easy thing for most teachers without the help of technology due to various reasons such as oversized class, limited class time and etc. MYET teaching system provides detailed and comprehensive learning reports, coupled with problem analysis to teachers. With the knowledge of students’ learning achievement and problems, teachers can timely adjust their teaching plan, assignment of tasks and offered special guidance and help to needed students. Through this way, both teachers teaching and students’ learning can be effectively improved.

Third, comprehensive and accurate evaluation and testing functions help teachers effectively grasp students’ learning achievements and promote students’ learning greatly;

Evaluation is essential for both teachers and students since the result is the measurement of teachers’ teaching and students’ learning. It used to take great time and effort to test students orally. To our happiness, the MYET system has a powerful testing function and proved to be very accurate and easy to use. It means that through the platform, teachers can organize oral tests anytime to learn the achievement and problems of the students after a period of learning. Students can choose to test themselves easily if they like. The learning progress revealed through test will boost them to move forward on the way of oral practice and learning. Similarly, the problems reflected from test also shed lights on their road of improvement.

Fourth, practical and authentic English teaching materials enhance students’ interest in autonomous learning and improve their practical ability of English listening and speaking in a short time.

Willis thinks that teachers must provide students with exposure to “real language”, opportunities for using language for real purposes and the motivation to learn and use the language. The teaching materials offered on the MYET platform are all authentic language spoken by native speakers for practical purposes. Students can get access to real language on different situations from meeting people on the airport to pay a first visit to your new neighbor. Through the course learning on the platform, students can not only contact the real language repeatedly which used to be impossible in time-limited class and more importantly, it seems to have more fun for students to conduct interactive communication with computers. Last but not least, for the shy students who dare not open their mouths in front of teacher and classmates, interaction with machines get rid of their obstacles of losing faces and less of confidence, raise their interest of speaking English.

Fifth, open and general system of the platform allows teachers to integrate their teaching materials and handouts and practice a new personalized English teaching.

Despite of the rich and diverse courses available on the platform, teachers also need to combine teaching materials into the platform learning, and the hybrid teaching mode is more desirable sometimes. MYET intelligent teaching platform makes this hybrid teaching possible with its open and general feature. Teachers can upload teaching materials and handouts onto the platform and assign students to finish and keep track of their learning process. This function complements our class teaching and integrates our class teaching with online learning organically.

Research Findings

After a ten-week teaching practice, all the 40 participants were tested again to see changes on their oral performances. All the students showed great improvement on the four aspects, especially fluency and pronunciation. The findings of the following questionnaire survey confirmed the
advantages of MYET platform in oral English teaching. All the students agree that it is beneficial for them to utilize the platform for their oral language learning. Through computer or mobile phones, students can conveniently get access to the teaching materials and courses offered by the platform which break the restrictions of the time and space of the classroom learning. The impressive functions mentioned by students include: the pronunciation and intonation practice and correction perfect their speaking proficiency and boost their courage and confidence to speak English openly; online interactions with machines lower their anxiety of speaking and allow them more real practice; test function provides them learning results and problem analysis, which guide their following learning.

**Conclusion**

To meet the needs of improvement on oral skills, reforms are unavoidable and new methods will be included in the oral English teaching. In the environment of modern information technology, the hybrid oral English teaching based on the MYET intelligent language learning system, as a new attempt in the ubiquitous learning environment, laid a foudamental role for the reforms of oral English teaching. The new methods brought convinence and advantages, but also challenges as well. First, teachers need to have a good understanding of MYET platform as well as its restrictions. Students need teachers’ guildence to be effectively involved in the learning process and develop their autonomous learning awareness and habit. Second, speaking exercises and test on the platform are human-machine interaction which is more or less different from interactions between humans. For example, in actual face-to-face oral tests, generally students are required to take a test in pairs. They are required not only to answer the teacher's questions, but also to relate to each other and note each other's oral expressions, and in response to each other's expression of questions and answers. People communicate not only the voice and content, but also facial expressions. In this regard, we need to further explore the use of platforms and the integration of platform learning and testing with practical teaching. Meanwhile, we shouldn’t ignore the fact that language learning is a long process and some teaching effect can’t be measured and observed in a short time. Teaching reform on college oral English teaching remains a challenging and rewarding task, which has a long way to go.

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