

# An Action Research on Oral Participation in College English Class

Exemplified by College English Teaching in Harbin Institute of Technology at Weihai\*

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**Abstract**—An action research is carried out on oral participation in College English class. Equal participation is intended to be realized by means of improving teaching methodology. Instruments such as questionnaires, feedbacks and teaching reflection are used to collect data. After the action plans are applied, more equal oral participation in class is achieved by means of proper teaching methodology, which also leads to more positive and more active learning attitude.

**Keywords**—equal oral participation; teaching methodology; college English teaching

## I. INTRODUCTION

The importance of English learning has already been widely recognized by most Chinese students, and at the same time they have shown the urgent need to improve their English listening and speaking ability, which is also emphasized by The Teaching Guide of College English Course issued by Higher Education Department of Education Ministry in China (2017), in which there are some specific regulations about the comprehensive ability to apply language. Students can not only communicate in English in different ways in their work and social interactions, but also develop their intercultural communicative ability to adjust to the economic and social development and international communication. However, in current College English teaching, input and output cannot keep the balance. Research shows that college students spend 80% of their time on the input information, that is to say, they spend little time on output. The teaching content is outdated and fossilized, and the teaching pattern is comparatively fixed, so the whole class is boring, which is harmful to cultivate student's interest in English learning and communicative

ability. The reform of English teaching is urgent.

This paper aims to probe into a creative classroom pattern of College English course with equal oral participation based on action research, which is beneficial to improve college student's overall quality of English application, and is especially instructive and valuable to cultivate the intercultural communicative ability to satisfy the development of economic globalization.

## II. THEORY OF ACTION RESEARCH

Action Research (AR) is part of a broad movement that has been going on in education generally for some time. It is related to the ideas of "reflective practice" and "the teacher as researcher". AR involves taking a self-reflective, critical, and systematic approach to exploring teachers' own teaching contexts. So, in AR, a teacher becomes an "investigator" or "explorer" of his or her personal teaching context, while at the same time being one of the participants in it.

So, one of the main aims of AR is to identify a "problematic" situation or issue that the participants—who may include teachers, students, managers, administrators, or even parents—consider worth looking into more deeply and systematically. Again, the term "problematic" does not mean that the teacher is an incompetent teacher. The point is that teachers often see gaps between what is actually happening in their teaching situation and what they would ideally like to see happening.

The central idea of the action part of AR is to intervene in a deliberate way in the problematic situation in order to bring about changes and, even better, improvements in practice. Importantly, the improvements that happen in AR are ones based on information (or to use the research term, data) that an action researcher collects systematically. So, the changes made in the teaching situation arise from solid information rather

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than from hunches or assumptions about the way they think things are.

According to Kemmis and McTaggart (1988), who are major authors in this field, AR typically involves four broad phases in a cycle of research. The first cycle may become a continuing, or iterative, spiral of cycles which recur until the action researcher has achieved a satisfactory outcome and feels it is time to stop. (1) Planning. In this phase teachers identify a problem or issue and develop a plan of action in order to bring about improvements in a specific area of the research context. This is a forward-looking phase where teachers consider: what kind of investigation is possible within the realities and constraints of the teaching situation; and what potential improvements teachers think possible. (2) Action. The plan is a carefully considered one which involves some deliberate interventions into the teaching situation that teachers put into action over an agreed period of time. The interventions are “critically informed” as they question their assumptions about the current situation and plan new and alternative ways of doing things. (3) Observation. This phase involves teachers in observing systematically the effects of the action and documenting the context, actions and opinions of those involved. It is a data collection phase where teachers use “open-eyed” and “open-minded” tools to collect information about what is happening. (4) Reflection. At this point, teachers reflect on, evaluate and describe the effects of the action in order to make sense of what has happened and to understand the issue they have explored more clearly. Teachers may decide to do further cycles of AR to improve the situation even more, or to share the “story” of the research with others as part of their ongoing professional development.

### III. PROBLEMS IN COLLEGE ENGLISH TEACHING

English teaching has been developed in the past thirty years and satisfied the great demand of social and economic development of our country. On the other hand, many problems lurking in the traditional English teaching method emerge gradually. Dumb English has been the target of public criticism. Although the listening and speaking ability has gained a lot of attention these years, there are still many problems to be solved because of the long-term traditional teaching method.

Firstly, the class atmosphere and the teaching method are not adequate to the development of listening and speaking abilities. Classroom atmosphere is an important factor and proof to assess teaching effect, and also a reflection of mental expression of teachers and students. Studies show that students have high learning spirits and prompt reactions so that they can internalize the learning material quickly while students may have psychological confrontation and breed passive feelings towards study if they are under the boring, rigid, tense and repressive atmosphere. A major problem of listening and speaking class of College English is that the class atmosphere is not active where teacher works as a machine to input listening material while students have little even no time or courage to express. Over time students are not willing to speak English in class.

Secondly, student’s anxiety is a very important emotional factor to affect English listening and speaking. According to linguist Horwitz, language anxiety refers that learners feel anxious because of the insufficient communicative ability when learning a second language or a foreign language. Under the test-oriented English learning system, students focus on their ability of gaining high scores and at the same time neglect their listening and speaking abilities. They cannot understand what they have heard or speak up their ideas in their mind, which is the situation that frustrates most students, and therefore, a big anxiety is formed. This kind of anxiety makes them unwilling, embarrassed and ashamed to communicate in English, their interest in English disappearing gradually.

Thirdly, the topics in listening and speaking are a little outdated and incommunicative and cannot arouse student’s interest to communicate. The new and interesting atmosphere of English language is in a great demand.

Fourthly, learners have little understanding about the background and culture of the English-speaking countries. Without the recognition of their background knowledge and culture, sometimes it is very difficult to understand what native speakers say. Without understanding what they say, learners cannot output their reply. That is to say, understanding the background knowledge and culture of English-speaking countries is vital to real communication with native speakers.

All in all, those problems are harmful to English learners. This system needs to be reformed immediately. The output-driven, input-enabled hypothesis modified by Wen Qiufang provides a direction and guideline to college English teaching reform.

Wen Qiufang, a famous scholar of English teaching in China, put forward the output-driven hypothesis, and modified it into the output-driven, input-enabled hypothesis after putting it into teaching practice, which provided a new idea in English teaching reform and provided advanced theoretical support. The output-driven hypothesis consists of three sub-hypotheses. Firstly, from the perspective of psychological linguistics, the output-driven hypothesis indicates the output can promote second language acquisition more than the input. Without being driven by the output, high-quality input cannot ensure the efficiency of acquisition. Secondly, the output hypothesis proposes that cultivating learner’s expressive skills—speaking, writing and translating has more social function than the receptive skills—listening and reading. Thirdly, from the perspective of English teaching, the integrated approach with output-oriented is more effective than the single skill training and lives up to the future employment. After the output-driven hypothesis is put into the practical teaching, Professor Wen detects that there is no specific explanation about the relationship between input and output, so she modified it into “the output-driven, input-enabled hypothesis”, which indicates that output acts as both the driving force and the target of language acquisition, while input is the approach to enable learners to finish the current output task, but not only to cultivate learner’s comprehension ability. Students need to concentrate on searching for the required language knowledge from the input information if they are determined to finish the output task assigned by their teacher.

#### IV. ACTION RESEARCH ON ORAL PARTICIPATION

From what has been discussed so far, it is clear that to involve students more actively in classroom oral activities, it is prominent and urgent to make some new teaching plan:

(1) Change the teaching method. The textbook iEnglish based on the output-driven, input-enabled hypothesis promotes the teaching idea of teachers as the guide and students as the subject in order to motivate student's potential and desire to express and finish the output task. That is to say, all of the teaching activities need teacher's elaborate guide and student's active participation, which is very important to determine the teaching efficiency. In the last century, a teacher-centered system is dominant, where teachers have the pure authority to instill the teaching material while students have little time to participate in class teaching. In this kind of system, students only accept passively the instilled knowledge. Over time, the boring class cannot appeal to half of the students. Since the 21st century, a student-centered teaching idea, to some degree, has weakened teacher's role in the classroom teaching. Although classroom teaching is doomed to serve students, it does not mean that teachers are not important in class. Teachers are trained professionally and have a comprehensive understanding of the language system, and have a clear idea of the teaching focus and difficult points. Therefore, teachers should control the progress of the classroom teaching, adjust the teaching strategy consciously and provide help to students in time, finally reaching the best teaching and learning performance. All in all, in the class based on the output-driven, input-enabled hypothesis, teachers should be the teaching designer and manager, while students should be the cooperator, assistant, and evaluator of learning and teaching efficiency. Teachers input language knowledge selectively and skillfully, and assign corresponding and interesting output tasks, and at the same time students search for the concerned knowledge according to the output task, and accomplish the output task with the assistance of teachers. The harmonious cooperation of teachers and students make the learning process successful and effective.

(2) Design teaching activities practically and interestingly. When designing the class, teachers should think about student's structure of knowledge, learning aims, learning style and learning environment, and then decide the ideal teaching content, strategy of recognition. Teaching procedures are to realize the student-subjected teaching objective of improving their comprehensive ability to apply English language. On the other hand, teachers should teach students in accordance with their aptitude. When designing the teaching activities, teachers should think about the different major background of learners, their individual difference and their different language performance in order to assign the output tasks with clear intention, approximately authentic situation and rich language context, which are neither too easy to make learners lose their interest nor too difficult to frustrate learners at the first sight. All of these requirements are great challenges to teachers, which mean that teachers must be familiar with all the teaching materials and know how to arouse student's enthusiasm to take part in the class activities and finish the output task wonderfully. Teachers need to search for a number of heated social topics to design appropriate output tasks. The better and

more interesting the output task is, the more creativity and enthusiasm may be aroused. Internet provides great convenience and resources to teachers.

(3) Cultivate the ability of applying language comprehensively in class. That is to say, listening, speaking, reading, writing and translating should be practiced at the same time. In class, students are needed to note down the key words or the main points while they are listening or reading. And they are also needed to speak out what they have heard or read, even retell some parts of the materials. If necessary, students are asked to paraphrase some parts in their own words or give a summary of the listening or reading material. After they have understood completely, they are divided into several groups to speak out their reflection and make oral comments on what they learn. This kind of teaching design starts from the easier to the more difficult step by step. Teachers assign the output task first before inputting information and knowledge, which may arouse learner's thirst for knowledge. In this way, students can be motivated to study actively to the maximum and finish the assigned oral and writing tasks. The effective interaction between input and output makes all of the learning material linked perfectly.

(4) Evaluate objectively and effectively. The summative assessment is not suitable to assess learner's level of language application. The process assessment is a good supplementary approach. Students' comprehensive ability to apply English can be shown only through the combination of the summative assessment and the process assessment. What needs to be assessed is the ability to apply the English language, that is to say, to accomplish something in English, instead of the knowledge of English language. Therefore, the summative assessment at the end of term is not sufficient, and the process assessment in the daily class is more valuable and important. Every student can also see clearly his or her own progress on English learning through this kind of progressive assessment, which will increase their interest and courage to learn English. The more they speak, the better they speak. The positive cycle make them more enthusiastic to learn English. Students pay more attention to class participation and are more active to accomplish the output task. All of these make class atmosphere more active and harmonious. The combination of these two kinds of assessment approaches can also show students' performance more objectively. In addition, the feasibility of assessment should be ensured. Teachers should make students know the clear standards of assessment and establish a diversified assessment system including students' self-assessment, mutual assessment and teacher's test and assessment. Teachers can divide students into several groups. When one group is presenting their oral task, other groups can be judges and make their comments. In this way, all students participate effectively, and their output of listening and speaking ability is reflected objectively. The combination of these two approaches of assessment can truthfully show students' progress and their current expressive ability.

All in all, the specific aims are to explore why some students participate orally and why others do not; promote student voice by redesigning with students; discover how students feel towards the new oral participation pedagogy. In order to achieve these goals, a questionnaire was made in 12

College English classes (428 students, including the author's own 4 classes) randomly in 2017 Grade of Harbin Institute of Technology (Weihai) in Dec. 25, 2017. Some problems are reflected from the data of the following questions:

Most students can only have daily communication in English (64.72%) and listening ability is also their weakness (26.64). The most important reason leading to these problems is that they seldom take part in oral activities in class (67.29%). So why do they seldom participate in oral activities in class? In Question 13, some important factors can be seen clearly—no English speaking environment and less practice (73.6%), limited vocabulary (60.98%), being afraid of errors and incorrect pronunciation (51.4%), lack of specific guide and related accumulation of expressions (32.48%), being shy to speak to the whole class (31.78%).

TABLE I. QUESTION 5: WHAT DO YOU THINK ABOUT YOUR ORAL ENGLISH?

Items	Total	Proportion
It's so difficult to speak English.	6	1.4%
Simple sentences can be expressed, but listening is quite poor.	114	26.64%
Simple daily communication can be achieved.	277	64.72%
Sharing some ideas on familiar topics is possible.	31	7.24%

TABLE II. QUESTION 12: DO YOU PARTICIPATE ORAL ACTIVITIES IN CLASS?

Items	Total	Proportion
Usually.	37	8.64%
Seldom.	288	67.29%
Never.	103	24.07%

TABLE III. QUESTION 13: WHAT ARE THE FACTORS INFLUENCING YOUR ORAL PARTICIPATION IN CLASS?

Items	Total	Proportion
Limited vocabulary.	261	60.98%
Be afraid of errors and incorrect pronunciation.	220	51.4%
It's difficult to understand.	113	26.4%
Be shy to speak to the whole class.	136	31.78%
Courses of science and technology take much time.	108	25.23%
No English speaking environment, less practice.	315	73.6%
Lack of enthusiasm.	93	21.73%
Lack of specific guide and related accumulation of expressions	139	32.48%
Low efficiency in class.	42	9.81%

Because the survey was anonymous, the author thought that sharing some of the salient data was the best way to raise student awareness of the problems. After showing the students the data, the author made groups of four, asked them to discuss what oral participation means and to think of any other possible reasons why students choose to talk or to remain silent. Students gave some good suggestions, for example, personalizing discussion, starting a discussion with an easy or personal topic in order for everyone to contribute their ideas, choosing a group leader who is to ensure that everyone who

wants to speak during group work has a chance. Students thought that the leader might stop other students being talked over and feeling excluded. Adopting these good suggestions represented students' voice and their ideas about classroom procedures. Some of the suggestions adopted were not just for the students but also for the teacher, requiring the author to change the teaching methodology.

Take the oral presentation of Unit 2 Book 2 of *iEnglish* as an example. In order to personalizing this presentation, the author modifies the topics and requirements according to students' desires, if only the topics are related to art, which is the topic of this unit. By doing this, students can choose the topic they are interested and the group members they like to carry out the presentation. Therefore, they are more active and enthusiastic to do preparation and conduct the presentation.

Besides, the author gives students clear structure which can be followed by students to make the presentation logical and meaningful. At the same time, some useful expressions are also given to students, which is very helpful for students to express themselves very well.

Furthermore, the author made the action plan as follows from Feb.26, 2018—the beginning of this new term: Design colorful activities to arouse students' interest and learning motivation; Give students' specific guide on some oral activity; Create the English environment to increase students' speaking practice.

The output task of Unit 1, Book 2 of *iEnglish* is to make a presentation of comparing Socrates and Confucius. The author explains the steps of doing a presentation, including develops ideas, organize ideas, write the script and rehearse. The author gives out clear structure of the presentation for students to follow—point-by-point pattern or block pattern. Content should be composed of their life, philosophical ideas and contribution. As to the language, students are given some useful expressions for presentation in different parts. With the help of these guides, students can do better more confidently.

And at the same time, the author sets Office Hour once a week for students to have face-to-face communication in order to solve their shyness to speak to the whole class, give students' more specific guide and create English environment, which is welcomed by all the students.

TABLE IV. QUESTION 10: WHAT ACTIVITIES CAN IMPROVE YOUR SPEAKING ABILITY EFFECTIVELY IN CLASS?

Items	Total	Proportion
Presentation and debate	264	61.68%
English Corner	109	25.47%
English stage play	167	39.02%
English dubbing	298	69.63%
Reciting and reading	164	38.32%
Others	30	7.01%

According to the data of Question 10, the author designs colorful oral activities in class, such as presentation, debate, dubbing, reciting, group work of different kinds, etc., which



improve students' enthusiasm, and as a result, oral participation is developed.

After carrying out the action plan, the author did another questionnaire among the same group of students on Mar. 26, 2018 to do more reflection on the new teaching methodology.

Based on the data analysis, it's obvious that most students prefer the colorful oral activities in class (75.93%) and they are satisfied with these activities (80.14%), thus, participate these oral activities more actively. What's more, most students (81.31%) think their oral English has improved.

TABLE V. QUESTION 8: WHAT DO YOU THINK OF YOUR ORAL ACTIVITIES IN CLASS?

Items	Total	Proportion
Teacher says most of the time.	166	38.79%
Do pair work most of the time.	143	33.41%
Do colorful activities, such as debate, group discussion, dubbing, and so on.	325	75.93%
Practice by mass-media, watching English movies and imitating.	86	20.09%

TABLE VI. QUESTION 9: ARE YOU SATISFIED WITH THE ORAL ACTIVITIES IN CLASS?

Items	Total	Proportion
Very satisfied.	97	22.66%
Satisfied.	246	57.48%
Not sure.	68	15.89%
Unsatisfied.	13	3.04%
Very unsatisfied.	4	0.93%

TABLE VII. QUESTION 14: DID YOU IMPROVE YOUR SPEAKING ABILITY THIS TERM?

Items	Total	Proportion
Improve a lot.	57	13.32%
Improve a little.	291	67.99%
No obvious improvement.	75	17.52%
No improvement, but regression	5	1.17%

## V. CONCLUSION

Different teaching methodologies enable students to take on different roles. Although the author believes that creating a student-centered class rather than a teacher-centered one encourages more active participation, it does not guarantee that all students would act appropriately in their groups. A satisfying group experience correlates with the ability of the teacher to facilitate group work and ensure equality of group roles. This highlights the important role of teachers in ensuring equal opportunities to share. Oral participation evokes feelings of power and powerlessness. Those students who do not speak usually feel they are not recognized by their classmates and hence are excluded from the group. One way to create equality in the classroom is to shed light on this issue through action research. Through this research, students are involved in creating an action plan which engages them in the struggle for a more equal classroom. It is only after the author changes the

teaching methodology in class that students are able to participate the oral activities more actively, more enthusiastically and more equally.

Overall, this action research engages the author and the students in critically thinking about the practice of oral participation, which leads to a new teaching methodology and the promotion of students' comparatively equal participation. The author begins to realize how one style of participation privileges those students who are comfortably volunteering, while other students do indeed want to share their ideas but the old methodology and other students hinder them from doing so. Therefore, creating colorful oral activities and comfortable English environment, offering necessary specific guide, doing more practice, in light of the data, provide the students opportunities more equal oral participation in class.

The great achievement of this action research is that more reticent silent students are helped to transform into articulate expressive speakers in the classroom and feel included in the class. The author believes this research does indeed change the dynamic of the classroom.

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