

Enhancing College Students' Speaking Under the Context of Multimodality

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Abstract

How a teacher presents information and motivates students to talk in English can seriously decide the efficiency of an English class; therefore, teachers need to explore sufficient approaches to stimulate students to talk. Coaching students to be involved in the process of communication can greatly satisfy individualized English learning. The author here will analyze teaching speaking based on multimodality and put forward some suggestions for English learners and teachers.

Keywords: College students; Speaking; Multimodality.



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1. Introduction

With high frequencies of international communications, the importance of speaking obviously has caught the attention of English teaching, especially urgent and necessary to prepare students with basic speaking skills in college English classes. *The Requirement of College English Teaching* (Higher Education Department of the Ministry of Education, 2007) makes that “to foster students’ overall ability, especially speaking and listening, ensuring them to communicate naturally and successfully both in spoken and written form”. It calls for English teaching to focus on cultivating the competence of communicating freely and efficiently in the process of English learning class (Halliday, 2000); while the reality is still a big challenge to implement these principles, because the English classes are still occupied with rote-learning, lectures, and passive role of students. These boring models of English teaching can never benefit the education of qualified English speakers.

Along the development of new technology, English teaching featuring teachers talking and lectures will barely meet the requirements of various communications. In this situation, multimodality-based teaching comes into being and offers teachers and learners opportunities to construct a context for English learning to take place in, which will greatly promote mutual understandings (Li and Yin, 2012).

2. Multimodality

In 1990s, educators all over the world had probed into the application of multimodality. R.Barthes was one the first ones to analyze it and he published one paper elaborating on the interactions between images and language; Kress and Van Leeuwen (2001) put that other signs except for words can be used in defining senses, like image, sound, colors, animated pictures, etc. Modality refers to approaches, media, including various semiotics like speaking, high technology, images, colors, and music etc., while these vehicles can be employed simultaneously in a logical way to enhance communication or learning, and it is the concept of multimodality. Li (2012) defines that one text, embodied in more than one sign and expression with two or more senses, can be divided into one approach or two with its complete meaning clearly disclosed; while Gu (2007) takes that modality is a kind of interaction between human beings, and the external environment (people, machinery, objects and animals, etc.) with senses like sight, smell, touch, hearing and taste (Kress and Van, 1996). Numerous studies about the application of multimodality have proved that it is efficient and interest-arousing in motivating students to communicate more in English class. Therefore, learning based on multimodality will greatly change the mechanical and tedious language teaching, learning can be fun with different language learners (O’Halloran, 2008). Based on tons of studies, the author here especially summarizes the prevailing problems in speaking class in Chinese universities and concludes some useful suggestions here.

3. Problems in Teaching Speaking

3.1. Overcrowded Class

It is a common phenomenon to have English class with a large number of students in China, and the seat will be 45-90 on average. This is hard for teachers to carry out activities and pay attention to individual’s performance. Besides from the issue of disorder and discipline in the big class, to teachers in the college, some are busy with the overloaded teaching tasks, English class will be worse if a teacher is one accustomed to old style of lectures to an overcrowded class. They do not have the awareness and time to infill new ideas and multimodal stimulus into the class, and the students always have a struggling time in learning English, because there are endless exercises and lectures from the teacher. Worse still, students with poor meta-cognitive competence will go awry in this tedious class, and they will play cellphones or wander.

3.2. Influence from Learning Habits in High School

In the high school, students have to take the College Entrance Exam, and they need to do a lot of exercise silently, for they have to memorize the words and practice the grammars and some thinking processing drills. They have been used to this kind of learning, though listening is required, just a small part in the exam, and draw little attention. On the other hand, they have the habit of receiving stacks of assignments without knowing whether they need to do the mechanical exercises or not. In this way, they do not know how to search appealing ways of language learning, trapped in the packs of written exercise. These factors directly lead to their passive state of learning, without knowing that they can take up the responsibility to find a personal way to make English learning fun through watching video, drawing, listening, speaking, etc.

3.3. Unbalanced Distribution of Learning Resources

One common phenomenon is that some students are nervous about that their pronunciation sounds strange and some even can not make a whole complete sentence. Apart from the personal habits of learning, another factor lies in that those students failed to resort to standard pronunciation and tactful teachers with flexible and efficient teaching experience. Students need a mentor to guide them to the right resources of English learning and they need a competent teacher to tell them how to learn easily and in a relaxed way. While it is unavoidable students from small towns or the remote areas lack for the superior materials and teaching faculties around them, which leads to their poor performance in speaking. These students choose to sit and watch silently when there is an activity of speaking, because they do not dare to voicing out their ideas.

4. Principles

It is easy for a teacher to introduce pictures and sounds into the English class, but the multimodality-based teaching will not be that easy: to stack different materials and senses together; instead, a good class of modality-based teaching is supposed to be in an organized way considering various rules:

4.1. Focusing on the Goal of the Teaching Contents

Modality does not mean it is good looking to insert a picture into the PPT; a good teacher will consider what will be the best combination of senses to make students comprehend the core idea and how to help them understand the learning contents. Using pictures sounds and using these materials efficiently are absolutely two things to a class! Before deciding what materials can be employed, the teacher should seriously think about the goal of that class, and the main purpose is not to draw attention to the additional stuff, but how to assist and strengthen students' comprehension through these approaches. Multimodality-based approaches can be a final goal as well can be a process to involve students to think and talk from various perspectives.

4.2. Students-Centered View

To ensure the efficiency of the class, and push students to speak, the teachers are supposed to give chances of discussion and talking to students first. Traditionally, teacher stands in the front of the classroom, and students are listening and taking notes, receiving knowledge but not seriously digesting. Teachers now in a multimodality classroom is not a detector, instead, an organizer of the class discussion, a helper when students need someone to explain from different angles of the an issue in the form of graphs, and other ways of presentation, a partner with the silent learners, an observer when the students need someone to monitor their presentation, a discipline manager when the students are busy with analyzing jobs, etc. All these above imply that we teachers need to think for the students and encourage them to demonstrate and explore by themselves in an English class with their favorite way of learning.

5. Suggested Approaches to Promoting Speaking

Gu (2007) defines the process of learning based on multimodality in three steps: learners extract information from the outside world. And they employ all senses to relate to materials; digesting and constructing meanings in their mind by generating connections with materials; mastering practicing skills through activities (Mehrabian and Susan, 1967), in which process learners obtains not only the written form information but nonverbal ways of communication. According to him, teachers need to provide chances for students to obtain materials and chances to practice in a safe way. And the author here tries to explore some suggestions to stimulate students to speak.

5.1. Offering Sufficient Input

At the beginning of English class, teachers can observe the problems of speaking, and they should set a plan to help students. Generally, they can encourage students to watch some short videos about pronunciations and some of the techniques in reading. According to the authors experience, many Chinese students are unable to distinguish between /v/and/w/, /i:/and/i/, /a/and/ae/, /e/and/ei/, so teachers had better show some pictures to students, at the same time check their way of pronunciation. Besides, there are some resources on *English Dub*, WeChat, the websites, and these are attainable to most students. The only problem is that they do not know where to start though they want to improve their English speaking. At the same time, TED speech online and some interesting videos online can give students' ways to imitate in sense groups, and pick some basic expressions to communicate and this way can also provide them with techniques of nonverbal communications such as facial expressions, gestures, tones etc.

5.2. Various Activities as Stimulus

Multimedia is just one way of realizing multimodality-based teaching in English class and it is not possible for us to just present videos to students, we can also encourage them to think and try to speak. Here, do not put too much pressure on them, and just wait and allow some slow learners to observe and imitate peers. When having listening class, the authors first handle the words in forms of explanations and association with students, then encourage them to listen and finish the tasks in the exercise, and then encourage them to read the script and then focus on some important lines so that they can imitate and summarize the useful tips of communication. In the process of teaching *Tony Trivisono's American Dream*, the author uses these steps to help students to talk: first, dealing with some key words with pictures; then, asking students to make sentences with the words with some cued pictures with different topics; thirdly, guiding students to read the first paragraph and find out the basic information about Tony; forth, listing the words in a mind map, and ask them to pretend that they were Tony to make a self-introduction of himself; fifth, reading paragraph 1-10, ticking out how many times of the broken English "I mow your lawn", and analyze the plan, the implied meaning and the correct expression of the sentence; lastly, listening to the recording, and inviting students to act the part out in groups of three. In this process, teacher uses pictures, listening, mind-map, group work, words and discussions, which are of a multimodal approach to encourage students to learn and talk in a logic way.

5.3. Guidance from Teachers and Peers

When the freshmen come into the college English class, they are excited but expecting for new modes of English learning. Therefore, teachers are responsible for guiding them to explore new ways of learning, and it starts from the learning ideals: first, they are supposed to take up responsibility of practicing English after class due to the limited class hour a week, and they need to speak out what they have learned in class to consolidate and reflect; secondly, teachers can introduce *fif*, *pigai*, and more useful online resources for students so that they will know where to find the information: making a plan with a tiny goal and getting the strategies of memorizing words like: following some public accounts about words memorizing, where students can find the collocations and example sentences on it; besides, teachers can set a group, and share one or two sentences in it at certain time every day, encouraging them to imitate the lines and check every day. These are policies from teachers, with the purpose of guiding students wherever they need help. Then, the teachers can have some assistant students to help them if the teacher is too busy: we can choose the student with better pronunciation to help the peers, and we can put the students of different levels in one group and they can have a chance to help each other and the needy students can observe and get more attention from their peers or roommates.

5.4. Keeping Track of Personal Assessment

Meta-cognitive sense is of vital to a qualified and efficient English learner, because it is tightly related to their self stimulation and efficacy. The college students emergently need to know what they themselves lack for and how they have proceeded over a time; they first need to grow into an independent learner, and then can they improve and learn much faster. About the speaking, the learners need to keep a track of their performance and apply multimodal ways to have a summary: they can practice the imitating before practicing and after practicing, so that they themselves can feel the progress; they can record the grades online, and, then make a chart; they can writing a summary of their learned techniques on the website of <https://www.pigai.org/?ssl=on>, and then post the passage in the website of <https://www.fifedu.com/iplat/html/index.html>, and read it out; they can talk to their friends and ask teachers for help settle their problems of speaking. All these are example ways for students to practice their English speaking more than in just one mechanical mode.

6. Conclusion

Teaching speaking on the basis of multimodal approach is urgent and necessary considering the challenges and requirements of cultivating a qualified English learner and all-round developed graduate. To teachers, we are supposed to positively guide students in different forms of activities and offer them chances and approaches to practice speaking. To students, they need to take up the responsibility of learning in an individualized ways and make up the weakness in English learning and explore more ways to practice speaking.

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