A Study of Promoting Classroom Participation Based on Activities Approach

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Abstract

The study surveys learning needs of Chinese college students through the questionnaire. The results show that most B-level students get a clear understanding of their goals and make them more resourceful English learners. The research also demonstrates some students, especially the low C-level students have no definite need for English in their future goal. Faced with those challenges, the teacher is supposed to do utmost to attract their interest and participation in English by designing different activities to satisfy high level and low level students' needs in English classroom. Therefore some in and out- of- class activities are suggested which not only train students' face to face communicative and cooperative competence but also make the classroom teaching more interactive.

Key words: participation; interaction; College EFL classroom; activities approach

INTRODUCTION

With the increasing concern of college English reform in China, teachers and students have focused more attention on the oral English teaching and learning. However, the speaking fluency and properness are still low though cell phone 4G has walked into students' daily life. Educators expected there would be greatly improved in learners' listening and speaking abilities because students are exposed to wealthy of audial and visual English information. Actually, many non-major English students are mute in Chinese average universities, perhaps not so many in key universities 211 and 985. In Chinese average universities few of them actively put up hands in answering questions or group discussion except naming him or her. Talking with each other in English is rare in class either. The collapse has brought about teachers' anxiety and loss of confidence in teaching. In order to get more students involved in classroom activities, the research report proposes several actual case studies in the hope of gaining active atmosphere of language learning and use.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The origin of Activities Approach stems from the Communicative Approaches which assumes activity is the center of teaching. As language is like a tool, learners can study it by performing and teaching is to activate students to play a communicative role. It attaches much importance to the teaching process, that is, process is activity. The aim of teaching is to cultivate learner's Communicative abilities.

What is Communicative Competence? Four kinds of Competences of Canale & Swain (1980) are widely accepted despite scholars' different views on the content. They claim communicative competence includes grammatical competence (knowledge of the grammatical rules), sociolinguistic competence (knowledge of the rules of use and discourse), discourse

competence (cohesion and coherence) and strategic competence (knowledge of verbal and non-communication strategies).

The communicative approach started in the late 1960s in UK, worldwide spread in the early 1980s for new immigrants to English-speaking countries and international business. People attended the training schools to acquire listening and speaking skills so that they could live in the new environment or they could bargain in meetings. The authentic communication classroom did make it, so the successful experience went into the average EFL classroom. The great influence of the theory is the essential goal of language learning that develop learners' communicative abilities.

Generally speaking, communicative language teaching involves four resources : (1) functional-notionalism (language form and function in some context); (2) cognitivism (language is the behavior confined to some norms) ; (3) language acquisition theory (acquisition of natural circumstance); (4) humanism (learner' subjectivity and psychology). Among them, Widdowson (1978) is a famous contributor to language communicative theory. He states that language is a system of conveying meaning, and the fundamental function of language is communication. He adds, "The teaching of usage does not appear to guarantee a knowledge of use." (Widdowson, 1983). As a result, such issues as what to use, where to use, when to use and how to use usually happen in English class. To solve them, the teacher should cultivate learners' English communicative ability so that they can speak in proper time and place and manner.

Activities Approach, as one branch of Communicative Approach, has been a hot concern for more than 30 years since English language education experts Jeremy Harmer, one of the initiators proposed the teaching concept "the Balanced Activities Approach" (Harmer,1983). He specifies the concrete activities for learners to practice four skills and for teachers to design clear and meaningful tasks so as to attract students' heart and eye in classroom. Harmer's teaching thought of "the balanced activities approach" can represent the benefits that all learners are assured of joining in a variety of tasks to improve four language skills. He also attaches great importance to keep the balances between language input and output, between content and students' need, between learner's preference and teacher's control. He summed up three common features of successful language learners in his book "How to Teach English" (Harmer, 2007): (1) a continuous exposure to a language, although not fully understand or use that language ; (2) to exchange and be interested in learning the language; (3) have an access to learning the language. Jeremy Harmer explored three necessary elements in foreign language teaching: engage(input), study, and activate(use), referred to as ESA. Input is through the different activities and methods such as games, music, video, TV etc., causing students to learn materials, to encourage students to actively participate in classroom activities. If we teachers are aware that Learning is through classroom activities rather than simply sentence explanation and practice, we ought to enable students to have a good commander of pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary and other linguistic knowledge. Through the use of language activities inside and outside class, students are free to the actual use of any particular scene and topic, to the activities of a typical role-playing and discussion.

Another language pedagogy is task-based language use and learning, which is popular in China nowadays as its goal is similar to the activities approach. Rod Ellis(2000) says that an enormous growth of interest in task based language learning and teaching has captured the second language acquisition (SLA) researchers and language teachers.

Just as a coin has two sides, any language pedagogy is not perfect. Therefore, it is difficult to make reliable predictions regarding "communicative effectiveness" (Ellis, 2000). Yule points out "communicative effectiveness is determined not just by the nature of the task but also by learner factors, such as personality and cognitive style. Yule's two broad dimensions of communicative effectiveness is the identification-of-referent dimension and the role-taking dimension. As Skehan has pointed out, the inherent weakness of this approach lies in the failure to show a direct relationship between task-design and L2 acquisition (Ellis, 2000). Similarly, the same task might also result in very different kinds of activity depending on the role that the teacher plays in the interactions that arise at various stages of a lesson

RESEARCH REPORT

In this part, the researcher conducts a survey on students' learning English history, need and preference, evaluation of present English proficiency as well as the future goal in order to design some activities for ensuring that learners have opportunities to speak English in a large-size class.

Research Purpose

The study is designed to offer some practical tips for breaking students' silence based on some basic information of students' need and preference for teaching methods and interactive tasks in an English classroom. Therefore, some activities are designed to promote the interaction between T-S and S-S in EFL classroom in hope of developing students' oral English competence and building up an active environment.

Subjects

The subjects participating in this project are Chinese university sophomore students who major in Mathematics, Politics and Costume Design. The students from Math and Politics are B-level, much better than those from Cosmetic Design who are C-level classified according to their scores of the National English Test of High School (NETS). The targeted B-level is 135 graduate students and the C is 58 while ignoring differences in age, sex, family background and other personality traits.

Instrument

The instrument used in the research is a questionnaire which consists of three parts in order to gain better understanding of the learner's need and preference as well as teaching focus. The items are described as the sequence classification made with no theoretical sources according to Malhotra (1993) and Wen (2004). The first part (2 items) is background information. The second part (2 items) is self-evaluation of English competence and future expectation of English ability. The third part (6 items) is learners' need and preference (See Appendix).

Data Collection

Questionnaires were distributed and completed before the class began In October of 2014 under the teacher's supervision. They were asked to finish them according to their true conditions. After 10 minutes all the questionnaires were collected, and 180 of them were found to be valid, 13 copies were invalid.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS
Teaching and Learning Setting

The teacher is an experienced one and all learners in a large-size class will have fewer opportunities to participate in classroom activities with 3 periods in one week. They have the same textbooks with different requirements: for B-level learners, the progress is faster than C-

lever learners. The variations occur in the teaching environment before the new class starts, so there exists a much great challenge for the teacher who wants more students to speak English in class (See table 1).

Table 1 : Background information

B-level (129 subjects)				C-level (51 subjects)			
Learning history	infants' school	Primary school	Middle school	Learning history	infants' school	Primary school	Middle school
	22	89	18		8	35	8
NETS(full score 150)	<110	110-129	>129	NETS(full score 150)	<80	80-99	>99
	12	83	34		22	16	13

First, Table 1 demonstrates that the time for them to start learning English are similar to each other mainly due to the fact many of them began studying English in primary school, but there is a sharp contrast in the National English Test Score. Most students in B-level are good at English learning since their scores are above 110 while most of C-level students are below 100.

Second, most C-level students are not only poor at English, but they haven't the high future expectation of their English competence since the choice D is 5 persons and E is zero. By contrast, 111 B-level students think they are not good at English, but they have higher future desire for the comprehensive English abilities because the choice A and B is zero, and the choice D plus E is 104, that is, most of them dream of improving English competence so that they will establish a place in society (See table 2).

Table 2: Present English level and future expectation

B-level (129 subjects)						C-level (51 subjects)					
	A	B	C	D	E		A	B	C	D	E
present	25	29	57	14	4	present	16	22	13	0	0
future	0	0	25	49	55	future	5	11	30	5	0

STUDENTS' NEED AND PREFERENCE

The table 3 consists of three aspects: (1) the skill to be improved and how to boost; (2) learner's motivation for English; (3) learner's preference for in and out of class activities. The results show that B-level learners have a great desire for oral English improvement (item 1, A =56), making a sole speech in class after preparing well (item 3, A=63) and realizing the dream of good salary by means of advanced English proficiency (item 5: A=51, C=33; and 6: A=49, C=53) ; however, C-level learners hope to improve reading skill (item 1, D=21), rely on teacher's duck-feeding translation (item 3, D=28) and don't think highly of English for the future life (item 5, D=27; item 6, B=34). It is clear that Chinese students haven't had the habit of planning the learning time: 35 learners in B and 30 learners in C think it is bothering them (See table 3).

Table 3: Learners' needs and preferences

B-level (129 subjects)					C-level (51 subjects)				
items	A	B	C	D	items	A	B	C	D
1	56	34	26	13	1	6	12	11	21
2	25	36	47	21	2	4	14	7	26
3	63	34	30	5	3	9	5	9	28

4	21	32	41	35	4	2	8	11	30
5	51	22	33	23	5	7	9	8	27
6	49	17	53	10	6	3	34	6	8

There are many reasons for the situation, such as belief and attitude, motivation, learner's strategy, affective mood and personality. Firstly, the main cause is that the traditional grammar-translation teaching method made them get used to the teacher-centered classroom for remembering grammar rules, words and expressions. English teachers in primary and middle school overuse the grammar-translation approach and seldom are aware of the significance of task-based language use and learning from the psycholinguistic perspective, especially pupils in the elementary school, they were not allowed enough time for speaking and singing English as language is learned in a native way, that is, speak or sing English first, read second, write last. In the course of speaking crucial days, teachers shrugged off the authentic task-based activities for their pupils to join in, how can college English teachers make up for the loss?

Secondly, any English textbook is essential in every stage of English learning in China, so how to utilize depends on teachers. In such situation teachers make great sense in classroom participation as they are the organizers who are supposed to spend much time preparing well and creating plenty of suitable tasks in accordance with the textbook to arouse learners' engagement. As Jeremy Harmer (1983) pointed out, "The textbook is an aid and not a bible. The teacher will have to work out the best way to use the textbook, he should never let the textbook use him."

Thirdly, the role of teacher in communicative classroom is certainly a challenge. Marton ever pointed out, "the teacher's role in communicative teaching is often that of a native informant … and the teacher has to be always prepared for any linguistic emergency." (Xu Ping, 1999:7) In a word, any teacher that wants to have a dynamic, creative and exploratory learning process has to work hard to arouse learner's interest and give learners more opportunities to practice.

Suggestions for Spurring Learner's Participation
Confronted with the embarrassing English classroom, a teacher is supposed to listen to his learners' silence and tell them the fact "learn to speak, we have to actually speak." (Li Shunying, 2003: 87)Moreover, we are patient with silent students as they are scared of talking in audience. Their passive silence doesn't mean the poor ability, actually "a learner can be active by being a silent speaker" (Nunan, 2001). There are a lot of students who are good at reading, writing and translating, so teachers should keep in mind when and how to invoke them in participation because learner-participation will benefit speaking autonomy and stimulate learner's interest. In other words, teachers should treat them as equals. If they join actively, the classroom will fill up with English voice. Now some keys to breaking silence are listed in the following:
1. Create a low anxiety speaking environment
2. Balance turns between extroverts and introverts
3. Design activities that can enhance self-confidence
4. Design activities that can arouse interest
5. Train learners in speaking strategy

Since the class is large-sized and the course period is 3 per week, it is not flexible for many students to talk with each other. Both inside and outside activities are assigned in advance for practicing, after class in particular. There are three tasks designed to get them involved: (1)

solo oral class report; (2) short play; (3) pair work and group discussion. Those are popular in China as we all exploit some of them to add the interactive atmosphere. As for the task 1 and 2, the evaluation must be made in class by the teacher and students together according to each live show, and the score is 5-10 points which will enter into the final term test. The class performance is favorable to students in that they take the tasks seriously and all do surf on the Internet and make wonderful PPT presentation.

OUT-OF- CLASSROOM PREPARATION AND INSIDE SHOW
Solo oral class report
This activity includes 1.5 minutes paper speech for Grade 1 in turn in the first term, 3-5 minutes PPT presentation for Grade 1 in turn in the second term, 3-5 minutes PPT background information presentation for Grade 2 volunteers in the third and fourth term. The topic is free and each freshman can choose what he or she is fond of, but the content is confined to the following lists: A. Introduce you, your family, hometown; B. Describe the book, film, person, historical site you like best; C. News report on political issue, sports, all walks of stars; D. Future dream: job, life, wife and husband, house; E. Introduction to Chinese culture such as traditional customs, local ceremony, ancient celebrity.

Another activity is related to background information TTP presentation which is not free as the subtopics are offered by the teacher. All subtopics focus on the title in the textbook. Volunteer students are to surf online for information such as pictures, music, video and the like.

Short play
It is a free task with 3-8 people per group that students can perform what they love. The micro-movie homework is assigned at the beginning of new term and all participants draw lots for turns to show off. After 6 weeks preparation outside class they display in class in turn. Chinese students comments highly because it is creative and cooperative.

IN CLASS ACTIVITIES
Pair work and group discussion are conducted in Listening and Speaking course, Reading and Writing course. Communicating strategies are trained in pair or in group. While answering questions, students can discuss them together. However, when it comes to talking with each other in a polite way or in a proper English, the Chinese manner arises. For instance, how to offer another opinion about the vacation work, most Chinese learners reply stiffly, "no, it is exciting". In fact, the proper expression is "yes, that's true, but it is exciting", or "Even so, …", or "maybe…,but don't you think…". Another occasion is how to show interest by saying "Oh, no!", "Oh!", "Uh, huh" and so on. Most Chinese students are not fully aware of the flexible use of the suitable strategies in the different pair work tasks, so it is worthwhile to train them so that they can open mouth actively.

As a teacher, we ought to exploit many opportunities to exert learners' communicative competence. Actually, different teaching methods are used according to students' different levels and needs. For B-levers, all above activities can be carried out, while pair work and group discussion in class are not appreciated by C-levers as it is shown in the survey.

CONCLUSION
In comparison with past decade, great changes have taken place in EFT classroom. Today's learners have more chances to acquire face-to-face talking through the Internet. If we teachers can cruise alongside the native speaker, students can reap a lot from classroom teaching and

self-surfing despite the fact they are silent in English learning in that they are in the authentic English environment, which is good luck to all English learners all over the country. What we ought to do is to design activities which can urge learners to talk with each other in English outside and inside class no matter what English level they are labeled.

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APPENDIX

Questionnaire for Learners' Need and Preference of 2014 Non-English Majors
(original version in Chinese)

The survey aims to promote learner's active participation in English classroom so that he/ she could improve oral English. Please complete it with attention. We appreciate your response.

Part I. Background information
1. Major_____
2. When to begin studying English: A. infants' school ___   B. Primary school___   C. Middle school____
3. National English Test Score (NETS)_____

Part II. Present English level and future expectation
1. Present English Level_____
a) Lower: Those who know 1000 words and expressions and are poorer in 5 skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing and translating).
b) Low: Those who know 1500 and are good at reading but are poor in 4 skills (listening, writing and translating).
c) Medium: Those who know 2000 and are good at listening and reading, but poor in speaking, writing and translating.
d) Good: Those who know 2500 and are good at reading, listening, writing but poor in 2 skills (speaking, translating)
e) Better: Those who know 3000 and are good at reading, writing and translating but poor at speaking.

2. Future Expectation of English Competence_____
   a) Those who know 2000 and are good at listening and reading, but poor in speaking, writing and translating.
   b) Those who know 2500 and are good at reading, listening, writing but poor in 2 skills (speaking, translating)
   c) Those who know 3000 and are good at listening, reading, writing and translating but poor at speaking.
   d) Those who know 4000 and are good at 5 skills.
   e) Those who know 5000 and are good at 5 skills, fluent oral English in particular.

Part III. Learners' Needs and Preferences

1. Which skill do you hope to improve ? _____
   a) speaking
   b) listening
   c) writing
   d) reading
2. Which teaching mode do you like ? _____
   a) sentence paraphrase
   b) text structure analysis
   c) focus on words and expression
   d) focus on grammar and translation
3. What classroom activity you prefer to join in___
   a) Presentation
   b) pair work
   c) group discussion
   d) no learner-participation
4. Do you plan your English learning? _____
   a) yes, always
   b) yes, sometimes
   c) no, thinking for a while
   d) no, too troubled
5. You think the advantage of learning English is _____
   a) job hunting
   b) improving interest
   c) post-graduation or going abroad
   d) others
6. Will you further English learning after passing CET4 or CET6? _____
   a) yes
   b) no
   c) depend on situation
   d) no idea