

*An Evaluation of Students' Oral Fluency to Identify Ways to Help Them
Improve Their English Speaking Skills*

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Introduction

In the process of globalization, it seems there is a general consensus to accept English to be a lingua franca although people have a natural preference to communicate with foreigners in their native language (Hall, 2013: 8). In Hong Kong, educators, teachers and students probably recognize this phenomenon very well. When planning the English curriculum, teachers are trying hard to promote a congenial learning atmosphere to enable students to acquire a high level of English to meet their professional and career needs.

Communicative competence

In the Hong Kong context, the classical grammar-based teacher-centred drilling approach which prevailed till late 1960s (Richards, 2006: 6) has become outdated. English teaching has adopted the communicative approach. Students are expected to do communicative tasks in the form of pair or group work. They use English to exchange information, present their ideas and finish the projects.

The focus of teaching oral skills at the tertiary level is to enable students to read aloud, give a presentation, ask and answer questions in a discussion or interview, describe and tell a story. These oral skills will enable learners to pass the speaking paper in public examinations like IELTS and TOEFL.

Hymes defined **communicative competence** as competence to decide when to speak, when not, what to talk about with whom, when, where, in what manner" (1966, 1972). This is a basic, pragmatic description of the ability to use the language to interact with others purposefully in a specific context. Nevertheless, he had not taken into consideration the medium for communication as a key factor affecting the effectiveness of communication.

Computer mediated communication (CMC)

According to Blake (2013), "84 percent of teenagers use the Internet as a primary communication tool, either in writing or by instant messaging (IM)" (cited in Hernandez & Rankin, 2015). With the convenience and widespread use of "whatsapp", instant messaging, facebook and instagram in Hong Kong, tertiary students are used to communicating in their "peer-type" English with a lot of emojis, incomplete sentences, acronyms, Chinese expressions translated directly into English and short answers with a particle at the end to add emphasis.

Here are some common phrases used in CMC

- (A) "blowing the wind" -- bluffing and exaggerating
- (B) "he not know?", "you mean what?"
- (C) "cu, ttyl, fds"
- (D) "no la", "you ah?",

Computer mediated communication (CMC) no doubt can help students convey their messages to receivers very efficiently. They can focus on communicating "the ideas", not the language expressions. In other words, there is a real information gap and the sender of the message is trying to use language concisely to pass information and

interact naturally with the receiver. Thus fast and vivid exchanges are generated. Eventually a certain style is developed among the group members who are used to one another's way of expressing themselves. As a language teacher, it is very hard to train students to speak properly using the correct conventions.

The research findings and analysis

In Semester 1 (2015-16), a total of 50 recordings of Year 1 students' discussions and presentations have been collected for analysis. The speech data is used for identifying common problem areas and errors for improving the learning of English and the English curriculum.

The subjects are from three programmes: Bachelor of Business Administration in Service Marketing and Management, Bachelor of Psychology and Bachelor of Social Work. The majority of this cohort have passed the DSE (Diploma in Secondary Education) examination and have attained at least Level 3 in their English and Chinese subjects.

From our recordings of 50 first year students, we find that students have the problems in:

- using appropriate vocabulary/ expressions to convey their ideas to others;
- using correct tenses, articles, prepositions, singular and plural forms of nouns etc.;
- avoiding the use of Chinese English;
- having too much hesitation and repetition;
- turn-taking and responding appropriately to others in a discussion; and
- using the correct tone and register in their discussions.

Weak students, in particular, have problems in the choice of appropriate vocabulary, tenses and sentence structures. Most of them could not differentiate the definite article "the" from non-definite articles (a, an). It is clear that L1 has interfered their use of L2. Quite a few also tried to memorize texts from various sources in their presentation. Only some above average students could respond to the teacher's comments using appropriate expressions.

In addition, there was a range of abilities among the group. Some were already quite articulate whereas others were still struggling to search for the right words to express their ideas. The weakest students were not able to pronounce some basic words properly. For instance, a weak student might say "I want to make **suggest (suggestion) go (going) together, meet at the ferry pier.**" (He pronounced "pier" as "pair"). It is hard for the listeners to capture what he meant.

Strategies to tackle the problems in speaking

Here are some suggestions to help tertiary learners improve their oral proficiency:

Formal face-to-face classroom teaching

(A) Adopt the **communicative/ situational approach** to maximize the opportunities for students to interact with one another in discussions, presentations,

debates and simulated situations. Teachers should encourage students to use language to express their views naturally. It is not desirable to spend a lot of time on repetitive drills or practice the use of new vocabulary out of context.

(B) Teach basic **pronunciation skills**: students have to learn some basic pronunciation skills. It is useful for them to learn what syllables, primary stress, intonation patterns, rising and falling tones are. But instead of having the teacher point out the mistakes, let students record their own speech and identify the errors. In so doing, they will be more aware of their articulation and will not repeat the errors.

Making use of computing technology to improve oral skills

(A) Recommend a list of self-learning sites to students: useful websites such as “TED talks” (Technology, Entertainment and Design) which consists of thousands of speeches. The site can be used for maximizing students’ exposure to the native tongue and enrich their vocabulary. If L2 learners find the speeches to be too difficult, they can switch on the “tapescript” to listen and read the text first. Listening to TED talks can increase their knowledge as well as improve their listening and reading proficiency.

(B) Video-tape or record students’ presentations, upload video clips to the learning site. In so doing, students can comment on one another’s performance and be more aware of their strengths and weaknesses.

(C) Teacher can select specific tapes/ recordings to focus on some common speaking errors which are likely to cause misunderstanding and communication breakdown.

Promoting self-evaluation can increase learners’ self-awareness. By adopting **an action-oriented learning approach**, learners are given ample opportunities to practice chunking of phrases, reducing redundancy (repetition, use of clichés, rephrasing the previous line etc.) and intonation patterns in formal speeches. Though redundancy makes it easier for learners to understand what the speaker is talking about (Brown, p.237), it is advisable to speak clearly and concisely on formal occasions. Thus teachers have to remind students to note the differences between personal (informal) and public (formal) communication.

With the advance of technology, teachers can easily use electronic multimedia devices such as mini recorders (recording pens, or cell phone), computer, ipod, ipad and camera to enable students to evaluate their own performance.

Conclusion

The study is to identify students' common pronunciation mistakes and problem areas in speaking to find ways to enhance their oral proficiency through the use of multimedia devices. In class, certain common spoken errors are highlighted and analyzed by the speakers themselves. This has increased students' awareness of their performance. Furthermore the teacher gives encouragement and support to the learners as positive feedback can strengthen their confidence in speaking English. Only through continuous efforts and practice in the language production process can L2 learners improve their oral fluency.

The proposed strategies are to enable students to get a more holistic perspective in English and communication. It is essential to make for them to understand that English is not a set of discrete skills confined to the classroom but an integral part to their success in their academic and later professional development. The ultimate goal is to empower students so that they can gain self-awareness to their English speech and improve their overall proficiency.

Some practical implications to course design include putting the learning tasks in context. Learners will be able to practise English in a more natural manner when the practice tasks are similar to the real world tasks. In addition, after teachers highlight a culturally specific list of errors that might affect communication, students will be more careful to avoid making these errors.

Furthermore, involving students in the analysis of their own speeches or performance can broaden their exposure to English in use. They will be more careful and consider the social and cultural context when choosing expressions to present their ideas. All in all, teachers' attitude and efforts in creating a favorable atmosphere in the classroom bears a major impact on the effective learning of a second language.

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