

A Case Study of Implementation of Action Research on Oral English Teaching in Vocational and Technical College

Zhou Qin¹

¹ Leshan Vocational & Technical College, Sichuan, China

Correspondence: Zhou Qin, Leshan vocational & Technical College, Leshan, Sichuan, China.

Received: October 17, 2018 Accepted: November 22, 2018 Online Published: November 25, 2018

doi: 10.5539/elt.v11n12p205 URL: <https://doi.org/10.5539/elt.v11n12p205>

Abstract

With the globalization and the increase of the foreign-oriented affairs, the oral English teaching and learning in higher vocational colleges has got a wide attention from all walks of life, especially, the educational circle. It has become an important task to explore how to improve the oral English teaching and strengthen students' practical and communicative ability in higher vocational colleges. Aiming to reform the educational practice and to improve the effect of oral English teaching, a ten-week task-based teaching plan has been designed and some adjustments on teaching content have been done according to the actual situation in implementation. The figures in the final analyses show that not only have the students' interests, confidence and effect of learning been rapidly improved, but also the teacher's self-reflection and the ability of putting theories into the practice have been clearly strengthened. The research result in this paper reveals that action research is a useful and practical way to propel the development of the oral English teaching in higher vocational education.

Keywords: action research, oral English, higher vocational education, task-based teaching, reflection

1. Introduction

Since being introduced into the educational field in the 1980s, action research, a new way for a teacher engaging in academic research, has been advocated and accepted by many experts and scholars. It stresses that a teacher should systematically and constantly observe and reflect his/her teaching, and regards education as a unifying and practicing process. At present, action research has become a heated field in educational reform at home and abroad (Wu, 1995). It greatly propelled the development of all forms of English teaching, including English teaching of vocational and technical education. However there are only a few studies on teaching in the high vocational college based on action research, not mention the papers or theses about action research for oral English teaching in higher vocational education. What's more, due to the influence of the traditional higher educational model, people traditionally attached more importance to general education than to vocational education. HVTE (higher vocational and technical education) in China hasn't really established its own characteristics, so is oral English teaching. Following a traditional model, teachers are put the center in teaching activities. All the time in class is filled with teachers' explanation about words, phrases, sentences and detailed analyses about the text, and very little time is left for other interesting and necessary activities. Most of the students can hardly express their ideas in English after having studied English for several years. Therefore it's very critical to single out oral English teaching, to introduce a new teaching notion, and to redesign and optimize oral English teaching approaches in HVTE. The position of oral English teaching becomes more striking than ever in higher vocational English teaching.

2. Implementation of Action Research in Oral English Class

2.1 Class Description

The researched class, where the research carried on, consists of 66 students majoring in English nursing of 3-year duration. Their major requires that they should have a good mastery of both nursing and English through 3-year study. All the students have studied English for over 6 years. The aim of this research is to help students improve their listening and speaking skills and to strengthen their communicative ability in oral English course.

2.2 Making Problems and Hypotheses

During the initial weeks of the first semester, a lot of trouble got in the way. To begin with, the students didn't take an active part in classroom activities. They were reluctant to ask or answer questions. Every time when

questions being posed, most of the students just lowered their heads, avoiding a direct eye-contact with the teacher. Even though their names were called, it seemed rather difficult for them to complete a topic. Some of them could only squeeze out a few words, or with “sorry, I don’t know” as the responses to the question. Many times as the teacher tried to encourage them to take part in class activities actively, no or little improvement gained.

Secondly, the large class is unfavorable for oral English organization. In the researched class, though the researcher attempts to ensure each student speak in class, actually it’s hardly possible to achieve this goal in a limited 45 minutes. Therefore, the actual situation is almost always like this case that the active students, usually those top ones, gained more chances than those passive students. So it is admitted that the latter ones have frequently been ignored.

Thirdly, teaching content couldn’t arouse students’ interests. The researcher was very confused about this problem. In fact, every time the researcher tried to prepare lesson seriously and carefully, but why they always complain about most of the topics remains unclear. After some investigations and thorough thoughts, the researcher found students disliked the traditional teaching method. They hoped to share the class forum with the teacher.

2.3 Data Collection and Analysis

2.3.1 About the Questionnaire

In order to clearly know the teaching situation and pave the way to arouse students’ interest and improve the class teaching effect, a questionnaire was designed to seek out their opinions on this course, their current study situation and also their suggestions about the proper teaching methods. This questionnaire is designed on the basis of Gardner’s relevant questionnaire, especially Gardner’s motivation questionnaire, some related-study theories, such as the Second Language Acquisition, Learning Strategies and so on, as well as the descriptions on the definition of self-learning by Holec (1981), and also has referred to the questionnaire in the thesis *Helping Junior students Speak English Well through Task-based Language Teaching Approach* by Zhang Jie in Capital Normal university. The software Excel will be used to analyze all the data needed in this study.

2.3.2 Analysis on the Questionnaire

Part one of the questionare focuses on the students oral English level. No one thinks he can always use English fluently in class; only 9% students respond that they can use English well; just 4.6% students can talk with foreigners when it’s possible; still only 3% students can frequently express their opinions on a given topic in English; more than half of them never or rarely speak English on any occasions. The above statistics clearly suggests that the students are generally poor in English-speaking. Their oral English ability is far from expectation though they have received English learning for years.

Part two of the questionnaire is on students’ subjective impression, including their study attitude, aim and further demand on oral English class. According to the data, 92% students reveal that they want to improve their oral English; no one doesn’t want to improve it; 94% students hope to get more opportunities to speak English in clas. However, when being asked about their performance in oral English classes, the result is no more satisfactory. Only 5 percent of the students can actively answer questions or participate in class activities; exceeding 80% students are reluctant to respond to a given topic; and 12% students react with silence or a word “sorry” when being called to answer questions in class.

These figures above definitely show the students have a strong study motivation, a certain determination to improve their oral English, and an eagerness to involve themselves in practicing oral English but these desires and emotions are not transformed into the concrete actions at all due to various factors. When it comes to students’ comments upon oral English course, only 11% students think that this course is very interesting; over half of the students, 52% of them to be specific, claim that they have no stimulating impulse in this course; to our astonishment, 37% of them painfully scream that this course is so boring that attending it is a big torture to them. At the same time, only 13% students are announced very satisfied about this course. Nevertheless, about 28% of them are unsatisfied. Under the circumstances, there’s no way but to introduce new educational concepts and reform the traditional teaching approaches. As for this question “Which teaching activity do you think is the most helpful to improve your oral English?” The result indicates that among all the teaching activities, role-play and pair/group work are the most popular ones for the students. More than half of them think these two are the most helpful way for them to improve their oral English. In addition, English songs and story-retelling are also very acceptable among students. Only 11 students, about 17% of the total, like the regular form of asking-and-answering-questions.

Herein, in the eyes of the students, an over-large class is unfavorable for the effective organization for the oral English course. So actually, it's very challenging for an oral teacher to have a wonderful lesson for a class with 66 students.

In the part three of the questionnaire, in order to get students' valuable suggestions on how to organize the oral English class better, the following three questions are designed:

- 1) In your view, how can we strengthen our English speaking effectively?
- 2) In what aspects does the oral English class need further improvement?
- 3) Have you any suggestions on the oral English teaching?

As regard of the first question, almost all of the students mention that speaking and practicing more is an effective way to improve their oral English. But except these abstract words, few of them refer to some concrete methods and aspects on their oral English study. Only in two pieces of the questionnaire, we find the students answer like these: "I think a good study method is helpful and effective for us to improve our English speaking. But in our oral English class, the teacher spends no time on it. So sometimes, I feel confused." We can come to the conclusion from the students' responses in the above that the majority of students, in fact, take English-learning approaches for granted. On the surface, they have some certain recognition on how to improve their oral English. However, it is not hard to find that so-called effective oral English approaches being mentioned by these students are too vague and general to be applied. Under the circumstances, it's time for the English teacher to play a leading role in guiding students out of the confusion. Specifically speaking, a teacher should explore and introduce concrete and effective ways. That is to say, it's very necessary for a teacher to tell his/her students how to study, which is of great need to almost all the students.

In the meantime, most of the students denoted that the present oral English class lacked of intercommunication between the teacher and the students. Sometimes the class became a monodrama of the teacher. Furthermore, some of students mentioned that teaching content was also one of aspects deserving attention. They thought that the topics in oral English class had less connection with their daily life so that they had little to talk about a given topic. Obviously, when the students have no enthusiasm in taking part in the class activities, both the students and the teacher feel rather embarrassed.

In addition, the complaint from the poor students could not make the teacher restful. This group of students said that they could not follow the teacher well in class due to their poor foundation. In their mind, oral English class is so difficult, even so intolerable sometimes that they can hardly concentrate on it. At times even if they make up their minds to improve the English speaking ability, reality frequently crushes their determination in a not long time. Furthermore, poor foundation pushes them into a vicious cycle. On one hand, they have a great difficulty in expressing what they want in most of times, which leads to their silence and passiveness in class; on the other hand, their silence and passiveness didn't gain the teacher's notice, or maybe the teacher has already despair of them in oral English, so the students often feel that the class is a cage, not a free forum for them. Actually, they have been ignored by themselves and the teacher. In a long run, marginalization of the poor students results in much worse performance with the time passing by.

In this case, this group of students suggest that before beginning a new lesson or task, the teacher should make more explanation about the usage of words, phrases and sentence patterns which will be used in the coming topic, so that they can follow and deal with the class activity. Some of them require getting more opportunities and being given an equal English-speaking chance in class. However, the other students advise to adopt more effective and useful teaching forms to replace the present dull and oversimplified preach.

At last, almost all the students frankly spoke out why they were universally passive in class. Firstly, the so-called virtue of modesty stops them from activeness. Traditionally, those activists are criticized for their "showing off". Secondly, many students feel that the possible error while speaking English is a shame. Since silence can never make mistakes, it's no strange that the proverb "silence is gold" is always well enforced among students. In brief, rooted traditional belief is really a big barrier for their improvement in oral English class.

2.4 Restatement of the Problems

Based on the questionnaire and analysis in the above, we can make a conclusion that the reasons which make my class ineffective and passive are as follows:

- 1) An over large class does reduce their opportunities to speak English;
- 2) Students have psychological block on speaking;
 - a. Too much anxiety hinders their oral English study;

- b. They Lack definite study motivation, especially internal motivation that influences their activeness and enthusiasm of English study;
 - c. Students are short of confidence;
- 3) The teacher follows a traditional teacher-centered teaching method; fails to organize interesting and meaningful teaching activities related with the students' real life.

2.5 Making and Implementing Action Research Plans

2.5.1 Division: from a Large Class to two Smaller Ones

In order to avoid the influence of the large class and explore an effective English teaching pattern, an experiment is carried out in the researcher's class with the approval and support of the school authority. According to the tentativeness, the class is divided into two smaller ones. Then two teachers are appointed to have oral English lesson for the two classes at an exchangeable way. To be more specific, each time one teacher gives only one period of lesson for one smaller class and then both teachers and students will be exchanged at the second period of lesson. In doing so, students can have opportunity to contact with different teaching styles in the given time. Their motivation is stimulated at utmost. Besides, they also get more chances, in detail double chances in the same time as before, to practice speaking. The chances of speaking English are the best way for students to increase their ability of speaking. All the students benefit from the smaller class. What's more, two teachers share the same class and the same course, to some extent, which makes a collaborative action research between teachers possible and feasible. So-called collaborative action research focuses on the collaboration among teachers. The active collaboration and corporation among English teachers is a guarantee of a successful action research, also an assurance of an effective class. During the experiment, both of teachers frequently get together to prepare lessons, discuss the suitable way of teaching, search for ways to solve problems they met during teaching, especially reflect on students' responses in class in order to give a more interesting and effective class.

2.5.2 Removal or Relief in Students' Psychological Block on Speaking

Language learning is by no means a simple task of instilling knowledge into students mind as some teachers do now. To make the teaching activities fruitful, a teacher should have to fully take account of all different kinds of factors, especially the mental or psychological factors of the students. So in the planned action, we should especially pay much attention to solve students' mental block and take account of the variables on mental aspects for example, interest, self-confidence, motivation and so on in the following teaching process and actions. Take something for example, in the researched oral English class, we should set goals and tasks as often as possible in class and these goals and tasks should not be too difficult for students. And in classroom drills, we should introduce interesting materials to the students, use suitable teaching methods and use multi-media technology like recorder, VCD, language lab, library, computer, to boost students' intrinsic motivation. What's more, it is important to draw the attention of the students at the very beginning of the class. So it requires the teacher to use interesting or humorous language. The more interesting of the language is, the more we can arouse the learner's enthusiasm or say, the more we can arouse the latent capacities of acquisition at the beginning, and the whole class can go smoothly and effectively. Thus, in the following action, an effort is made on changing the researcher's language style in the class.

2.5.3 Ten-week Action on Improving the Students' Oral English

With an eye to further improvement of oral English teaching, the implementation of action research in ten-week actions in the researched class is to be elaborated about as follow:

Planned Tasks	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Plan traveling on holidays	▲									
2. Rent houses near the college		▲								
3. Buy a pet in a pet shop			▲							
4. Search your ideal lifestyles				▲						
5. Tell moving stories					▲					
6. Find out the crime						▲				
7. Celebrate traditional festivals							▲			

8. Have a job interview								▲		
9. Do the first aid									▲	
10. Role play										▲
	Questionnaire	▲								▲
Data collection	Observation	▲	▲	▲	▲	▲	▲	▲	▲	▲
	Teacher log			▲			▲			▲

One topic is designed for each task. The students will come to know how to use English language in a natural way while carrying on these tasks, and they have the opportunity to describe what is required and to express their views on the issues concerned. The underlying philosophy is that learning a foreign language is more rewarding, meaningful and effective when the language is used for authentic communication.

3. Analysis and Reflection

During the ten-week action research, the teacher and her colleague were engaged in the process of discovering, identifying, solving the problems and reflecting in the teaching practice. As ten weeks passed by, great changes have taken place in the class. This action research has obtained a satisfactory effect, which has fundamentally not only transformed the students' attitudes towards oral English class, but also has got substantial fruits in improving students' oral English. Judging from the indices and analysis in this paper, we can find easily that the students have stridden into a new stage in oral English after the action research.

What's more, ten-week action research in the researcher's class makes the concept of action research, especially teaching-reflection deeply rooted in the researcher's mind. It is sure that the researcher benefits a lot from it, and it not only changes the researcher's thought, the way of teaching and the teacher's role in the class but also changes the students' study habits and methods. Action research is a powerful method of bridging the gap between the theory and practice of education; for here teachers are encouraged to develop their own personal theories of education from their own class practice.

4. Conclusion

Through analyses and argumentations on action research in the oral English teaching of higher vocational education, the researcher expects that the experience and conclusion having been drawn from the academic research in this paper can offer some inspiration for the researchers in this field, and engages more teachers and other teaching staff into the exploration of action research. And we also hope to develop a model of action research based upon our experience in the past ten weeks which will be transferable to other classes in the researcher's college or even in the other vocational and technical colleges.

References

- Baker, J., & Westrup, H. (2000). *The English Language Teacher's Handbook*. London: Continuum.
- Burns. (1999). *Collaborative Action Research for English Language Teachers*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Deci & Ryan. (1985). *Intrinsic Motivation and Self-Determination in human Behavior*. New York: Plenum.
- Elliott, J. (1976). *Developing Hypotheses about Classrooms from Teachers' Practical Constructs North Dakota Study Group on Evaluation-series*. Grand Forks: University of North Dakota.
- Elliott, J. (1991). *Action Research for Educational Change*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.
- Hitchcock, G., & Hughes. (1989). *Research and the Teacher*. London: Routledge.
- Holec, H. (1981). *Autonomy and foreign language learning*. Oxford: Pergamon.
- Jeremy, H. (2000). *How to Teach English*. Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- Keller, J. W. (1983). Motivational Design of Instruction. In C. M. Reigeluth (Ed.). *Instructional Design Theories and Models*. New Jersey: Erlbaum.
- Kemmis, S., & McTaggart, R. (1982). *The Action Research Planner*. Geelong, Victoria: Deakin University Press.
- LoCastro, V. (2001). Large classes and student learning. *TESOL Quarterly*, 35(3), 493-496. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3588032>
- McKernan, J. (1991). *Curriculum Action Research--A Handbook of Methods and Resources for the Reflective Practitioner*. London: Kogan Page Limited.

- Michael, J. W. (2000). *Action Research for Language Teachers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Stenhouse, L. (1975). *An Introduction to Curriculum Research and Development*. London: Heinemann.
- Stenhouse, L. (1979). *What Is Action Research CARE*. University of East Anglia, Norwich.
- Thome, C., & Wang, Q. (1996). Action Research in Language Teacher Education. *ELT Journal*, 50(3).
- Wallace, J. M. (2000). *Action Research for Language Teachers*. Cambridge University Press.
- Gardner, R. C. (1985). The Role of Motivation and Attitude. *Social Psychology and Second Language Learning*. London: Award Arnold.
- Vandergrift, L. (1996). The Cinderella of Communication Strategies: Reception Strategies in Interactive Listening. *The Modern Language Journal*, 81.
- Wallace, J. M. (1987). A Historical Review of Action Research: Some Implications for the Education of Teachers in Their Managerial Role. *Journal of Education for Teaching*, 13(2), 97-115. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0260747870130201>

Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).