

HOW TO IMPROVE STUDENTS' ABILITY OF SPOKEN LANGUAGE

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HOW TO IMPROVE STUDENTS' ABILITY OF SPOKEN LANGUAGE

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Abstract

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The problems presented in this paper were how to improve student's ability of oral language and what's the relationship between learning style and improving speaking skills. Listening and speaking are the two most important skills in foreign language learning, but they are also the weakest skills in Chinese English learners. One of the reasons is that there are no suitable testing methods. We have to pay great attention to the reading, vocabulary, and structure according to the Chinese testing systems, but we ignore training for the applied ability of listening and speaking.

Learning styles are the general approaches e.g., global or analytic, auditory or visual that students use in acquiring a new language or in learning another subject. Learning strategies are defined as "specific actions, behaviors, steps, or techniques --such as seeking out conversation partners, or giving oneself encouragement to tackle a difficult language task -- used by students to enhance their own learning."

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Chapter One: Introduction

Language is the tool for expressing human thought and transmitting information. It is significant to exchange international learning techniques. Spoken language is one of the basic forms in language exchange. According to Chaney (1998), language speaking is “the process of building and sharing meaning through the use of verbal and non-verbal symbols, in a variety of contexts” (p. 13). Speaking is a vital part of foreign language learning and teaching. In spite of its importance, in the past few years, teaching speaking has been neglected and many language teachers have gone on to teach speaking just as a repetition of drills or memorization of dialogues (Kayi, 2006). Language teaching in China has emphasized grammar-translation rather than language use for real communication. Learners are given more chances to practice their reading and writing skills while chances for practicing listening and speaking skills are quite limited. Instead of regarding English as a tool for communication, learners try hard to cope with this difficult subject in order to pass examinations. As a result, learners usually get good grades in school but perform inappropriately in real-life situations. However, the modern society requires that the aim of teaching speaking should develop learners’ communicative ability, for only in that way can learners express themselves and learn how to comply with the social and cultural rules appropriate in a particular communicative circumstance.

Statement of the Problem

The problem to be addressed is “What is the relationship between learning style

and improving speaking skills?”

Definition of Terms

ESL. Abbreviation for the term English as a Second Language.

Spoken language. Richards and Schmidt (2002) defined spoken language as “language that has been spoken, as compared to written language” (p. 41).

Learning styles. Learning styles refer to the ways to approach the acquisition of new information. Each of us learns and processes information in our own special way.

Language speaking strategy. Language speaking strategy are the strategies for practicing speaking, for engaging in conversation, and for keeping in the conversation going when words or expressions are lacking (Cohen & Weaver, 2006).

Language input & output. (in language learning) Language which a learner hears or receives and from which he or she can learn. The language a learner produces is by analogy sometimes called output (Richards & Schmidt, 2002).

Delimitations of the Research

The research will be conducted through the Karmann Library at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville over eighty-eight (88) days. Primary searches will be conducted via the Internet through EBSCO with Academic Search Elite and Wilson Index as the primary sources. Key search topics include “speaking skills,” “Learning styles,” “Language speaking strategy,” and “Language input and output.”

Method of Approach

A brief review of literature on the studies of speaking skills and learning styles and learners will be conducted. The findings will be summarized and recommendations made.

Chapter Two: Review of Related Literature

This chapter aims to describe the characteristics of spoken language, spoken language in teaching, and the strategies for improving learners' spoken language.

Spoken Language

The characteristics of spoken language. In language acquisition and learning, there are four language skills commonly agreed on by linguists and language teachers: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Speaking is one of the productive skills. Human beings use it to communicate meaning and emotions, learn new things, and build up interpersonal relationships in a societal framework. Richards and Schmidt (2002) defined spoken language as “language that has been spoken, as compared to written language” (p. 41). Hughes (2002) stated that the features of spoken language comprise a structural level and a discourse, or global level. Structural level is related to linguistic structure, such as vocabulary and grammar, while discourse level is concerned with how spoken language operates and is influenced from the global perspective. Brown and Yule (1989) pointed out that regarding sentence structures, spoken language is much simpler than written language. In spoken language, sentences are usually shorter and possibly incomplete, and ungrammatical forms may often occur. They gave an example of an oral remark of an English native speaker, as shown in the following: “Well...one of our main jobs in the Botany is writing for the flora of Turkey...they haven't got the (uhuh) scientists to do it” (p. 5). There are two clauses in this sentence, of which the former, “one of...Turkey,” is the main clause, while the latter is a subordinate clause, which provides the cause of the event.

It would be necessary for a writer to add “because” to the beginning of the subordinate clause when putting it in written form, but in speaking this is optional. Compared with writing, subordinate structures are less frequently used in speaking, and thus the sentences are usually shorter and possibly incomplete, as in the example “...and one...one reads and the others” (p. 5) in Brown and Yule (1989). In terms of the vocabulary, Hughes (2002) stated that the words and phrases used in speaking are much simpler. Speakers tend not to use “big words” in conversation in order not to be pedantic. Even when scholars use more difficult types of words in writing, their diction in speech will be more straightforward than those in the academic papers that they write. Speakers choose simple words in order to save their burden of retrieval and also to ease the listeners’ burden of comprehension, thereby making the oral communication goes smoothly. In addition, speakers frequently use non-specific words to refer to the subject matters they talk about, for instance, “thing,” “stuff,” “get,” “guy,” “they,” etc., and this is quite in contrast to writers’ tendency to use exact and specific terms. Finally, ellipses such as “I’ll” and “they’ve” are used more frequently in spoken language. According to Zhao (2005), spoken language is mainly used to communicate, and it varies across settings (e.g., whether formal or informal), topics, regions (e.g., dialectal differences), and among participants (e.g., according to age, social status, and intimacy).

Spoken language in teaching. According to Nunan (2003), teaching speaking is to teach ESL/EFL learners to (1) produce the English speech sounds and sound patterns, (2) use word and sentence stress, intonation patterns and the rhythm of the

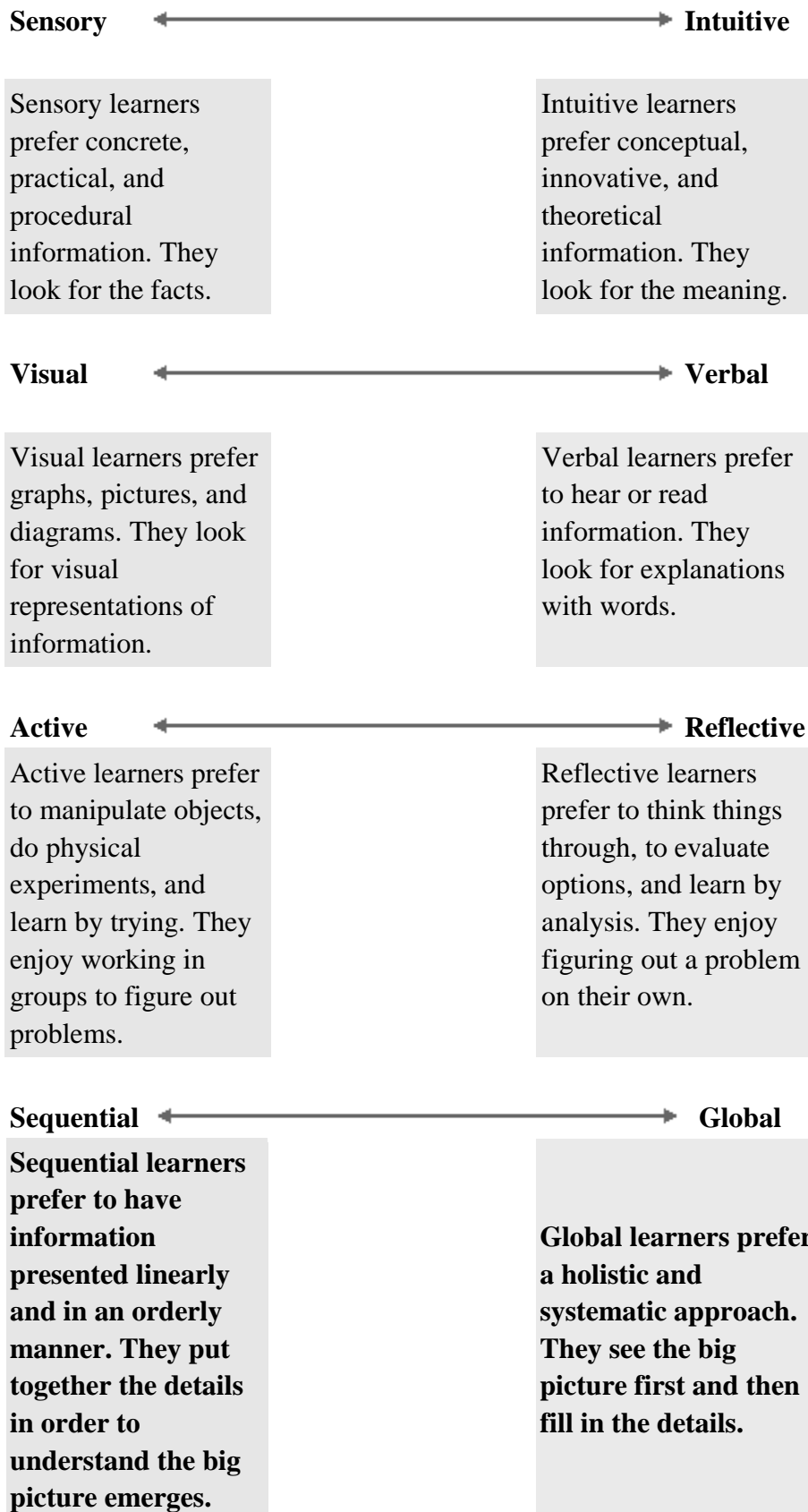
second language (i.e., select appropriate words and sentences according to the proper social setting, audience, situation and subject matter), (3) organize their thoughts in a meaningful and logical sequence, (4) use language as a means of expressing values and judgments, and (5) use the language quickly and confidently with few unnatural pauses, which is called as fluency.

Strategies for improving learners' spoken language

Discover learners' learning styles. Learning styles are an important factor influencing language learning. Keefe (1979, cited in Ellis, 1994) defined learning styles as “the characteristic cognitive, affective and physiological behaviors that serve as relatively stable indicators of how learners perceive, interact with and respond to the learning environment... Learning style is consistent way of functioning, that reflects underlying causes of behavior” (p. 499). Research on learning styles has attempted to develop a framework that can reveal learner's learning style. One of the most widely used models of learning styles is the Index of Learning Styles developed by Richard Felder and Linda Silverman in the late 1980s. The model of learning styles is widely adopted by the research from home and abroad. According to this model (which Felder revised in 2002) there are four dimensions of learning styles.

Figure 1

Learning Styles Index



Several researchers already noticed the relationship between learning styles and English learning. Brown (2002) states that successful language learners usually understand their own learning styles and preferences know which styles help them and use those styles, and know which styles might hurt them and change or avoid those styles. Reid (1987) found some significant cross-cultural differences in visual and auditory styles in one study of 1388 adult learners of ESL. By means of a self-reporting questionnaire, the subjects rated their own preferences. Reid found that Korean students were significantly more visually oriented than native English-speaking Americans; Japanese students were the least auditory students, significantly less auditory inclined than Chinese and Arabic students; ESL learners shown a general preference for kinesthetic and tactile learning styles, proficient level was not related with learning style preferences, which indicating the importance of recognizing learner's varying style preferences. Wang Churning (1992) made an investigation among 490 English majors with Reid's PLSP in 1988. He found that most learners preferred tactile learning style and group style was the least preference; language achievement was related to learning style. Stebbins (1995) designed a replication/expansion of Reid's work with 660 English as a second language (ESL) students in eight university-affiliated intensive English program and 121 native English speakers (NES) in various graduate and undergraduate major fields study at University of Wyoming. The result paralleled Reid's in several areas: Kinesthetic and tactile learning styles were strongly preferred by ESL students when compared to NES. Group learning was again chosen as the least proffered mode by most NESs and

ESL students; preferences for group learning mode were those students with low TOEFL scores. Lu Ting (2007) investigated 101 second-year non-English majors from North University of China. She found that the major learning styles of the participants are tactile and kinesthetic. Their minor styles are auditory and group. Both the awareness of learning styles and the diversity of learning styles are significantly correlated with students' language achievement.

Increase learners' language input. Krashen (1985) stated that teachers should provide true input to the second language acquisition. Most second language researchers also stated that acquisition of a second language depended not just on exposure to the language but also on access to L2 input that was modified in various ways to make it comprehensible. In other words, comprehensible input is a necessary condition for L2 acquisition (Schachter, 1983). According to Cummins (1988), four characteristics of optimal input for comprehension are summarized as follows: (1) Optimal input is comprehensible; that is, the message is understandable to the learner regardless of his or her level of L2 proficiency; (2) optimal input is interesting and/or relevant; (3) optimal input is not grammatically sequenced; and (4) optimal input must be sufficient quantity, although it is difficult to specify just how much is enough.

The research conducted by Forner (1979) showed that the contents of input were highly correlated with learners' communicative competence and actual communication. In addition, according to Wong (1983), the acquisition of a second language depended on the ways in which L2 input was modified to be comprehensible. He maintained that the language used in instruction had to be formed and chosen with

the learner's abilities in mind. Long (1983) suggested that the most important ways of making input comprehensible were (a) "a 'here and now' orientation in conversation and the use of linguistic and extralinguistic (contextual) information and general knowledge" (p. 210) and (b) modification of the interactional structure of the conversation by means of devices such as self- and other-repetition, confirmation and comprehension checks, and clarification requests. Thus, Long concluded that "a beginning learner, at least, must have comprehensible input if he or she is to acquire either a first or a second language" (p. 210). Wen (1998) points out that it is quite necessary for learners to have enough input in language learning. Lim (2003) stated that paying great attention to listening is a best way for all learners to master a foreign language. According to Yue (2005), in order to improve students' speaking ability, teachers should give students enough input, for example, listening by watching English TV program, videos, radio and songs. Through these ways, students can become familiar with people of different accents, different sexes, different ages, and different cultural backgrounds.

Develop learners' English speaking Strategies. Learning strategies are defined as "specific actions, behaviors, steps, or techniques --such as seeking out conversation partners, or giving oneself encouragement to tackle a difficult language task -- used by students to enhance their own learning." In article "Strategies in Learning and Using a Second Language," according to the different fields of language knowledge and skills, there are strategies for receptive skills of listening and reading, the productive skills of speaking and writing and the skill-related strategies such as

vocabulary learning. Cohen and Weaver (2006) listed five types of strategies: listening, reading, writing, speaking, and vocabulary and translation strategies, referring them as methods as learn language that are related to a specific language ability, among which speaking strategies are “strategies for practicing speaking, for engaging in conversation, and for keeping in the conversation going when words or expressions are lacking”. Alcaya, Lybeck, and Mougel (1994) classified speaking strategies into three categories: (1) Pre-speaking strategies: lower anxiety (e.g., relaxation techniques and positive self-talk), prepare and plan (e.g., identify the goal and purpose of the task, ask for clarification of the task purpose, predict what is going to happen, and rehearse); (2) Speaking strategies: feeling in control (e.g., concentrate on the task, use prepared materials, ask for clarification, delay speaking, think in the target language), be involved in the conversation (e.g., direct your thoughts away from the situation, listen to your conversation partner, cooperate to negotiate meaning and to complete the task, and take reasonable risks), and monitor your performance (e.g., monitor your speech by paying attention to your vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation while speaking, self-correct, activate your new vocabulary, and imitate the way native speakers talk); (3) Post-speaking strategies: evaluate performance (reward yourself with positive self-talk for completing the task, evaluate how well the activity was accomplished, identify the problem areas, and share with peers and instructors), and plan for future tasks (e.g., plan for how you will improve for the next time, look up vocabulary and grammar forms you had difficulty remembering, review the strategies checklist to see what you might have forgotten,

and ask for help or correction).

Promote learners' speaking in classroom. According to Yue (2005), teachers should take measures to promote students to speak in the language classroom. He lists the following six ways: (1) choose meaningful topics involving information gap; (2) give clear understandable instruction; (3) monitor pair/group work in a sensitive way; (4) encourage students to speak with consideration of introversion and extroversion; (5) lower anxiety, create a relaxed atmosphere; (6) train students to use communicative strategies.

According to Kayi (2006), there are some activities to promote speaking discussions: (1) role play (e.g., in role-play activities, the teacher gives information to the learners such as who they are and what they think or feel), (2) simulations (e.g., in simulations, students can bring items to the class to create a realistic language environment), (3) information gap (e.g., in this activity, students are supposed to be working in pairs. One student will have the information that other partner does not have and the partners will share their information), (4) brainstorming (e.g., on a given topic, let students produce ideas in a limited time), (5) storytelling (e.g., students can briefly summarize a tale or story they heard from somebody beforehand, or they may create their own stories to tell their classmates), (6) interviews (e.g., students can conduct interviews on selected topics with various people), (7) story completion (e.g., let students do free-speaking activity for which students sit in a circle), (8) reporting (e.g., before coming to class, students are asked to read a newspaper or magazine and, in class, they report to their friends what they find as the most interesting news).

Overcoming learners' affective shock. According to Krashen's (1985) affective filter hypothesis, successful second language acquisition depends on the learner's feelings. Negative attitudes (including a lack of motivation or self-confidence and anxiety) are said to act as a filter, preventing the learner from making use of input, and thus hindering success in language learning. One of the important things that teachers must do is to eliminate the learners' affective shock (Weiping Wen, 1998). Zhao (2005) stressed that most of Chinese students are afraid of speaking English. They worry about a lot of things such as losing face when they make mistakes, being laughed at by others and so on. The more they worry, the more language input filtration they have, and the worse they can speak. In order to improve the English level of Chinese students, the teachers should reform their teaching models, instruments and evaluating systems to help students to relieve their affective shock.

CHAPTER 3

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Speaking, as one of the basic language skills, plays a significant role in the process of language acquisition. Today along with Chinese opening and reform policy, more and more Chinese people have realized the importance of learning a foreign language (mainly English) both for the development of our economy and for each individual. To meet the needs of the rapid development, the investigation of the theories of language teaching has been made with each passing day, and the reform of the foreign language teaching has taken shape. However, oral English teaching and learning is universally considered the most difficult process in China, and bears the poorest result. Many students, after learning English for more than ten years, still cannot speak English fluently. Due to the limitation of speaking skills and the influence by Confucianism, some Chinese students are not active enough in expressing opinions in class; some even feel conservative and uncomfortable, and seldom ask questions that they do not understand (Brice & Roseberry-Mackibbin, 1999). In other words, “influenced by Confucianism, students tend to value quietness, and be less opinioned” (Lim, 2003, p.1). They have unexceptionally encountered such a common phenomenon of dumb English, and feel frustrated at the slow progress in their speaking. Therefore, it is essential to seek the effective measures that may improve ESL/EFL learners’ oral English development.

According to the literature review of the theories of spoken language acquisition, the author proposes the following teaching strategies that may help teachers to

improve their students' oral English acquisition.

First, teachers should create the input-output balanced classroom. It is generally thought that Chinese learning culture is input-dominated learning culture, which is characterized by imparting and cramming knowledge into students' brains in the classroom. In other words, linguistic knowledge becomes the core of teaching and in turn language skills are neglected. Learning autonomy does not defy classroom learning. Classroom activities should invoke learners' engagement in the learning process. Learners' motivation in English learning could also be promoted by introducing specific innovations into the language program and into the activities in the classroom. Students should have opportunities to apply what they have earned to practice communication, or it will frustrate students' initiative and restrain the development of students' potential and creativity. In addition, teachers should try their best to activate and motivate students to talk in class and give them more chances to talk, since both teachers and students have strong awareness of the importance of speaking. It is a good and useful way for students to be involved in student-student interaction in the classroom setting. This kind of interaction should be encouraged to provide students with opportunities to use English to interact with their partners and produce comprehensible output, which may make an important contribution to second language acquisition.

Second, teachers should pay more attention to the students' individual differences, and then, according to their differences, adopt the proper methods in their teaching.

With the acceptance of the "learner-centered" theory, more and more attention is

focused on learners. Students learn English with different leaning styles, learning strategies, affective states such as self-esteem, inhibition and motivation, and their learning efficiencies are different too. The teacher should study the individual differences of students in order to suit their different needs. Teachers should try to know about every student and be aware that they are individuals with distinct characteristics and personalities. The large size of the class often prevents every student from participating in the classroom activities, so a good teacher may make a great effort to involve everybody, despite the large number of students: He or she may encourage those who are timid and have a lack of self-confidence to voice their opinions.

Third, teachers should make more efforts in teaching speaking strategies as part of the teaching process in order to help their students become strategic and independent listeners. Generally speaking, teachers are not only language instructors but also diagnosticians, learner trainers, cooperators, researchers, and so on. To help students grow into an independent, responsible, strategic learner, teachers should first reinforce the student's awareness of strategy use. Strategy awareness refers to the learner's understanding of the general effectiveness of systematic strategy use, the understanding of his or her own strategy application--how he or she takes in new language material, decodes it, and transforms it to make it usable for actual communication (Oxford, Cohen 1992; Cohen 1998). Awareness is a crucial aspect of strategy instruction.

Finally, teachers should adopt communicative language teaching approaches in

their language classroom. Communicative language teaching approaches are effective in developing students' oral communicative competence. Nunan (1991) describes five features of communicative language teaching: (1) emphasizing learning to communicate through interaction in the target language, (2) introducing authentic texts into the learning situation, (3) providing opportunities for learners to focus, not only on language but also on the Learning Management process, (4) enhancing the learner's own personal experiences as important contributing elements to classroom learning, (5) linking classroom language learning with language activities outside the classroom. Through communicative language teaching approaches, such as task-based approach, language teachers can design speaking activities that maximize students' opportunity to speak.

Although this study has yielded valid findings concerning strategies of improving spoken language in Chinese English education, there is still much room for further research. First, studies relative to spoken English can be conducted to a certain group of students, such as students with different ages, genders, countries or other backgrounds. Second, future researches can focus on exploring what factors may affect learners' spoken proficiency. Knowing the factors that influence learners' spoken ability can help teachers to adopt more useful and efficient ways to improve their students' spoken language.

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