On the Application of Mobile Learning to College Oral English Teaching

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Abstract. Social Constructivism claims that learning is constructed during the interaction between people and the environment. The rapid development of the Internet and mobile technologies provide students with an ideal learning environment for such interaction. Therefore, Mobile learning should be integrated into traditional language teaching. In tertiary EFL settings, oral English is often considered a skill students want to develop most. The paper explores one possible model of integrating Mobile Learning into college oral English teaching through a mobile teaching APP called “Mosotech”. A three-stage teaching process is designed and carried out in this integration model. The end-of-term evaluation shows about 83% of students rated this integration as Very Helpful and Helpful. Suggestions are put forward on better implementation of this blended oral English teaching.

Introduction

Importance of English Speaking to College Students

Speaking, one of the basic language skills, has long been relatively ignored by Chinese college non-English majors for it is not a compulsory part in important English exams such as College Entrance Exam, CET 4, CET 6 and Graduate Entrance Exam. However, the incredible development of globalization has made English speaking, a major way of intercultural communication, increasingly important in recent years. The Belt-road Initiative launched by the Chinese government further calls for the talents equipped with good English speaking skills. A survey done among the students at the author’s college this year indicates that about 70% of students rated oral English as the course they wanted to learn most among 20 courses. Besides, it’s reported that oral English is to become a compulsory part of the exams mentioned above. Therefore, tertiary teachers in China need to work out effective ways to help students develop oral English skills to meet the needs of both individuals and the country.

Current Situation of Oral English Teaching in College

In EFL context, teaching oral English is no easy task, esp. to non-English majors. Apart from the eight characteristics (clustering, redundancy, reduced forms, performance variables, colloquial language, rate of delivery, stress, rhythm, and intonation, interaction) that make oral English difficult to acquire[1], the traditional teacher-centered classroom provide students from a big class with few opportunities to do real interactive communication practice. In English speaking classes, only a small number of students can participate in oral activities like filling blanks, answering simple questions or making choices. These mechanical drills focus more on imitation and fail to arouse students’ enthusiasm, not to mention to train their higher level thinking esp. critical and creative thinking[2,3]. Even graduate students complain that their dumb English embarrass them in real intercultural communication. Fortunately, the amazing development of the Internet and smart phones makes mobile learning a possible way to improve oral English effectively.

Advantages and Feasibility of Mobile Learning

In recent years, mobile information technology has transformed the ways people acquire
knowledge at an unprecedented rate. The ubiquity of mobile learning devices such as smart phones and tablet computers is attracting increasing attention to Mobile-Learning (or M-Learning) and making it a spotlight in the research of educational technology.

Constructivism claims that learning is constructed during the interaction between people and the environment[4]. That is, learning is conversational in nature including dialogue and shared activities[4]. Based on this theory, mobile learning has witnessed rapid development in recent decades. In particular, mobile learning has been widely applied to English learning thanks to its inherent advantages: freedom to choose where to learn and when to learn; easily accessible and portable devices; use of fragmented time to learn constantly; interactive learning process; abundant and practical learning resources[5]. Mobile learning is not limited to time and space and can best reflect the educational belief of “learners in focus”. It is considered “a new learning revolution and the future of Chinese foreign language learning”.[6] Another reason for its feasibility is the personality of Chinese English learners who prefer to learn individually rather than cooperatively[6].

Therefore, many learning APPs on listening, vocabulary, reading and oral English have enjoyed popularity among Chinese English learners[5]. Li and Xu reviewed 25 empirical studies on mobile teaching of oral English in recent 10 years and found using various mobile teaching methods can improve students’ learning interest, oral skills and oral teaching effect[7]. The application of Mobile technology also makes it possible for schools to adopt blended oral English teaching approach.

Integrating Mosotech into Oral English Teaching

Creating a Mosotech Oral English Class

Mosotech, a free mobile teaching APP, has been used by many college teachers across China for it can well support the innovation of informational teaching and promote the curricular reform[8]. It can be used both on mobile devices and computers in and outside classrooms. By providing active interaction between teacher and students and among students, it enables blended teaching in mobile learning context. At the beginning of the course, the teacher creates a Mostech oral English class and students enter the class by scanning the QR code in class after downloading this APP onto their smart phones. Teaching and learning can occur in the real and the virtual classrooms through activities like resource learning, surveys, discussions, tests, brainstorming and assignments.

Teaching Design and Implementation

Different from traditional classroom, blended English teaching through the Mostech class is more interactive, constructive and challenging[7,8,9]. Teacher’s role is transformed from a dominant presenter to a backstage director and coach, organizing and facilitating students’ learning systematically. Good design can make mobile technologies a spur to student engagement rather than a hindrance. The specific process of this teaching model for oral English is conducted through the following three stages:

Pre-class stage: The teacher uploads relevant learning resources onto the virtual class in the forms of short video, audio, PPT, Word or mini-class. One big advantage of this Mosotech class is it allows web link to share the resources online, which can save the trouble of downloading the resources (such as an online video). By learning the resources before class, students are equipped with ideas and ways of expression concerning a specific topic, which helps them produce more complex and accurate language. Meanwhile, the teacher posts one or two questions of the same topic into_Q & A Session_and ask students to reply by voice messages. Both the teacher and students can respond to those voice message replies. Such interaction can help students improve their pronunciation, intonation, stress and fluency in general. If necessary, the teacher may correct some language mistakes to further promote their language accuracy.

While-class stage: Attendance-taking is done with ease and fun through the Mosotech class, esp. in a big class with about 60 students. Students ask questions concerning online learning resources and teachers answers and gives feedback on their pre-class stage performance. To elaborate on the
resources and questions posted in Q & A Session, the teacher can hold an in-class group discussion based on a video (For example, a TED talk entitled Eight Secrets of Success) or a question (For example, What items do you buy on impulse?). After the discussion, one student from each group will give their 1-min summary of their viewpoints. Note here time limit is essential to help students organize their talk logically and promote fluency. Through face-to-face group discussion, students can fully engage themselves in speaking activities, thus enhancing their fluency and communication skills. The teacher walks around the classroom offering help with ideas and language. Brainstorming is another activity to better involve students in learning. The teacher posts a question (for example, how to improve memory?) onto the Mosotech class, students are asked to send voice messages after 20-second think time. Afterwards, students can share with their pairs face to face. Through Mosotech, discussion based on an in-class survey is also possible. For example, when talking about Neighbors and Communities, students are asked to finish a 5-question survey on “Where to live” in one minute. Then interaction is done between teacher and students or among students about their choices based on the result. This activity can also be turned into a after-class writing activity by asking students to write a short report on the survey result. In this way, students learn not only oral English but also logical and critical thinking, which is considered crucial to cultivate among Chinese English learners[2].

Post-class stage: Students discuss other topic-related questions or send text messages to the teacher for puzzles, which allows more interaction in educational settings. They can also take mini-classes (for example, on how to deliver a good speech) uploaded by teachers as an extension of in-class teaching and learning. To help students build a solid language foundation, the teacher can give a test or an assignment with a focus on topic-related words and expressions (for example, on expressing uncertainty). Through different ways of interaction between people and learning materials, students gradually construct their learning, improve their language and thinking competence.

Assessment

Good assessment can have a strong backwash effect on teaching and learning. Compared with traditional assessment methods, assessment done through mobile technology is more efficient. Students can get assessment though the feedback from the teacher and students on their oral English performance. They can also get a detailed learning report in the Mosotech class. Every task they fulfill will earn them a certain quantity of Experience Value through which they can see their learning happen gradually and get motivated continuously. For the teacher, they can assess students’ performance by listening to their voice messages, checking their learning reports, giving tests and assignments.

Evaluation of the Integration Model

Teacher’s Observation

When the Mosotech oral English class is integrated into traditional classroom teaching, the teacher sees more active and cooperative students participation in and outside class, online and offline. Most students can learn resources before class and post their questions and replies online. It can be clearly shown on students’ Experience Value quantity which ranges from 419 to 263. Their oral English output has been improved in terms complexity, accuracy and fluency, which proves that more effective input promotes higher quality output and then ensures the occurrence of real learning[9].

Students’ Feedback

Students’ feedback is obtained through a Mosotech questionnaire survey and an four-question assignment to collect quantitative and qualitative data at the end of the semester. Seventy-five valid questionnaires were collected. Among them, about 83% rated such integration as Very helpful and Helpful. For qualitative data, students give positive feedback on pre-class resource learning, voice
message discussion, attendance-taking, group discussions, one-minute group summary and teacher’s feedback. Some voiced their negative attitude to tests and assignments. One interesting finding is that students with higher proficiency participated more actively in all activities and held more positive opinions to such teaching model. Some high frequency words they give are: motivated, reflective, cooperative, interactive, autonomous.

Conclusion

Mobile technologies have permeated our society[10]. The introduction of mobile technologies into college English learning is fundamentally inevitable. With the integration of the Mosotech into our traditional oral English classes, the learning has transcended the limit of time and space. Students can be given more initiative and chances to get involved in all the three-stage activities as well as assessment. Such integration is a good way to carry out “Learners in focus” belief because it makes learning more reflective, cooperative, constructive and autonomous.

Undoubtedly, this integration also poses great challenges to teachers in the aspects of technology, class management, assessment and teacher devotion. Deep commitment of time, energy, knowledge and skills is required to ensure the success. Based on the action research and literature review, such blended oral English teaching model can be improved if the teacher adapts in the following ways: First, make online resources better suit students’ needs, interests and learning styles based on big data analysis; Second, design and organize group work and peer review in a more reasonable and challenging way (for example, ask students to do Mini-research projects) to better engage each individual; Third, make questions and discussions suitable to train students’ critical and creative thinking through oral English[2,8].

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References


