

Enhancing English Oral Proficiency of Chinese College Students: Curriculum Design Through the Communicative Approach Perspective

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Abstract: In the context of global communication and individual development, English has evolved into a universal lingua franca, playing a crucial role across various fields worldwide. Proficiency in spoken English is indispensable for the academic journey of Chinese college students. However, the current status of Chinese college students' spoken English proficiency reveals that there are still some aspects that need improvement. The communicative approach, recognized as an advanced language teaching methodology, proves to be instrumental in enhancing students' oral proficiency in English. This paper adopts the communicative approach perspective, employing a case study focused on a specific section of a Chinese students' English textbook. The study delves into the teaching path of "create-experience-practice-achieve". Building upon this teaching framework, a concrete teaching plan is designed, followed by an analysis and reflections, aiming to provide reflective insights as a practical reference for college-level oral English instruction. The ultimate goal is to contribute to the enhancement of college students' oral English proficiency.

Keywords: Communicative Approach, English Oral Ability, Chinese College Students, Case Study

1. Introduction

Maxim Gorky once articulated, "As a moving force, the beauty of language comes from the accuracy, clarity, and sound of words." In this context, English, as a global language, transcends being merely a subject for examination; it emerges as an indispensable tool for the future endeavors and lives of the youth generation. College students, as the linchpin of the nation's and society's forthcoming development, are mandated to possess a heightened standard of English oral communication skills.

The current scenario surrounding the English oral proficiency of Chinese college students is far from optimistic; it is fraught with challenges. The prolonged influence of test-oriented education has deprived many college students of opportunities to nurture their spoken English, leading to a persistently substandard level, colloquially labeled as "mute English" [1]. Notably, a considerable number of students learning English merely aspire to meet the requirements of exams such as CET4 and CET6, lacking intrinsic motivation for independent language acquisition [2]. Furthermore, issues

persist in the design of college English curricula and teaching materials. Addressing these concerns is imperative, as they pose potential barriers impeding students' progress in English communication.

In response to the escalating academic scrutiny of this predicament, the communicative approach emerges as a viable solution to rectify students' oral deficiencies, characterized by its student-centered teaching methodology. Employing this approach mandates that educators guide students towards proactive and frequent English verbalization in the classroom, offering necessary support. A fundamental teaching mode within communicative teaching is the "introduce-practice-produce" model, as proposed by Harmer. This model affords students authentic communicative experiences, fostering heightened interest and confidence in spoken English [3]. The communicative approach harnesses students' enthusiasm, effectively enhancing their speaking abilities.

This paper commences by reviewing previous studies on English oral proficiency and the communicative approach. Subsequently, it delves into a case study, utilizing a section from a Chinese students' oral English textbook to design and discuss the application of this methodology.

2. Literature Review

The literature review primarily centers on the English oral proficiency of Chinese college students and the communicative approach. The former aspect provides an in-depth exploration of relevant research conducted at both the student and teacher levels, while the latter delves into studies concerning the communicative approach, elucidating its nature, specific cases, and related aspects.

2.1. Research on Chinese College Students' English Oral Ability

The examination of Chinese college students' English oral ability encompasses an analysis of their learning status from the student and teacher perspectives. This section addresses the utilitarian and passive nature of current English learning among Chinese college students and proposes solutions from both student and teacher standpoints.

The prevailing situation in Chinese college students' English learning is characterized by a utilitarian and passive approach. The lack of a clear aim and orientation in English teaching has led to an incomplete and unsystematic teaching system [4], resulting in a weak English foundation among college students [5]. A significant number of students view English learning merely as a means to pass exams and attain high grades [6], diverting attention away from oral English proficiency [5]. The utilitarian focus of English learning is reflected in teaching materials designed primarily for exam success, particularly CET4 and CET6, significantly neglecting students' spoken English ability [7]. This narrow focus leads to a lack of a broad cultural perspective, contributing to challenges in accurately expressing opinions [6] and hindering oral English improvement [1]. Scholars propose targeted solutions, including the enhancement of listening skills as a crucial aspect of improving college students' English communicative competence [5]. Zhu suggests that students can enhance their listening skills through activities such as accumulating high-frequency listening vocabulary, watching movies, and listening to English songs [8]. Qin advocates for the use of American TV series as a means for college students to cultivate cross-cultural perspectives and bolster oral skills [9].

At the teacher level, Gu [1] highlights the impact of the language environment on college students' English proficiency. Factors such as familiar communication objects, small group interactions, and adequate preparation influence college students' willingness to communicate (WTC) in English oral settings [10]. Creating an all-English classroom environment enables students to immerse themselves in an English context, with teachers utilizing diverse and flexible teaching strategies to enhance the language environment. Classroom teaching strategies, as classified by Lazaraton [11], encompass group discussions, in-class presentations, and role-playing. Additionally, teachers can employ four communicative teaching methods, namely imitation, discussion, connection, and real-time translation

[12]. Following the establishment of a conducive language environment and effective teaching strategies, providing evaluations and feedback on students' English oral communication becomes essential.[13] Jia emphasizes the significant role of formative assessment in cultivating college students' oral English communicative competence [14]. Leveraging technology and digital media is indispensable, offering a wide platform for teachers and students to share learning information and resources while fostering timely communication.[13]

2.2. Communicative Approach

The communicative approach is a pedagogical method designed to foster students' communicative competence in authentic situations [15]. Its key attributes lie in its emphasis on situationality and motility, which collectively underpin the construction of the communicative teaching practice path, namely, "create-experience-practice-achieve" [15]. The three guiding principles of the communicative approach are the communicative principle, task principle, and meaning principle, all of which underscore the significance of activity in communicative teaching [15]. In practical application, educators can employ this approach by designing activities that necessitate students to use communicative language to accomplish specific tasks. For instance, students can engage in class discussions on topics pertinent to daily life [12]. The communicative approach proves beneficial in enabling students to identify their own challenges in English oral expression and subsequently formulate solutions. Furthermore, it contributes to enhancing the complexity, accuracy, and fluency of students' language expression [16]. Despite the heightened focus on improving students' English oral ability through the communicative approach, existing research exhibits some limitations. A substantial portion of current research on the communicative approach remains theoretical, lacking specific examples of teaching modes, as well as practical investigations and demonstrations. Given this backdrop, the imperative is to establish a clear and actionable practice path to address this research gap.

3. An Oral English Teaching Case Using the Communicative Approach

In this section, we present an oral English lesson tailored for Chinese college students, illustrating the application of the communicative approach. Specifically, we focus on Section 7: Echo from the English textbook "New Inside Out," a widely used resource among Chinese college students. This section delves into the critical topics of climate change and earth conservation. The teaching approach centers on communicative activities, complemented by multimedia tools, to encourage students to engage in authentic oral English communication and utilize language naturally.

3.1. Teaching Objectives

3.1.1. Language Knowledge

The primary goal of this lesson is for students to acquire proficiency in specific phrases related to the environment and endeavor to integrate them into practical communication. Emphasis is placed on accumulating commonly used expression patterns relevant to environmental topics, facilitating nuanced and appropriate language expression.

3.1.2. Language Ability

Through oral English learning, the aim is to enhance students' communicative skills by exposing them to oral expressions, thereby improving their English input. Increased exposure to English input is anticipated to culminate in enhanced speaking skills, a pivotal language ability within this course. Students are expected to engage in oral communication, articulating and elucidating their viewpoints

fluently. The overarching objective is to guide students beyond the confines of exam-oriented English education, fostering English proficiency characterized by articulate spoken language and practical application.

3.1.3. Environmental Awareness

Beyond language skills, students are encouraged to elevate their awareness of environmental issues through the exploration of this topic and class discussions. Actively proposing viable countermeasures for environmental protection becomes a pivotal component. The ultimate aim is to instill a sense of social responsibility among college students, motivating them to translate this awareness into tangible actions in their daily lives. The course aspires to contribute to the cultivation of students as individuals committed to environmental stewardship.

3.2. Key Teaching Points and Difficulties

Encountering nuanced topics such as the environment, a common challenge arises where students may struggle to articulate their viewpoints due to a lack of relevant phrases. Consequently, the key teaching point centers on broadening students' repertoire of phrases pertinent to environmental topics. The aim is to furnish students with a comprehensive lexicon that can enhance their proficiency in expressing thoughts in oral English. The primary teaching difficulty lies in assisting students in fluently and logically articulating their opinions, fostering effective communication with others. This involves navigating the intricacies of expressing complex ideas in a coherent manner, a skill crucial for successful oral communication in English. Addressing this challenge requires a strategic approach to guide students through the process of translating their thoughts into articulate and coherent spoken English.

3.3. Teaching Process

3.3.1. Warm-up

Show a two-minute video which calls for warning about environmental crisis. After watching the video, students need to share their thoughts with the whole class:

What do they see in the video?

What do they think about what they see in the video? Any reflections or comments?

In this process, teachers should encourage students to freely exchange, discuss and even debate each other's points of view.

3.3.2. Phrase Learning: Environmental Problems and Solutions

Following the warm-up, where students have already formed initial thoughts on the environmental crisis, shift focus to the learning of phrases related to environmental topics. Utilize phrases from the textbook's section on environmental problems and solutions, guiding students to construct comprehensive discussions using these phrases. Through effective task completion, students can master these phrases. Subsequently, offer feedback on students' oral output, allowing for peer evaluation and communication to discuss strengths and weaknesses. Through systematic learning, evaluation, and promotion, the language used in the communication process between teachers and students will become more complex and profound.

3.3.3. Pair Work: Dialogue Creation and Role Play in Context

Garbage sorting is currently a very fashionable and effective way to protect the environment. Many Chinese universities are implementing garbage sorting, so Chinese college students are familiar with it. Teachers can leverage the widespread practice of garbage sorting as a context for oral English application. Students work in pairs to create and perform dialogues in role play scenarios. One person acts as a garbage sorter and the other person acts as the citizen. The garbage sorter advises and disseminates knowledge on garbage sorting to a citizen who lacks awareness. Each group presents their role play dialogue in class, integrating new phrases acquired during the lesson.

For example (The italics are new phrases learned from this lesson):

student 1 (S1) acts as the garbage sorter, and student 2 (S2) acts as the citizen.

S1: Hello, here is the station of *garbage sorting*.

S2: Hi! I think *garbage sorting* is *environmentally friendly*! *Global warming* is an urgent problem that cannot be ignored. But how to sort these garbage?

S1: For example, these *plastic containers* you bring here are recyclable, so they can be put in the bin marked recyclable.

S2: Great! Are there other ways that can help protect the earth?

S1: Sure. Trying to use *renewable energy* is a good way. Also, using *public transports* instead of private cars when hanging out.

S2: Oh, it occurs to me that

3.3.4. Summary and Assignment

Conclude the lesson with student-led summarization of their conversations and reflections on the language learning process. Assign homework requiring students to work in pairs for a mock interview on the status of environmental protection and problem-solving. One student acts as the interviewer, while the other plays the role of a member of an environmental protection organization. This assignment aims to enhance students' oral English communication experience in various scenarios.

4. Evaluation and Analysis

The entire teaching process follows a progressive structure aligned with the communicative teaching path of the communicative approach: "create-experience-practice-achieve".[15]

4.1. First Stage: Create a Situation

Initiate the class with a relevant video, leveraging it as a medium for information communication. English videos, recognized as effective tools for language input, enhance students' listening skills, subsequently improving their verbal output [17]. The observation and reflection on the video stimulate students' interest in the topic, facilitating a swift transition into the classroom setting. The in-class discussion serves as an effective warm-up for English oral expression, fostering an atmosphere conducive to oral communication in English. Through this initial step, the teacher successfully establishes a situation for the students.

4.2. Second Stage: Experience the Situation with New-Learning Words:

Students delve into the situation by learning words related to the topic discussed in class, deepening their understanding. This stage lays a solid foundation for students to apply language in this specific context.

4.3. Third Stage: Practice in New Communicative Situations

Pair work, role play, and discussions, integral components of the communicative approach, are actively employed during teaching. This teaching style enables students to practice and enhance their English oral abilities in novel, context-specific situations, moving beyond mere technical exercises. The communicative approach proves effective in enabling students to absorb and apply their learnings from class.

4.4. Fourth Stage: Achieve the Teaching Goal by Assigning Homework

The communicative approach prioritizes fluency and expression over the meticulous accuracy of grammar. To address this, teachers may record class sessions or student presentations for subsequent self-evaluation of grammar accuracy. This reflective practice aids students in gauging their language learning progress. Additionally, assigning practical tasks, such as group mock interviews and presentations, serves as a means to assess students' learning outcomes effectively. These tasks not only provide a comprehensive evaluation of their language proficiency but also reinforce the practical application of learned skills in real-world scenarios.

5. Conclusion

This paper delves into the communicative approach, examining its pivotal role in oral English teaching. Through an exploration of research on Chinese college students' English abilities from both teacher and student perspectives, it becomes evident that students' oral proficiency falls short, necessitating the targeted application of the communicative approach for improvement. However, existing studies lack a comprehensive exploration of the concrete practical modalities inherent in the communicative approach. In response to this gap, the paper employs the communicative approach as a foundation, utilizing oral English teaching materials commonly used by Chinese college students. The resultant teaching design, along with suggestions for evaluation and reflection, aims to bridge the existing void in research. By providing examples of the communicative approach in action, this paper furnishes teachers with practical insights and offers students guidance on enhancing their oral English communication skills. Ultimately, it serves as a valuable reference for elevating the quality and efficiency of college oral English courses, contributing to the ongoing enhancement of English language education.

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