A Critique on New Horizon College English—Viewing, Listening & Speaking

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Abstract. In this textbook critique, New Horizon College English—Viewing, Listening & Speaking, Book 2 (version 2) is chosen, which is one of the most popular textbook serials used among Chinese colleges and universities at various levels. This critique begins with an introduction of the book and the structure of each unit, and then examines the strengths and some points to be improved concerning the speaking part of this book based on input hypothesis and output hypothesis, and finally some suggestions are offered how to use this textbook more effectively in teaching practice.

Book Introduction

The book, New Horizon College English—Viewing, Listening & Speaking, Book 2 (version 2) to be critiqued is the most popularly used college English textbooks in China, to teach the non-English majors listening and speaking. It is for the non-English major students at beginner level, to help them develop basic listening and speaking skills and strategies, and some cultural topics, and cultural knowledge of English-speaking countries is also introduced to the student in the meanwhile. Book 2 consists of 10 units, and every unit has five parts: warming up, listening, speaking, listening and speaking, homework. In this paper, the critique will be mainly focused on the speaking part.

Strengths

Connection between Speaking and Listening

This book covers English viewing, listening & speaking, so the speaking part is strongly supported by view and listening, especially listening. In fact, almost every speaking activity is initiated with video or audio materials. Different types of input is crucial for speaking activities, because they not only trigger the learners’ prior knowledge and schema, offer them related topic knowledge, but also the language modeling and grammatical features.

It is always conducive to support an output activity with an input one in learning and teaching. Krashen (1998) asserts that the comprehensible input is the only true way a learner has to acquire a second language. It also means that we acquire the target language only when we understand the language. It is to say, in SLA context, the abundant input of target language is important and the prerequisite to advance learning. We can hardly imagine how an SLA learner learn a language without the necessary input in target language to provide the language modeling and the context it is uses. In a word, it is undoubtedly helpful to start a speaking with listening or reading of the related language and cultural knowledge.

Speaking, as an output, is often challenging learners to focus on the means of expression when they realize it is necessary to enhance and develop the target language level, and it is just then, when language output can contribute to language acquisition. (Swain, 1985)

Despite the gap of input hypothesis and output hypothesis, the combination of input and output boosts the SLA learning in various ways. This is one of the advantages of the book we are critiquing. It emphasizes both input and output, and starts every speaking activity with listening to support learner’s performance.
**Language Modeling and Scaffolding**

Besides the importance of the combination of input hypothesis and output hypothesis, there is another distinctive function of listening as a part of input, playing a role of language modeling and scaffolding for SLA learners.

When SLA learners speak in a target language, they need not only the topic knowledge, necessary vocabulary, but also the necessary grammar, how to organize all the grammar elements, and the modeling and scaffolding of every concrete expression. All these make it possible for SLA learners to speak in a comprehensible way so that others can understand them.

According to Bruner (1978), for learning to take place, appropriate social interactional frameworks must be provided. Scaffolding provides this kind of social interactional. At the beginning of the Speaking part of the text, questions and useful expressions are given and the teacher is supposed to familiarizes students with these expressions and to make sure that students understand these expressions and how they can use them. A listening material models how these expressions are used, and also the pronunciation which is especially useful for SLA beginners. This will tremendously ease the speakers’ cognitive load and the pressure and anxiety concerned and further to support their performance. This indicates a shift from traditional teaching, to teach students how to do, but not simply to test them how well they do. This is also the necessary preparation should be done in the Pre-speaking support: providing vocabulary and knowledge input (Goh, 2007).

In brief, these two instinctive advantages of this book should be appreciated and teachers should take good advantage of them in their classroom instructions.

**Three Aspects to Improve**

The following points to be discussed are not really weaknesses, but something which need somewhat adjustment or improvement in Chinese teaching context in China.

**Listening as Input**

As the discussion above, the first advantages of this book is the connection between input and output, by supporting every speaking activity with a listening material. But if Chinese teachers move further in the real situation, it will be found that only the listening material as the input is insufficient, which are often quite short. What’s more, the speed of listening materials is too fast for normal college students at the beginner level. This makes the insufficient input even worse, because the fast speed causes a lot of pressure and anxiety of students, which, to a great extent, undermines their understanding of the listening materials.

To make up this insufficient input, a solution advised is to prepare some pre-reading materials related to the topics, and in so doing, students can be equipped with some necessary topic knowledge and expressions before coming to class. This is included in the **Homework** part of teacher’s lesson plan.

**Task Repetition**

Task repetition is the repeated use of the same or similar communication task or discourse sequences with same or different people (Bygate, 2001) and he suggests several benefits to getting learners to repeat a task:

- More fluency in terms of pausing and speed (less need to plan as we speak)
- Fewer false starts and self corrections
- Fewer errors

As indicated in his small-sampled study, it suggests that repeating a simple speaking task (in this case describing a film), **without any input or feedback**, still led to the learner producing more appropriate and more complex language. They improved in terms of accuracy, repertoire and fluency.
Despite the importance of task repletion, this book seems to fail to do this in terms of the structure of the units. Of course, while it is difficult to organize task repetitions in class, it is possible to extend them from the in-class activities to after-class ones. Therefore, in homework, each group in class discussion is required to video their discussion and oral reports, and upload to the Class group (adopting QQ functions for) so that everyone can download, watch and comment, which is also included in student assessment system. In order to do this after-class tasks well, students have to rehearse many times before they are satisfied with their own performance. This is part will be included in Homework of my lesson plan.

Students Theater will also be the method I may adopt as a part of the final assessment of student’s oral English performance at the end of every semester. It can also be regarded as task repetition.

**World Englishes**

New Horizon College English serials, including New Horizon College English--Viewing, Listening & Speaking, are obviously American-culture biased. (Liu, 2009) Over half of the materials are selected from American English resources. In the New Horizon College English--Viewing, Listening & Speaking, all the listening and video materials are chosen from American contexts and are read in American accent. Therefore, there is a need to expand the conceptions of English from the standard English to world English’s, or students may not have the chance to understand the reality of the English as world language and there are many varieties of English. In terms of English speaking, world Englishes or English as Lingua Franca should be introduced to students so that they can choose the different forms of speaking grammar according to their needs, instead of passively to learn native-speaker forms as the only choice, especially for those who do not wish to speak like a native. In other words, students should know there are some possible options. (Mumford 2008)

**Suggestions for Teaching**

New Horizon College English—Viewing, Listening & Speaking is an excellent textbook to instruct Chinese college students, but like many other textbooks, teachers may need tailor the content according to their practical needs. According to my teaching practice, some suggestions are given here for consideration.

1. Prepare students before class, by offering them reading materials related to the topic of every unit, and ask them to familiarize the grammar and useful expression.
2. Adopt the group discussions in the part of listening and speaking if you have to teach a big class (e.g. 60 students),
3. Include a task-repetition activity in homework.
4. Introduce some materials of world Englishes and speaking grammars according to students’ needs.

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**References**


