

A Communicative Approach to Spoken English Course Design

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Speaking competence is one of the basic skills of language acquisition. The teaching of speaking skill has been attached great importance to in College English education in China. For decades, people have made efforts to improve the classroom teaching effects through various means, one of which is that of communicative approach. This paper attempts to explore the design of a spoken English lesson through a case study in the light of communicative theory, thus providing an alternative to the conventional spoken English course teaching method.

Keywords: spoken English, course design, a communicative approach

Introduction

Speaking, as part of the output of second language acquisition, accounts for a vital part in College English language education in China. It manifests students' capability in dimensions including pronunciation, vocabulary, syntax, discourse, and more importantly the appropriate expression of thoughts and the competence of communication.

For decades, teachers and researchers had been exploring various methods to conduct effective spoken English teaching by emphasizing that speaking competence was an object for expression. Therefore, the class was teacher-centered, with pronunciation and intonation practice, vocabulary and sentence pattern drills, and role-play performance.

Instead of the above-mentioned conventional teaching methods, the communicative approach provides a more practical perspective to ensure the teaching effect and the cultivation of students' speaking competence.

In the following part, the methodology of communicative approach will be introduced to conduct a spoken English lesson in College English education as a case study.

Communicative Approach

Allen and Widdowson (2000) propose "there is a need for new approach to language teaching which will shift the focus of attention from grammatical to the communicative properties of language" (p. 122). According to their understanding, language should be presented with its feature as communication. It is suggested that teachers should "foreground" characters of language that possess specific communicative value.

Conventionally, spoken English course design lays more emphasis on the accuracy of pronunciation and intonation and the mastery of vocabulary and syntax, while ignoring the fact that the speaking as a whole possesses its innate property of communication or function. As a result, the design of the spoken English lesson must take into consideration how to help the students respond to the context in terms of its communicative or functional property through various means.

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Spoken English Course Design: A Case Study

In the light of communicative approach, “the principal aim is to promote a knowledge of the language system, to develop the learner’s competence by means of controlled performance” (Widdowson, 2000, p. 118).

Learning how language is used is to give expression to certain reasoning process, how it is used to define, classify, generalize, to make hypotheses and draw conclusion, and so on (Allen, & Widdowson, 2000, p. 125).

In the following part, a case study of one spoken English lesson is exemplified to show how communicative approach is applied.

The Aims of the Lesson

1. To develop the speaking competence of expounding, discussing, and reflecting in the target language;
2. To cultivate the ability of expressing ideas through performances such as interview, seminar, debate, etc., in social settings;
3. To promote the practical skill of presentation in class through both speech and interaction with audiences;
4. To finish all the guided tasks in team-work.

Task Allocation

Since the lesson is to develop college students’ communicative competence of spoken English through teamwork in social settings, it is necessary to allocate the task and clarify the requirements.

1. Each group is to finish a project of the same general topic “harmony”.
2. Each group is to submit its own specific theme concerning “harmony”.
3. A project plan is supposed to submit to the teacher for review.
4. The project is to be carried out in various spoken forms such as discussion, interview, debate, etc., in real life settings (not in the classroom). Therefore, the students are supposed to conduct the above performances outside the classroom and record the whole process on video.
5. Each group is to present their project with the aid of PPT slides and give speech to the whole class.
6. Interaction with the audiences in the presentation is required.

It is worth mentioning that the students are college students who have mastered the basic speaking competence; therefore, the teaching focus is not on the pronunciation and intonation, or the vocabulary and syntax, but on the communicative competence, i.e., to perform certain complex tasks with related difficulty in social settings. The procedure of task allocation is as specific as possible so as to help the students accomplish the various steps with the application of target language.

Project Plan Review

This part is carried out on the form of review or seminar between the teacher and each group. Before the review, each group is supposed to narrow down the topic of “harmony” by formulating its own theme, some of which could be “The relationship between children and parents in family”, “How to keep the well-being of the underprivileged people in the society”, etc.

When the theme is submitted to the teacher, the discussion or seminar begins. The teacher asks each member of the group questions concerning their project; the following is the list:

1. How do you come up with the theme?
2. How do you plan to carry out the project?

3. Do all of you reach the agreement of the plan on consensus, or if there's any dispute in your preparation, what is it? How do you resolve it?

4. What is the possible difficulty in your project?

All the questions are open ones, and the answer to each of them depends on the nature of the project and the students' speaking competence. In the review, each group member is in fact assessed by the teacher, and the scores are also recorded against the criteria of content, logic, fluency & accuracy, vocabulary, and syntax. At the same time, related suggestions and advice are given by the teacher to each group.

Project Accomplishment

After the review is finished, the students carry out their respective plans. Each student assumes a certain role in their project and the task is accomplished in teamwork by one of the following suggested forms: interview, debate, role-play, etc. Since the course is to promote communicative competence of spoken English, students are encouraged to invite someone to take part in their project in social settings. For example, improvised interviews on campus are suggested.

All the projects are recorded on video and will be shared among all the class members. And the assessment is also conducted by the teacher according to form, content, language fluency and accuracy, involvement of real-life scenario.

Presentation: Project-Sharing

It is not sensible to end the lesson with the submission of the video, because the communication up till now is only confined to teacher-group, and members within the same group. As a result, it is necessary to provide each group with an opportunity to share their work with all the classmates in class and the recommended form is through presentation.

Before the presentation is given, a lecture is conducted concerning "how to give a presentation" by the teacher.

After the lecture, each group is supposed to present their own work with the aid of PPT slides which contains at least the following parts:

1. The introduction of the theme and group members with task allocation;
2. The introduction of the preparation of the project;
3. The presentation of the project briefly (limited amounts of video clips are allowed to supplement the presentation);
4. The difficulty and setbacks in the process and their resolution;
5. Reflection;
6. Q-A.

Each member is to give the presentation and the performance is assessed according to slide-design, content, language fluency and accuracy, interaction between the speaker and the audience.

The whole lesson covers at least four sessions, in which the students are assigned a task to finish with the use of the English language. Not all the processes are presented in class, e.g., the accomplishment of the project is conducted in the social setting in which a passer-by can be invited in the improvised interview, which has a relative high requirement for the students' communicative competence.

Besides this, the lesson is self-contained: The preparation, the planning, the project accomplishment, the presentation of the project, and the feedback from the audience are all included.

It goes beyond the limitation of the accuracy of pronunciation and the correct use of the vocabulary and syntax in conventional spoken English course. Instead, it promotes the motivation of the students by urging them to use the language to do something, to conduct a certain performance through the communication among group members, the teacher, the classmates, and also the interviewee in social setting.

Conclusions

In China, an average college student has learned English for 6-12 years since primary school or middle school. With certain foundation of the basic speaking skill, how to promote their speaking competence further is worth exploration in research. The communicative approach provides a possible way to apply what the students have learned about the language in real-life or social settings.

Brown and Yule (2000) mentioned that certain approaches permit the teacher to support and develop the student's ability to use language communicatively over a range of situations.

We shall be concerned not so much with the process by which the student comes to learn the forms of the language, since many years of language teaching has been devoted to that discussion, but with the process by which the student may come to use those forms creatively and appropriately. (p. 28)

References

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