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Main Problems in College Students' Oral English Learning and the Corresponding Teaching Strategies

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Abstract

For a long time, college English learners attach more attention to the input of language knowledge while ignoring the output aspect in language practice, leading to the dissatisfactory phenomena—"dumb English". This paper aims at the main problems in college students' oral English learning and points out several prominent problems such as the internalized factors in language knowledge; meanwhile, it presents some effective strategies in English teaching such as the combination of "modeling and imitating" strategy, presenting strategy, situation creating strategy with detailed examples.

Key words: Internalized factors; Teaching strategies

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INTRODUCTION

Language is a kind of audio resources, a kind of tool for communication also. The aim of language learning is to achieve the transformation from input to output successfully which influenced by many factors such as internalized factors in language knowledge. The so called "internalized factors", refers to English learner's language knowledge level including three aspects such as pronunciation, tone of voice; the content of verbal expression including vocabulary, grammar, sentences

as well as the richness and logical clarity of the content expressed; the formal aspects of verbal expression including fluency and conversational skills and plays a very crucial role in their output value of oral English. Among the many internalized factors, pronunciation, tone of voice, the content of verbal expression such as vocabulary and sentences and their corresponding teaching strategies will be emphatically involved.

1. PRONUNCIATION

Chinese and English are two different languages in phoneme and phoneme juncture. From phonemic aspect, phonemic analysis and calculation methods differ largely between English and Chinese, with the obvious features of vowels and consonants in English and consonants, vowels and tones to distinguish meaning divided by syllables (words) in Chinese phonology; vowels and consonants with special timbre exist in both Chinese and English such as tight and loose pronunciation of the same phonemic vowel and the majority of voiced pairs consonants in English and many aspirated and unaspirated voiceless consonants in Chinese; ways of phonemic combination and their different existing position differ between English and Chinese: English has consonant clusters and consonants in words can be two, three, four, or even five linked in free position at the end of words or syllables. However, Chinese doesn't have consonant clusters with only one consonant appearing at the first or the end of the syllable. From the aspect of phoneme juncture, that is to say, the way and boundary of phonemic continuity during talking, which mainly shows in English conversation, consecutive syllables are smooth and uninterrupted and the boundaries between syllables and words can't be heard clearly. That is what we call legato sound in musical terms. But Chinese is different. Most Chinese syllable begins with consonant with a few exceptions of vowels. Additionally, there are few true Chinese vowels, which are

mostly preceded by a glottal stop, so it can't be connected with the ending consonants to pronounce, causing the staccato sound in music.

1.1 Main Pronunciation Problems in English Learning

A. Due to much more detailed classification of English vowels than Chinese, / i /, / u /, / ei / are three prominent difficult points for Chinese students in pronouncing. Students tend to resort to a Chinese substitute to pronounce a similar sound in English. Chinese pinyin "yi", sounds like / i : / in English. Thus, it makes confused while pronouncing words such as *if, ill, ignore, illusion* etc. Similarly, the substitute of wu (Chinese pinyin) sound is used to pronounce / u /. The common problems lie in the finding of a very similar substitute in native syllables while learning a second language instead of considering their scientific pronouncing position. In language learning process, students are eager to find the shortcut while ignoring the basic language learning principles. Although reaping considerable effects at first, they still have to correct the knowledge they grasped with double or even triple efforts since the tiny mistakes in pronunciation may make great obstacle in further study.

B. Prominent problems of consonant clusters such as / bl /, / fl /, / gl /, / kl /, / pl /, / sl /; / tl / and / dl /.

The so-called consonant cluster is two or more consonants linked together. It is not the Chinese typical structure as in Chinese, there is only one consonant at the beginning or the end of a syllable, so our students tend to pronounce syllables of consonant cluster with a vowel inside. It is accustomed to be more consonant cluster at the end than at the beginning, thus more difficult for Chinese students in pronunciation. In my English class, /ə/ is a very common sound inserted in / bl /, / fl /, / gl /, / kl /, / pl /, / sl /. Students are customary to pronounce /bəl:k/, /f ələd/, /gəlu:/ /kə la:s/, /pə l i:z/ /sə l i:p/and /tə:rtəl/, /nu:dəl/, being far away from standardized pronunciation.

1.2 The Corresponding Teaching Strategies of Pronunciation

Pronunciation is a very essential part in oral English practice. Due to some objective reasons, such as the district factors, students in southern part of China seem to meet much more difficulties than other areas causing some psychological obstacle in oral English communication. Besides, some students didn't cultivate a good habit of imitating at the initial stage of oral English learning, over time, with their study focus shifted, it is hard for them to correct the customary pronunciation habit.

It is warmly welcomed to take 5-10 minutes off the ritual time in oral English class to model and imitate the prominent sound. "Model", is to elaborate on the articulator location and the method of pronunciation first, and then use diagrammatic decomposition, multi-media as well as teachers themselves to demonstrate the whole

process of sound producing. Take the common mistaken syllables for example: compared with / i /, when / i:/ is pronounced, the tongue position is more higher with more closed mouth, meanwhile the tongue muscle is more tight and lasts for longer time; while lower tongue with mouth slightly open, loose tongue muscle and short time when / i / is produced. Apart from it, paired words with / i /and / i: / phonemes should also be listed for demonstration such as eat and it, feel and fill, heat and hit, leap and lip, meal and mill, peak and pig, read and rid etc. As the consonant clusters mentioned above, the basic rule is the fast transition from the first to the second consonant and not being a pause so as not to insert a vowel. As to / tl / and / dl /, students should be guided to tighten the tip of the tongue against the upper gum closely so that air from the tongue side explodes. From theory to practice, an overall impression of pronunciation is made on students. They may list the words with difficult phonemes and easily confused ones on a piece of paper, practice them after class. As long as standardized rules and their concrete figures are elaborated and demonstrated, students are capable to correct their own drawbacks in pronunciation.

2. INTONATION

Intonation is the melody or music of a language. It refers to the way the voice rises and falls as we speak. In oral English, students tend to pay more attention to pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar whereas ignoring the effects of intonation. Since different intonation may express different emotional color, attitudes, mood, even different meaning, it occurs frequently in various listening materials such as:

A: This lecture is tedious.

B: It ↘ is.

B: It ↗ is.

B: It ↙ is.

The falling tone as in the first sentence shows expresses very affirmative attitudes, while the rising tone in the second can be either a kind of casual echo or impatience. The falling-rising tone in the third example with somewhat blaming tone conveys the meaning- how can you think so? It is not as tedious as you think. The sentences above serve a very good case in tone usage as meanings differ greatly for the same information with different tones. For English learners, intonation learning embody a lot in listening skills as a lot of assumption of speakers' implication concerning intonation involved in conversational materials. Due to this fact, in certain scale, students are competent in figuring out speakers' intention by various options while ignoring the transformation from input to output. That is to say, what we heard in the listening material should be utilized effectively in our oral output practice. The proper use of intonation can also be viewed as a kind of speaking skills conveying information

in a concise, authentic way.

Reading aloud and imitating are two strategies used in intonation practice. It is generally known that reading aloud is widely used in the early stage of English learning. In fact, oral English learning can't leave without reading aloud, no matter which stages are at. For some college students with high scores in English exam, due to district restricted, many problems exist in their pronunciation leading to the misunderstanding from listeners. Imagine one with high-skilled ability in English exam can't convey the right information in communication, can't it be viewed as a kind of failure in English education. It's the teachers' responsibility to remind the students of their defects, encourage them to face their shortcomings directly and overcome it with great efforts. The aim to read aloud is to train mouth muscles as Chinese vocal organs and muscles are not accustomed to the mouth of the movement made in English. Through reading the muscles, we can adapt to the needs of English pronunciation, authentic intonation can be achieved naturally.

Then imitation follows. Imitation as one of the effective ways in language learning plays a very important role in oral English practice. Usually, imitation is viewed as a mechanic way to copy and repeat what they've heard. Yet, as a practical way of oral language English learning, imitation is not that easy. For many language learners, opening their mouths to speak English in public is an insurmountable obstacle due to their innate introverted character such as shyness. Even they dare to speak, yet are in a very low and soft voice, which does harm to their pronunciation and intonation. Thereby, the presupposition to learn oral English well is to overcome such kind of self-abased psychology and imitate in a loud voice. Why we emphasize so much on the loud volume of voice? What if we pronounce or imitate as our normal voice? If we used to murmur in our throat practicing pronunciation and intonation, we tend to make mistakes in pronunciation once speak aloud due to the unfamiliarity with the extended vocal organs. So when we get imitation started, do believe to speak in a loud way in order to activate our oral muscles being adapted to newly motion mode, thus mouth and brain altogether can cooperate well correspondingly. At first, for the accurate pronunciation and position, imitation with slow pace will be better. Students are hurried to imitate what they heard and begin at a very fast voice pace. In fact, the aim of imitation first is to master accurate pronunciation as well as its sound producing organ position; therefore, it needs not to begin at a fast speed; the slower, the better. With the proficiency in pronunciation, they can speed up to their normal speed till fluency. Then, try to imitate with definite aims. Most students do have cultivated the good habit of imitation, but when speak out in their own words, it still seems without any progress. In oral English learning, reflections are attached more importance which being overlooked by

a majority of students. Imitation is not simply a mechanic process at all; it involves a series of self-reflection process. Usually, students' self-learning awareness should be cultivated once mistakes being made, or difficult sound and intonation being met; they may underline the points by comparing the original sound with your own sound for later highlighted practice. In this point, a tape recorder will help. When the mistaken pronounced sounds are marked, the corresponding hints, attention matters and what you've learned from the listening materials are followed. As long as you insist on experiencing and practicing with your whole heart, habitual authentic intonation may become a good help in oral English learning.

3. THE CONTENT OF VERBAL EXPRESSION WITH VOCABULARY AND SENTENCES INVOLVED

It is generally acknowledged phonetic features as we mentioned above such as pronunciation and the voice of tone serve as an important form while communication; the more authentic, the better. And we all know the content we convey while speaking is the core of oral practice. That's why for the second language acquisition learners, even their pronunciation and voice of tone aren't standardized, there's still no obstacle in communicating with native speakers. Since the aim to communicate is to deliver information and once the information has been received, the communication is valid and successful.

3.1 Common Problems for Oral English Learners

3.1.1 Running Short of Words due to the Stereotyped Expressions from the Lack of Storage of Vocabulary

When it comes to the verbal content expressed, students usually are misled by the usage of vocabulary, that is to say, they show their over-care to the exact English equivalence of Chinese characters. If a corresponding equivalence can't be sought out in their brain, they tend to quit the expression totally and convey in a very safe way without any words unsuccessfully interpreted directly. It leads to a very common phenomenon students' ideas are almost the same when being raised by the same topic. A case in point is the questions: What's your character? What's your ideal character of your friends? The majority will respond with kind, friendly, optimistic, pessimistic, happy, while minority will answer with tolerant, serious, easygoing, quick-tempered, narrow/broad-minded let alone decisive, paranoid. We can't deny what the students said is true, but they are not truth totally. Some students are stumped by the exact English equivalence of Chinese words failing to express their true feeling and responding with similar stereotyped answers. No matter what "character" questions being asked, their answers can't leave without the words kind, friendly etc. There is no difference from the answers from primary school students

and middle school students, and then what do we learn on campus? Where can our unique viewpoints and high mastery of language skills be showed?

3.1.2 Neglect of the Practical and Applicable Function of Languages

Many students attribute their unsuccessful communication to the shortage of accumulation. When speaking with others, students tend to think a large amount of vocabulary is the presupposition of oral communication, and they think the more vocabulary they memorize, the easier and better their oral English is. The fact is not. If we observe carefully, native speakers such as British and Americans prefer simple words, slangs and idioms for daily communication to complex words and sentence structures. Usually the communication can be achieved successfully in simple words or sentences instead of a series of rigid, standardized structure. For example: Let me know it once you get the information. It's structurally right and acceptable in meaning. But if we pay more attention to the colloquial expression, a simple phrase "get me posted" will be suitable. Again, we are accustomed to say "I feel tired" and "You misunderstand me", but if we are careful observers, we may find they are far away from being colloquial compared with the usage of simple word "get". Then we have "I get tired" and "you get me wrong" for colloquial oral expression.

3.2 The Corresponding Strategies of Vocabulary and Sentence Teaching

3.2.1 The Systematic Categorization Strategy

In English learning process, students tend to emphasize on the input process, say, what they hear from the teachers, read from books, watch from videos. Their attention is usually paid to the things such as whether they can understand the reading, listening and watching materials. This kind of positive thinking is predominant in students' learning process. However, once the Chinese interpretation provided conversely for the students, even very simple Chinese sentences, students still can't give the exact English words as original materials. Why does this phenomenon happen? It is due to the neglect of output. English is learned for the purposes of communication. Application is its first necessity. English learners should always bear in mind that what they learned must be used in their daily life from the very basic step and try to build a series of systematic categories suitable for their own. Let's take the previous question for example. If students master the skills of concluding words into several categories such as character, high-technology, attitudes, social life etc, when a topic concerning is mentioned, the corresponding vocabulary in this category will be activated simultaneously.

3.2.2 The Roundabout Strategy

In oral English expression, usually it is hard to find the corresponding equivalence of Chinese meaning. Still, we shouldn't be bothered by it since the English explanation can be employed for communication. It is a very common strategy for us to avoid what we can't express and state things or facts indirectly. Employing this strategy can also help us practice English fluency and acute thinking since our thinking will not be stopped by any unfamiliar words. As the character "decisive" and "indecisive" we mentioned above, students are able to explain the meaning "He has the ability to make quick decision in a difficult situation" or "It is difficult for him to make decisions". If students are encouraged to employ such roundabout strategy, their thought will be broadened instead of being confined to a limited vocabulary category.

3.2.3 Presenting Strategy

Presenting strategy is an effective strategy used in large classroom teaching. Students are arranged in groups and present what they are interested in groups. Once groups are formed, they are required to finish the oral assignment periodically. After class they may consolidate different thoughts and extract the elite from group members, while class, two members from the same group together will give a presentation of their teamwork while others try to seek out their oral mistakes in pronunciation and grammar. It is an all-class activities during which group members are focusing on the oral matters while the remaining on content. Through the presentation, students are engaged in the whole teaching chains, most importantly, students' attention towards pronunciation, voice of tone and verbal content are effectively and unconsciously consolidated into students' classroom activity. Not only do they increase students' study interest, their confidence in English speaking is also highly boosted.

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