

Research on Peer-evaluation in Senior High Schools' Oral English Teaching

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Abstract: Evaluation of the students' speaking is a key stage in oral English teaching. By evaluation students can get positive and necessary information about their speaking, making it possible for them to improve their oral competence. But for a long time, evaluation of students' speaking in oral English class has been neglected or only dominated just by the teacher in middle schools in China, which is one of the main reasons for the students' low level in this aspect. This thesis reports the possibility and effects of peer-evaluation in oral English teaching in Chinese middle schools. The researcher finds that the student's peer-evaluation under the teacher's direction has achieved a lot. This method can greatly motivate the students to be braver and more interested in speaking, which has greatly promoted the students to speak and has great active effects in improving the students' speaking ability, especially on the students who are shy or poor in speaking. It is also found that the students' ability of cooperation and attitudes towards cooperation are well developed by peer evaluation which results in an overall progress of their oral English.

Keywords: Peer-evaluation; Cooperation; Oral competence

1 Statement of the problem

The purpose of middle school English teaching is to improve the students' four skills including listening, speaking, reading and writing. It is very important to keep a balanced development of the above four skills. Both in the old syllabus and the new curriculum there is special criterion for each skill. But it is a pity that the development of the four skills is not balanced. Now most of the students do better in reading, writing and listening but are poor in speaking. They can hardly communicate or express themselves in their own words.

There are many reasons responsible for it, and the teaching method of the spoken language is one of the main reasons, which is often considered to be one of the most difficult skills and has been a headache for the English teacher. In the traditional oral English teaching, after the students' oral presentation, the teacher gave his or her personal comments. On most occasions, it is based on a general impression of how well the students speak. The overall evaluation is often teacher-oriented, which makes the students stand out of the evaluation of their own oral activities^[1]. So the students, the main part of speaking, may think that oral activities have nothing to do with them. There is no doubt that it can make students lose interest in speaking or feel shy to speak. According to the situation of oral English teaching in China and the researches done by the famous linguistics at home and abroad, the researcher tries employing peer-evaluation to engage the students more in the cooperative oral activities and make them involved in the evaluation work. In this thesis, the researcher intends to find out what are the different effects in improving the students' oral competence between the teacher-oriented evaluation and peer-evaluation in oral English teaching.

2 The significance of the study

As one of the basic language skills, oral competence has a particularly important place in English instruction in middle schools. But as described above, there are many problems in oral English teaching in middle schools in China today, although teachers have devoted considerable effort in it. According to the new curriculum, when students are ready to graduate from middle schools, they should have the following abilities: 1) to start a conversation of a certain topic; 2) to transfer the topic; 3) to get in a word; 4) to predict and end the conversation; 5) to express opinions with the help of different tones and intonation. In cognitive aspect, these requirements are not too difficult. What matters is the efficiency of practice. One of the hindrances of this perhaps lies in the teaching method in which teachers give the evaluation directly after the student's oral presentation or performance without the students involving in the evaluation. There is little research on peer-evaluation of students' oral English learning, which is a very important step in oral English teaching. The researcher tries to apply peer evaluation in assessing students' oral performance and expects this study can provide some useful and practical information of evaluation in oral English teaching, as far as to provide some useful suggestions in this area.

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate how to develop students' active attitudes towards oral English, stimulate students' effective participation in cooperative oral English learning and promote students' development of oral proficiency through peer-assessment

Considering the problems related to the assessment of oral English teaching and learning, the author hopes this thesis can help

teachers make a better understanding of peer-evaluation in oral English teaching and learning and make teachers put it into practice more reasonable. Meanwhile the intention of this paper is as much to heighten the awareness of language assessment procedures and help teachers to be more systematic about the use of assessment procedures.

3 General features of peer evaluation

Peer-evaluation is one of the ways by which students internalize the characteristics of quality work by evaluating the work of their peers. Peer-evaluation is very helpful in building up students' confidence and cooperative spirit^[2]. When students find that they can also offer others valuable comments, their confidence is built up. This, in turn, will help students put more efforts on the work. So it is clear that peer-evaluation in oral English teaching and learning has its own advantages.

Firstly, it offers good opportunities for the learners to get involved in the evaluation of their own performance face-to-face with their peers. In such situations, the speaker can get direct feedback from a large scale of audience rather than just from the teacher only.

Secondly, when the students work in a small group, they really feel relaxed. This can help them to express their thoughts freely without feeling afraid of being exposed in the whole class. It will develop a more positive attitude toward speaking. Intrinsic students and the students who are poor in English can benefit more from this.

Thirdly, the students will develop critical thinking skills. When the students work together to assess each other's oral performance, they are given opportunities to think over to judge and analyze by themselves. So they will be very active to find the mistakes in their peers' performance. This will help them to put great effort in oral English learning. And then it helps reduce the students' dependence on the teacher.

Finally, when the students practice their skills of assessing, they will find it is a recursive work. They will gradually learn to be more careful when organizing oral language. And the peers' mistakes and the shortcomings appeared in their speaking will remind the

4 The nature of speaking in foreign language learning

4.1 Speaking and foreign language learning

Language are referred to as "speakers" of the language, as if speaking included all other kinds of knowing; and many if not most foreign language learners are primarily interested in learning to speak. The aim of language learning is to communicate with the others is a well-accepted concept. So in many cases we have to express our ideas and send information to others by the oral form, which shows that the speaking skills are very important.

4.2 Oral English teaching in Chinese middle schools.

Speaking in foreign language in middle schools is inevitably an institutionalized activity, which only reflects the easy level of the target language. On most occasions, it is just at the beginning stage, but it influences the development and achievement of the language learning a great deal. Important as oral English is, it is, however, not well developed in Chinese middle schools. In the recent years, as the result of the innovation of language teaching, the competence of communicating becomes one of the main aims in English language teaching in middle schools. But it is still a fact that in middle schools many teachers don't pay enough attention to employing effective techniques in oral English teaching and learning. They don't do enough work to motivate the students in speaking and the students don't show enough interest in it, either.

Part of the reason for this is from the assessing method. The teachers haven't got the effective assessing approach in teaching speaking. The researcher has made a survey about the oral English classes in the area where she is an English teacher. It shows that very few teachers (only one out of ten) have tried peer-assessment in teaching oral English. So the researcher thinks that in order to improve the students' oral competence, the assessing method should be improved first and trying effective techniques to promote oral English learning in teaching oral English are what we must do at present.

4.3 The teacher's role of evaluation in oral English teaching

The teacher's role is quite different between the researcher's peer-evaluation and the traditional evaluation. In the traditional method, the teacher dominates the evaluation process, but the students are merely passive receivers. While in peer-evaluation method, the students are not just passive receivers, they themselves joined the work directly and the teacher always acted as organizer, observer and advisor etc, which is quite different from the traditional method.

It is an important part of the teacher's job to motivate learners. In more recent "learner-centered" approaches to language teaching, the teacher's function is seen mainly as a provider of materials and conditions for learning, while the learner takes responsibility for his or her own motivation and performance^[3]. In this kind of class, the teacher's role of motivating the speakers is emphasized. And furthermore, peer-evaluation is even more important for the teacher to turn the extrinsic motivation into intrinsic motivation

5 Major findings

The researcher made the experimental study in middle school and found peer-evaluation is efficient in improving the students' oral competence and cooperation in oral English class. In the process of the experiment, some findings were made both expectedly and unexpectedly. The major findings from the research and statistical analysis of the study data are the followings.

1). Peer-evaluation is better in improving the students' cooperation and their awareness of cooperation than teacher-oriented response, as long as it is well organized. Peer evaluation is a good way in improving the students' awareness of cooperation and the ability of cooperating. Each student gets much more advice from peer evaluation than just from the teacher-oriented comments.

2). Peer-evaluation is efficient in motivating students to be interested in oral English. Second language acquisition theory leaves no doubt about the crucial importance of motivation. The study shows that peer-evaluation has great effect in improving the students' interest in oral English.

3). Peer-evaluation is more efficient in promoting the students' oral competence as in cooperative oral English class with peer-evaluation adopted, the students are more active, interested and cooperative, and they have more opportunities to practice their oral

English and learn from their peers.

4).The changes of the learning atmosphere in cooperative oral English class are very obvious. Students become active in class and have discussion with group members. Many group members benefit from peer-evaluation and discussion. Peer-evaluation helped students become less anxious about oral English and cooperation and build up their confidence in cooperative oral activities. They can reflect, evaluate, and adjust their oral English learning process in time.

5). Teachers' instructions and help are useful and necessary when students meet difficulties in cooperative oral activities. Teachers' walking around the class is a great help, especially at the beginning of the experiment, when students are not familiar with the approach of peer-evaluation.

6 Implications of the research

The researcher has noticed the following implications that the teachers who want to employ the method should pay special attention to:

1).Organization is vital in peer evaluation. The experiment finds that there is no doubt that the group work has its own advantage. What matters is the organization, such as the component of the team member, the sitting and the working style, the teacher's way of instruction etc. It is important to have the students accept the technique itself and as far as be interested in it. In order to get a good result, training some students as organizers is rather necessary. Enough examples should be made at the beginning so that all the students have a good understanding of what to do during the procedure.

2).Timely summary and advice is necessary, especially at the beginning of the activity, because the students are not very familiar with the work or the working efficiency is not satisfying. So the researcher thinks that the teacher's advice and suggestions and even comments to their work are much helpful to the activity.

7 Suggestions for future research

Firstly, the number of subjects in the research is not big enough, so in future research, more subjects should be involved as many as possible to increase the validity and reliability of the research. Secondly, the subjects of this experiment are English majors. In future research, the average students should be selected as the subjects and the result may be more representative. Finally, this experiment lasts only one year. In the future research, the experimental time can be prolonged to see whether the students' interest and motivation in cooperative oral English learning will be affected or not in the prolonged time.

8 Conclusion

Evaluation is vital in helping students to improve their speaking skills. It can provide the student useful information of his speaking and give him an outside view of his speaking production. It can also help the students to gain the long-term improvement in their oral competence. So it is important for the teachers to employ an efficient method to help the students gain great progress.

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