

The Application of PBL Group Learning Mode in Oral English Classes of Chinese Universities

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Abstract: The usage of PBL is one of the heated topics in the education area. The present paper reviews the application of PBL group learning mode for improving the oral competence of English-majored students in China. After reviewing previous literature, this paper found that speaking classes of English majors, in current Chinese higher education, have long been characterized by vague teaching content, poor classroom quality and weak student learning outcomes. Besides, the group learning model under the PBL teaching method has great importance for the efficient development of the speaking classroom. However, there are still scant studies in the analysis and construction of the group learning model for the speaking classes of the English major, which is a research gap. Through reviewing a large amount of literature, conducting in-depth analysis and summarizing, the paper explores the application of the PBL group learning model in the speaking classes. The study shows that this learning model can avoid the drawbacks of the traditional speaking classroom, substantially improve students' speaking ability, promote the quality of teaching and put forward higher teaching requirements for teachers. Therefore, the effective construction of the PBL group learning model is essential for speaking learning in current Chinese higher education.

Keywords: PBL, Group learning model, English major, Students' problems, Teachers' roles.

1. Introduction

In current higher education, English exams focus on reading and writing skills, and there is almost no test requirement for speaking skills. Due to the test-taking mentality, students generally think that English speaking courses are optional [1]. Most English majors report that the speaking classes they receive are still teacher-led and focus on grammar and phonetics, with little application to practice. PBL is an emerging teaching model that has been utilized more often in foreign universities, with better results in practice. In contrast, in China, the PBL teaching method is widely used but has not gained the anticipated effect. This paper aims to investigate the application of the PBL group learning model in the English-speaking classes of Chinese universities with a large amount of literature

consulted to analyze and summarize the relevant contents. After comparing the teaching characteristics of the traditional teaching mode and the PBL teaching mode, this paper analyzes the problems that students may have in group learning and suggest methods that teachers can use in classes to improve the quality of the PBL group learning mode in the English major speaking classes in Chinese universities, so as to enhance students' interest in speaking learning and improve their speaking practice skills in a substantive way.

2. The Analysis of Speaking Class

2.1. Analysis of English Major Speaking Classes

Traditional test-based education places a high value on pronunciation and syntactic rules in English [2]. In a traditional speaking class, the teacher sets up a real-life meaningless situation for students to prepare a presentation to perform individually. In this type of class, students treat speaking practice as a task and do not improve their speaking skills substantially.

In response to social demands, many universities are gradually paying more attention to speaking, but there are still shortcomings: 1) less class time is arranged for speaking courses; 2) teaching facilities are not advanced enough; 3) there is a lack of suitable speaking materials. Teachers usually use multi-media and social hot spots to raise students' interests and motivate them in the speaking classes. However, students focus more on the videos or the hot topics themselves rather than the speaking practice.

Most universities choose to recruit foreign teachers to teach speaking, but the effect is not significant. Firstly, most foreign teachers are non-professional teachers with a lack of teaching experience. Secondly, many foreign teachers do not use teaching materials in their classes, and their classes cannot provide students with purposeful and systematic learning. Thirdly, some foreign teachers do not understand Chinese culture and Chinese thinking patterns. Thus, there is a large language barrier and cultural barrier to communicating with students [2]. In this context, Chinese universities begin to use the PBL teaching model in their English-speaking classes.

2.2. The Use of PBL in the Speaking Class

PBL, an emerging teaching model, is gradually being used widely in the Chinese university-speaking class. Speaking Teaching in this model is student-centered and mainly adopts group cooperative learning, which reflects the main position of students in learning.

The PBL design for teaching spoken English includes four stages: 1) pre-class preparation; 2) while-class teaching; 3) post-class summary and extension; 4) assessment and evaluation [3]. The teacher assigns learning tasks and explains them, and then carries out the necessary teaching of the relevant knowledge. Students form their study groups and discuss the assignment of their tasks as well as work together to develop a study plan. Then, students analyze and integrate the information according to the plan. Finally, they summarize and produce the results. Students work in groups to present their results. The teacher will review the results one by one. The teacher makes an overall assessment of the students' performance, reinforces the knowledge mentioned by the students and adds knowledge not covered by the students. Students reflect on their performance during the group work. Assessment and evaluation can include a combination of teacher self-assessment, student self-assessment, intra-group mutual assessment, inter-group assessment and questionnaires [3].

PBL is not only effective in improving students' English oral expression, teamwork and critical thinking skills, but also in improving teachers' teaching skills [3]. In order to better use the PBL teaching model in teaching, teachers should be aware of the relevant elements of the PBL teaching model.

2.3. The Development and Reflection of PBL Teaching Methods

PBL is a systematic teaching method that is student-centered, teacher-guided, project-based, and task-driven, with vocational competence training as the goal and social needs as the background [4].

In 1916, Dewey first proposed the word Problem-Based Learning, arguing that students need to learn to face problems they encounter in the real world and grow in the process of learning how to solve problems effectively [5]. Howard, a professor of neurology in the United States, pioneered the PBL teaching model at McMaster University in Canada in 1969 [6]. With the development of PBL, it uses real-life scenarios as learning interludes to help students gain background concepts that are easily applied with knowledge, integrating the problem-solving process with the learning process as a way to improve self-directed learning and problem-solving skills. One of the best features is group work. Unlike traditional teaching models, the role of a teacher in PBL is no longer the authority in the class, and students are no longer passive recipients of knowledge. Students become the protagonists of their own learning, taking the responsibility for learning and the initiative to explore the learning tasks. In the process, students gain insight into the group work model and work with group members to produce learning outcomes. In the process of students' learning, the teachers change their roles from that of one-way lectures to that of facilitators, supervisors, etc.

The PBL teaching method aims to attract students' attention, increase their interest in learning, develop the ability to think hard in the learning process and achieve the effect of independent learning, focusing on developing students' 5C skills: Complex Problem Solving, Critical Thinking, Collaboration, Communication, and Creativity [7]. Whether teachers can really develop these skills in their students depends on their ability to use PBL effectively and how they structure their group teaching.

3. Group Learning Model under PBL Teaching Method

3.1. Overview of the Group Learning Model

3.1.1. The Purpose of Group Work

A group learning model is a form of teaching organization based on cooperative groups. It makes use of the links between dynamic factors in teaching and learning, plays the positive function of collective cooperation, and achieves teaching objectives together.

In traditional group learning, teachers rigidly assign homework according to the syllabus, and students are grouped randomly to carry out learning activities with the aim of finishing tasks or achieving high group grades. In this case, most students complete fewer tasks, spend less time, and do not take responsibility. Although the group members interact with each other, the knowledge, to a large extent, is acquired on the basis of independent learning. And the goals of the PBL group learning model are threefold: First, it can facilitate effective learning. Students continue to discover new problems, carry out in-depth analyses and even draw conclusions that are different from their predecessors, which are in a process of comprehensive learning and re-creation of existing knowledge. Second, it can develop the attitudes and skills that will foster self-directed lifelong learners. In this process, the teacher acts as a mere facilitator, and students, as subjects of collaborative learning, need to think independently, and constantly stimulate their potential. The last one is to improve students' ability of collaborative inquiry [8].

In short, group learning under traditional education is more of a mechanical means of cooperation for students to improve the speed of homework completion, while group learning under PBL teaching is an effective form of cooperation for students to explore knowledge in depth.

3.1.2. Advantages of Group Work

At first, the speaking context set up in the PBL group model is more authentic, creating a real language environment for discussion among members, with increasing more independent oral communication time [9]. And though this context can be applied to different learning styles, students are able to exercise their autonomy in different ways to achieve the best effect of input and output. In addition, this learning group can enhance students' learning initiative and promote their participation in the whole process, which effectively avoids the drawbacks of the traditional model---the teacher over-directs or group cooperation easily turns into a one-person demonstration. Furthermore, the PBL group model focuses on the comprehensive application of the knowledge learned, helping students to make connections between existence and unknown to get a spiral effect. Finally, it is conducive to fostering team spirit and examining students' overall abilities. As an interdependent whole, students form a strong bond with their peers so that they will take the initiative to assist others in facing difficulties and share responsibilities together.

3.2. The Construction of the Group Learning Model

Holen has referred to a concept: group dynamics [8]. A definition from the American psychiatric glossary explains it as the interactions and interrelationship among members in a group and between members and facilitators. That means the activities in the process of group work. In a classroom setting, the successful operation of this model depends on the conscious and systematic activity of the group members and their facilitator (the teacher). Two factors are important in determining group dynamics: one is the group's capacity to accommodate spontaneity, and the other one is its tolerance for disarray and the unexpected [8].

The group learning model in traditional education focuses on the assignment of tasks and cooperation. The teacher is less involved in the whole process of group formation or even lets students pair up into teams. In this situation, students often seek out nearby peers or form groups according to their personal closeness, which not only results in unevenness of members' levels but also in two extremes: In the former case, although the group can function in an orderly and predictable manner, there is little understanding between members, which limits individual freedom of expression and low flexibility. In the latter case, the group is flexible, open, and adaptable, but tolerant of all kinds of bad behaviors and poorly regulated. These groups, which have no established principles, are not effective in maximizing the benefit of cooperative learning.

In the PBL model of group learning, the establishment of a group that maximizes effectiveness is a crucial part of the process. Hereby the 'establishment' involves two aspects: a reasonable mix of group members and the development of the best way for a group to operate. The teacher, as a facilitator, plays a key role in this segment. On the one hand, the teacher needs to have a general understanding of the students' personal traits, interests, learning goals and speaking levels so as to assess the differences between the group members, taking into account the influencing factors and principles of the group formation. Facilitators should not only respect the students' willingness but also match them reasonably [11]. On the other hand, the process of group formation occurs by default. During this formative stage, group members unconsciously establish implicit rules about who will dominate, who will be submissive, and who will play certain roles [8]. Therefore, teachers should facilitate the construction of certain rules that highlight the norms of behavior that group members need to follow and the core values of an effective learning group, and guide members to balance differences so that they can develop in the best way [10]. Under this circumstance, the more team members get to know each other informally at the beginning, the more likely the group is to be willing to change at a later stage. Teachers also need to guide the group to talk about interests, practical experience and future ambitions, etc.

4. Anatomy of Problems Students Have in Group Learning

4.1. Finding and Memorizing Answers Online

Students' strong utilitarianism leads them to search for answers to oral questions on the Internet and recite them so that they can take the training process imperturbably and score high marks. This rote memorization can mislead teachers in objectively judging students' speaking ability, resulting in low validity of the test. Meanwhile, it also shows the idea that students are confined to practicing for the sake of the speaking test rather than having a genuine desire to improve their oral English. Memorizing answers also undermines students' autonomy and makes the questions less thought-provoking.

4.2. Some Students Are Still Not very Motivated During the Group Discussion

A good cooperative teaching model should be one in which students are brave enough to engage in collaboration in the class and form a mechanism for mutual help within the group [12]. However, despite being in the group learning mode of PBL, there are still some students who are very unmotivated, and such students show an attitude of neither listening nor sharing. This situation stems from a weakness in students' personalities [13]. Indeed, there are some students who are introverted. They may perform excellently at English speaking, but it is their personality that prevents them from talking to other people. Then it may result in other students with poor oral English in the group not getting good advice on improving their oral English.

4.3. Low Oral Expression Ability

When some students no longer memorize answers and try to speak according to their own thoughts, this paper will find that many students have poor oral expression ability:

First of all, the lack of English vocabulary reserves will make it difficult for students to express their ideas smoothly and fluently [14]. In time-limited conversations, many students are unable to quickly reflect on the corresponding words or phrases especially proper nouns in the process of language transformation, which will cause a waste of time. This also reflects their lack of English vocabulary accumulation in ordinary times.

The second is the problem of inaccurate pronunciation of words and the typical manifestations are: incorrect placement of stress and incorrect pronunciation of letters [15]. When talking with foreigners, students' wrong pronunciation of words will cause foreigners' confusion in understanding [15]. For example, in the word 'obstacle' the stress is on the first letter 'o', while some students tend to put the stress on the syllable 'ta'; and in the word 'establishment', the letter 'e' is pronounced as '/ɪ/', while some students pronounce it as '/e/'.

Grammar problems are common among students [16]. Some students use prepositions incorrectly when expressing some fixed phrases. Some are not good at using advanced sentence patterns, such as independent nominative structures, adverbial clauses and attributive clauses, because they do not fully grasp the knowledge of various types of English sentences. These grammatical problems can account for students' inability to score high marks.

4.4. Students' Lack of Experiences Relevant to Some Topics

Nowadays, the topics for speaking practice are new and tend to be more flexible. Due to differences in lifestyle, students belonging to 'homebodies' lack experiences of outdoor travel, have never been to cities outside of their home town and have never visited famous sites, making this topic extremely confusing for them. Recently there have been some speaking topics about people including

"interesting foreigners" and "famous athletes", but some students don't usually follow various groups of people and therefore do not know anything about their qualities, events etc. In the absence of experiences related to the above-mentioned topics, students will not be able to describe them because they know too little about them.

5. Teachers' Roles under Group Learning Mode

5.1. The Designer of Class Activities

The extent to which the teacher is in control of the speaking class can, to a certain degree, determine the effectiveness of the PBL mode. In a traditional speaking class, the teacher follows a corresponding teaching schedule for mechanized teaching, which does not involve other subjects. Therefore, the author divides speaking class activities under PBL method into three categories: question design, task arrangement, and achievement presentation.

5.1.1. Question Design

Qi and other scholars have suggested that teachers should adopt a problem-centered approach, tailored to the actual level of students and combined with students' practical application so that students can effectively and efficiently acquire knowledge [17]. In other words, teachers should design reasonable topics that are based on students' actual lives, take into account the prior knowledge and cognition of group members, and introduce topics that are close to everyday life in order to reduce students' unfamiliarity with the topic and allow them to mobilize their life experiences. As a result, students with a wide range of knowledge are more responsive, have a higher degree of topic extension and take less time to complete the task in the corresponding context [18]. The teacher should try to stimulate small groups of students to think together and come up with new speaking topics, rather than limiting them to the course material.

Teachers can apply the perspectives of different subjects to English in question design. For example, teachers can assign tasks or related topics before class (e.g., human and nature, language and literature, law and morality), so that students can restore oral communication in real scenes.

5.1.2. Task Arrangement

When teachers arrange tasks, they should grasp the key content and avoid setting too many and too detailed learning goals, which will lead to students being unable to achieve the goals within the specified time [17]. It should be pointed out that in the process of students' learning, teachers should avoid the two situations of over-guidance and no guidance to students. Over-instruction will make the group of students lose their autonomy in learning. If the group lacks the teacher's guidance, it may make the students question the need to learn. In both cases, learning objectives are affected.

Meanwhile, teachers should consider the practicality and corresponding cost of the course. In terms of teachers' cost, time, and energy, the teaching-based method has the lowest cost, the lowest requirements for course design, and does not need special teaching skills and equipment. Problem-based and project-oriented learning requires complex problem simulation for teaching evaluation, and requires a certain amount of time and energy to prepare. The presentation of tasks must think the course objectives, the selection of problems, the arrangement of time and the development of resources. This method requires teachers to have higher teaching skills [19].

5.1.3. Achievement Display and Assessment

The achievement display refers to the construction of the topic scene. After a period of adaptation to the group learning mode and a period of group oral communication and discussion, it is necessary for

each group to have an achievement display. The teacher asks each group to show their oral achievements by simulating the real scene of the topic. Students can choose one of all reasonable topics to show their achievements. After the presentation of each group, the teacher should let the groups exchange their feelings and suggestions for improving deficiencies so as to improve the learning results [17].

As for the achievement assessment, teachers should formulate a comprehensive scoring system in advance, and evaluate the students' achievements with it, which should include: student's body language, pronunciation and intonation, words and sentences, and group members' cooperation.

5.2. The Solver of Students' Problems in Group Learning in Section 4

Admittedly, university is an important base for cultivating high-quality English communicative talents, and the importance of college Oral English teaching is self-evident [20]. Therefore, if teachers want to give full play to their role as a guidance, they should first attach great importance to the teaching of oral English.

5.2.1. Clarifying the Purpose of Oral English Teaching

Teachers should abandon the traditional exam-oriented education model, and make it clear that oral English teaching is mainly to improve students' oral English ability. The examination results can only prove the students' temporary ability. Oral English teaching for the purpose of dealing with examinations will make students focus on the benefits of achieving good results while ignoring the real improvement of their oral English ability. Teachers can not only play foreign movies and TV plays in class, so that students can learn oral English in a good language environment, then students' enthusiasm for learning can be high and their learning interest can be cultivated, and then they will follow the characters to read English, at the same time with appropriate pronunciation and intonation [21]. This helps them learn more new, idiomatic phrases and sentences.

5.2.2. Follow the Principle of Complementary Personality

The so-called personality complementarity is the personality complementarity between people, with one person's character affecting that of person. As an organizer of the learning groups, the teacher needs to know the personality of each student, and then match the outgoing and communicative students with the introverted and quiet students. On the basis of reasonable allocation of group students, teachers should guide students with strong enthusiasm to drive the students with weak enthusiasm. For example, students with strong enthusiasm can take the initiative to ask some questions to students who are not active: how their oral English levels are, how to practice oral English and so on in order to improve the familiarity between group members, so as to enhance the communication between group members. The interaction between people in terms of personality is subtle, with the help of students with strong enthusiasm, students with weak enthusiasm will become actively involved in the discussion.

5.2.3. Following the Principle of Complementary Ability, Joining the Discussion of Each Group, Listening to Students' Oral Expression

The principle of competence complementarity requires the teacher to identify the position of every student in the class, understand the oral level of each student, and then match the students with the strong oral ability and the students with poor oral ability so that group members can learn from each other and rely on each other appropriately.

Secondly, teachers should pay attention to the problems exposed by students in oral expression when they go deep into the group discussion. When students make mistakes in word pronunciation or grammar, they should point out and repeatedly emphasize the correct word pronunciation and grammar to the students, and then let the students read it several times to keep it in mind. As grammatical errors are so common in students' oral learning, it is necessary for teachers to take the time to systematically explain and summarize grammatical knowledge for students. Both vocabulary and syntax belong to grammar. To impart grammar knowledge comprehensively, teachers should give overall consideration to the teaching of both vocabulary and syntax [22]. In terms of vocabulary, teachers should tend to sort out new English words, their applicable situations, and fixed collocation related to them, such as prepositional phrases and proper nouns. In respect of syntax, teachers should help students to sort out the types and structures of various English sentences.

5.2.4. Cultivating Students' Good Psychological Quality

To cultivate students' good psychological quality is to relieve students' nervous anxiety in oral training. Anxiety is one of the obstacles to students' normal oral performance. Most students will have symptoms of anxiety in oral expression. According to the research, most students' oral anxiety is caused by the fear of test scores. Some English majors worry about test scores because their oral English level is low and they lack confidence in themselves. In traditional college English classes, students' English score mainly depends on summative evaluation, that is, the results achieved by students after the completion of teaching activities [23]. In order to enhance students' oral confidence and help them adjust their anxiety, teachers need to combine summative evaluation and formative evaluation organically and increase the proportion of ordinary scores in the final score. The implication is to pay more attention to process assessment and reduce students' fear of summative evaluation. The evaluation criteria should include students' participation in group interaction and groups' achievement presentation.

5.2.5. Allow Students to Share Their Experiences and Ideas on Reasonable Topics

When students have a discussion on the topic, the teacher should allow students to share their personal experiences as specific as possible, and let them learn from each other's views on certain events. As students come into contact with more and more new topics, they will subconsciously think and look for English expressions related to these new topics. For example, when students talk about "mobile phone software", they will think of some phrases and words such as "swiping mobile phone" and "Tik-Tok", which is beneficial to enrich students' extra-curricular knowledge.

6. Conclusion

In summary, through the study of universities' oral English classes under the PBL group learning mode, this paper concludes that the learning mode can avoid the disadvantages of traditional oral English classes, thereby improving the quality of courses and students' oral English level effectively. Therefore, universities should pay attention to the combination of PBL group learning mode and oral English class, and teachers should give full play to their own roles in enhancing students' oral English ability. Thus, this paper can provide references for the application of PBL teaching mode in universities and teachers' oral English teaching requirements, so as to facilitate the efficient conducting of oral English class, help English-major students consolidate their oral English foundation, to practice and improve themselves in oral English. Through in-depth study of PBL group learning mode and improvement of teachers' teaching methods, it is believed that PBL teaching mode can be popularized in Chinese universities in the future, and the oral English problems faced by English-major students can be reduced.

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