

Impact of Peer Interaction on the Improvement of English Speaking for Students of Non-English Majors

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Abstract: This paper explores the impact of peer interaction on the improvement of English speaking for students of non-English majors. Peer interaction is always seen as the most important factor affecting students' English speaking performance. The purpose of this paper is to discover the essence of peer interaction, then try to apply the concept of peer interaction to the actual university class. At last, this paper advocates that we should adopt the interactional teaching mode to help students improve their English speaking proficiency.

Keywords: English speaking; peer interaction; student's performance.

1. Introduction

English speaking, one of the English language skills, is a significant part of English competence. However, in China, many English language learners have found that English speaking skill is hard to master, even though they have learnt English for years, especially for those non-English major students. English speaking has long been a weak point of the English learning, students also think that their spoken English is not satisfying. At present, learners spend much time in class, but the result is that Chinese learners' English speaking proficiency is relatively low. And most of the speaking class is still teacher-oriented, which leave limited opportunities and less time for them to practice what they have learned. In order to solve the problem, many teachers and scholars have carried out researches to analyze the situation and search out an appropriate method to cope with the drawbacks of English speaking teaching in China. Learning spoken English on the internet was a good way to follow. But there still exist problems using internet to practice speaking English, for example, the students are always absentminded when they sit in front of the computer. And English Writing can help to promote the English speaking, writing can help learners to construct when they want to speak. As internet technology develops so fast, some new ways to improve oral English also arise. Classrooms like flipped classroom was helpful to promote oral English for college students.

Under this situation, peer interaction is a new way of pushing the oral English teaching forward. Interaction means the use of language for communicative purposes, with a primary focus on meaning rather than accuracy (Philp & Tognini, 2009). Peer interaction happens between peers, it brings many benefits to the English language learners because it offers a new way for learners to speak English both in class and out of class. Peer interaction requires learners to interact with each other in the target language, and teacher's role transforms from dominant position to assistant position. Differentiated from the teacher-student interaction, peer interaction provides more learning opportunities for language learners to practice their target language.

It is known to all that peer interaction is a context in which the participants are all language learners who are together for learning (Philp, Adams, & Iwashita, 2014). Peer interaction

consists of four steps: activity design, in-class activity, teacher's feedback on peers, and after-class activity. Teacher's important role represented in the activity design and feedback. Suffice it to say, teachers play a crucial and an unseen role (Dörnyei & Malderez, 1997). The context provided by the peers is highly active and learners can communicate with each other freely and easily compared with teacher-learner interaction. One reason why peer interaction is that it allows for different types of language use and practice (Philp, Adams, & Iwashita, 2014). The talking between peers may not be perfect, but it is also beneficial to those learners.

As mentioned above, peer interaction is quite important for language learners to acquire the speaking skills, but the study of peer interaction is not very popular in China, in most universities, many classes are still teacher-oriented. And few researches are conducted on how peer interaction can help those learners of non-English majors to improve their speaking skills of English. The study will mainly focus on the practical application of peer interaction to better improve the English-speaking skills of those non-English major students, giving teachers alternative ways to organize classroom activity.

1.1. Focus of the Study

As the study intends to investigate the practicability of peer interaction and how peer interaction can be better used in the current English-speaking course to help learners better improve their spoken English, therefore the study is significant in current English-speaking teaching and learning. In this study, Michael H. Long's Interaction Hypothesis is the theoretical foundation.

The kernel concept of peer interaction is that the teaching of English speaking should be student-oriented, teacher ought to play a role as an organizer and evaluator. During peer interaction, learners are free to communicate with each other, and feel less stressful when they make mistakes during the interaction. In this way, learners will acquire the English more quickly.

1.2. Significance of the Research

The teaching of spoken English is always a problem for teachers for a long time in China. One reason is that students have little chance to speak, to practice what they have learned

in the class. Therefore, the peer interaction can give teachers a new direction on how to teach spoken English.

The study is about the peer interaction used in the oral English class to promote students' English-speaking competence and encourage them to speak more both in the classroom and in their daily lives. And the students' attitudes towards the peer interaction is also important to the future development of peer interaction.

Different from teacher-student interaction, student-student interaction is much more important, because students will feel easy and comfortable when they talk with each other, even though sometimes they may have a slip of tongue or make mistakes. However, few studies have been done to investigate the peer interaction.

Peer interaction is useful for the teachers to organize the classroom activities. What's more, peers can also practice their English during the break, in the dormitory and canteen. Peer interaction does not only exist in the classroom, it presents an idea that peers can talk to each other anytime they want to, that is more significant to improve spoken English for the students of non-English majors.

2. Literature Review

This chapter first presents Long's interaction hypothesis, and Vygotsky's ZPD. the theoretical foundation of peer interaction. And it provides solid foundation that interaction is helpful in speaking courses and peer interaction does help English learners to improve their English-speaking abilities. And the following is an overview of peer interaction, including definitions of interaction, teacher's role and peer interaction, and relevant researches both at home and abroad.

2.1. Theoretical Foundation

The theoretical basis for drawing a connection between peer interaction and foreign language (FL) development largely draws upon Interaction Hypothesis (Long, 1981, 1983, 1996). Long (1996) put it that peer interaction could be understood as negotiation for meaning, and "it triggers interactional adjustment by more competent interlocutor and facilitates acquisition" (pp.451-452). According to Gass and Mackey (2015), the integration of input, interaction, feedback, and output in second language acquisition is referred to as Interaction Hypothesis. The interaction is the position that what promotes the development of second (or foreign) language proficiency is through the process of face-to-face interaction and communication (Johnson, 1999). Interaction is so important in acquiring a language in that learners provide feedback to one another and receive opportunities for modified output through peer interaction (Pica, 1994). Interaction among language learners can modify one another's language, it offers a good context for learners to polish their own target language. Verbal interaction provides chances to experiment through production and to receive feedback, thereby making learners have more awareness of the target language (Ellis, 2013). And the process of modifying and correcting draw learners' attention to form and promote cognitive processing of target language grammar (Pica, 2013).

From a sociocultural perspective, negotiation of meaning is contextualized within a collaborative process, where the dynamics of the interaction itself inform its usefulness to the learner (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). The collaborative effort mediates language learning as it supports the process of internalizing information from the shared discourse, it is also

called the "collective scaffolding" (Donato, 1994). Many researchers associate this with zone of proximal development (ZPD), put forward by Vygotsky (1987) used the ZPD to describe the cognitive learning potential reached through collaboration between novice and expert. And "ZPD has been increasingly used to describe and create peer-interaction environment" (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006, p. 264).

2.2. Peer Interaction Researches

Peer interaction can be understood as communicative activities carried out between learners (Philp & Tognini, 2009). In recent years, the nature and outcomes of peer interaction have received increasing attention in foreign language study (Tognini, Philp & Oliver, 2010). Blum-kulka and Snow (2004) described peer talk is a collaborative, multiparty, symmetrical participation structure. Learners work together for a common goal, and it always happens among learners themselves. Peer interaction emphasizes the fact that learning is not just about the transfer of knowledge, but about more learner's participation in the class (Philp, Adams, & Iwashita, 2014). The traditional pedagogy of language learning class should be updated. The learner's engagement in the peer interaction is also important, it helps learners in a number of ways. Engaging in peer interaction enables learners to accommodate the variety of processes and solutions that may be appropriate for solving a given class of problems (Merrill & Gilbert, 2008). Peer interaction is facilitative in the development of foreign language. It also gives learners more confidence. Such interaction may give them increased confidence in using the forms and improved accuracy as they gain declarative knowledge of the forms (Philp & Iwashita, 2013). Through the dynamic interaction, learners will transform their explicit knowledge into their long-term language knowledge (Ellis, 2005), this will help learners improve overall aspects of language learning.

There are also many scholars and teachers discussing the effectiveness of the peer interaction. Taylor and Wigglesworth (2009) stated that sometimes learners work alone perform better. However, in other cases, collaborative work is still an essential way to promote language learning. Watanabe (2008) suggested that peer-peer interaction between L2 learners of the same level may also enhance the learner's target language proficiency.

While in the classroom settings, teachers ought not to just give instruction and leave no time for learners. Harmer (2001) suggested that teacher-learner interaction in the full class time gave learners less time to speak, but talking time was expanded in peer interaction. Philp, Adams and Iwashita (2014) suggested that great strength of peer interaction represented in its complementary role to teacher-learner interaction. And teachers also play many crucial roles in peer interaction. The distinctive role played by peers and by the teacher work in tandem over time and across contexts, each contributing in the cumulative process and learning (Batstone & Philp, 2013).

And classroom activities are also the essential part in peer interaction, teachers should design appropriate classroom activities. Through tasks, learners will acquire the target language in a practical way, this is a vital factor that can help language learners better understand the language they have learned (Long, 2005). Peer interaction through tasks is an important feature of communicative classrooms, it complements teacher-fronted interaction by providing a context for practice and meaningful use of the target language

and greater opportunity for individual production (Philp, Walter & Basturkmen, 2010).

As for the importance of peer interaction to improve the speaking proficiency of the target language, Swain and Suzuki (2008) refer to the process of interaction as “*linguaging*,” and to the process of constructing knowledge with peers as “*knowledge building*.” In fact, learners use language to learn language. Therefore, the peer interaction is one of the key factors that help learners construct the knowledge and speak the target language. Gan (2010) pointed out that the interaction in group oral assessment often scored higher and performed better. And May (2009) discovered that students’ performance in co-constructed interaction in a paired speaking test was more active and scored better than those students in a teacher-student test. The researches oral test all declare that peer interaction plays an indispensable part in the improvement of spoken language.

There are many varieties of peer learning, but most common varieties are collaborative learning and cooperative learning. In the collaborative learning, students must depend on one another to complete the task, and it involves a strong sense of mutuality and joint effort (Topping & Ehly, 1998). The cooperative learning is often used a synonym for collaborative learning.

In China, the study of peer interaction has also become more popular. Peer learning is an effective way of teaching, it is characterized as having practical use in the teaching progress, and it can also improve English teaching in China’s universities. It is believed that peer learning, also cooperative learning, could help build up learners’ motivation and confidence, thereby promoting the accuracy of the target language use. Peer learning in large class is also helpful to help learners improve their target language performance. It is proved that peer learning enhances the opportunities to practice what they have learnt and build a good English-speaking environment in the classroom. Peer interaction is a new and efficient way for students to make their spoken English better.

3. Methods

Research Questions:

Based on the above review, some questions are asked as follows:

1. Can teachers help learners to enhance interaction between peers?
2. Can peer interaction help to improve students’ spoken English through speaking activities both in classroom settings?
3. What are learners’ attitudes towards peer interaction?

In order to reach the aim of the study and answer the research questions, the study will be carried out in a speaking course for non-English majors. Experimented method and questionnaire are employed to collect data.

3.1. Experimental Method

The study will be implemented in the intermediate speaking course of in a foreign language university in the northwest region of China. The participants are 80 non-English majors of two classes (40 for control group and experimental group respectively), and all the participants will be tested to ensure that all the participants have the same speaking proficiency. The experimental classroom research is adopted in the study, in this case, “besides observing and describing, researcher seek to intervene in the learning process” (Gass & Mackey, 2011, p.179). The classroom-

based experiment is mainly designed for justifying whether the peer interaction is effective and useful to improve speaking abilities of those learners of non-English major according to the test scores of participants.

3.2. Questionnaire

Questionnaire, one of the survey methods, is a widespread and popular means of eliciting data. “it enables the researcher to collect data in field settings, and the data themselves are more amenable to quantification than discursive data such as free-form field-notes, participant observers’ journals, the transcripts of oral language (Nunan, 1992, p.143), and it is widely used in the second language researches. The questionnaire is used for collecting learners’ attitudes and understandings towards peer interaction. The design of the questionnaire will follow the Likert scale. It is easier to collect data and analyze them than other models.

3.3. Statistical Analysis

It is important to make a comparison between experimental group and control group to observe the effects of peer interaction. The data mainly collected from experimental research groups and questionnaire, and each of the datasets will be analyzed with SPSS 20.0.

3.4. Major Procedures:

The study will last the whole semester. To ensure the effects of the study, a test will be conducted before the experiment to measure participants’ speaking proficiency, in the meantime, teachers ought to tell participants of the experimental group the concept of peer interaction and train the participants how to conduct peer interaction in and out of the classroom setting. And the participants of the control group are still taught in the traditional pedagogy, the new teaching method of peer interaction is not adopted. At the beginning of the semester, the students in the experiment will be assigned speaking activities under the framework of peer interaction, more initiatives will be given to them, and the teacher is an assistant, organizing speaking activities, giving feedbacks, and helping students when necessary. While the control group, taught in the traditional pedagogy, different from the experimental group. At the end of the semester, the participants of the two classes will have a speaking test, and will be scored by the same experienced teacher. After the experiment, questionnaires will be handed out to the students of experimental group to collect data of the students’ attitudes towards the peer interaction.

4. Anticipated Conclusion

This study focuses on how the peer interaction can help to enhance learners’ spoken English. Peer interaction help learners of non-English majors improve their spoken English, and may also help learners master speaking skills of the English language. The improvement of teaching pedagogy and English spoken activity also helps learners make progress in their spoken English learning. The peer interaction help both in and out of classroom settings. The teacher’s design of activity, facilitative role in students’ learning process is indispensable. And the students have positive attitudes to the peer interaction.

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