

Teaching Oral English from the Perspective of Educational Ecology*

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Abstract—Every year in China, thousands of University students passed the College English Test Band 4 and College English Test Band 6. However, these students found that after they entered into the society, they still could not speak English. Why? With this question in mind, the paper is designed to discover the problems in oral English teaching from the perspective of Education Ecology, and also, bring out the solutions to these questions.

Index Terms—dumb English, Education Ecology, oral English teaching, College English Test

I. INTRODUCTION

In a traditional English class, students only receive passively what their teachers want them to learn. In this environment, teachers value “how to teach” more than “how should students study”. We have long been promoting “student centered”, but we still have a long way to go to realize it. Secondly, traditional teachers put much emphasis on procedural knowledge, but ignores oral English practice. Thirdly, students lack real language environment. Some teachers can not speak English well themselves, which will have negative impacts on students. Last but not least, students are afraid of making mistakes, therefore, they are not confident in speaking English. In the long-term, oral English will become a burden for them, and students will finally give up on speaking English.

If we compare the traditional English class to an ecological system, the teachers and students can be seen as ecological subjects, and teaching environment and teaching methods can be regarded as ecological objects. We can know from the problems mentioned in the last paragraph that this ecological system is not well balanced. So in order to improve oral English teaching, we should create a balanced ecological system for it. And the answer can be found from Education Ecology.

In 1858, naturalist Henry David first put forward the concept of ecology. Then in 1868, Haeckel defined it as the scientific study of the relations of animals to each other and their surroundings (Haeckel, 1905). With more and more researchers step into this field, the connotation of ecology has been broadened, and many branches of ecology have come into being. There are two main branches of ecology: bioecology and humanecology. The Education Ecology is one of the important branches of humanecology, which provides a new perspective for education. One definition of Education Ecology is that it is a discipline integrating natural, social sciences and the humanities researching in the interrelation of a person as an individual and/or a social system with the multidimensional environment in a holistic perspective in the aspect of education as means promoting the development of the sphere, process and result of human activities, the content of interrelation, human and environment qualities/characteristics. To put it in a plain way, Education Ecology is mainly about the relations between education and the environment. Researches on the Education Ecology began from the British scholar Ashby who first put forward the concept of ecology of higher education, which stands for the milestone of applying ecological principles into the study of higher education. Later in 1970s, Cremin and Eggleston took the lead in the study of Education Ecology. Thereafter, a growing number of scholars conducted many researches on Education Ecology (Cremin, 1976; Eggleston, 1979).

In addition, domestic and foreign scholars have done many researches on oral English teaching. Task-based approach appeared in the late 1970's in India, which is a new model of teaching, and this approach emphasizes communicative language teaching and learning. In China, task-based approach has become a research trend. Liu Ting from Hebei Normal University thinks that task-based approach can be used to change students' attitude toward oral English, thus improving their oral English. Canadian scholars Gardner and Lambert did a research on oral English learning from the perspective of social psychology (Gardner and Lambert 1972). They think the learning of oral English is driven by instrumental motivation and integrative motivation. Wilga M Rivers think that the interaction between teachers and students is of great importance to oral English teaching. She insists that oral English teaching should follow this principle strictly (Wilga M Rivers, 1978).

There are many researches in the field of Education Ecology and oral English teaching. However, the study of oral English teaching based on Education Ecology is rare. This paper tends to improve oral English teaching from the perspective of Education Ecology.

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II. CHARACTERISTICS OF ORAL ENGLISH AND EDUCATION ECOLOGY

This part focuses on the characteristics of oral English and Education Ecology. By analyzing the essential attributes of Education Ecology environment and oral English, the author will draw to a conclusion that it's feasible to improve oral English teaching with the ideas from Education Ecology.

A. *Characteristics of Education Ecology*

Just like other subjects, many principles are required in ecology, that is, the ecological principles. Ecological principles usually include ecological system, niche, co-evolution, competition, cooperation and ecological balance. Taking the research purpose of this paper into consideration, the author will mainly focus on ecological system and ecological balance.

In traditional sense, Ecological system is a biological community of interacting organisms and their physical environment. With time goes by, the connotation of ecological system has been greatly broadened. Nowadays, ecological system not only refers to the natural ecological system in biology, but also the ecological system in human society and activities. And both natural and human ecological systems share some common characteristics. Next the author will elaborate these characteristics.

1. Mutualism

Ecologically, mutualism refers to the concept that the living of one organism depends on the existence of another organism, and these two organisms will contact with each other both directly and indirectly. As for Education Ecology, mutualism is very apparent between students and teachers. For example, when it comes to the evaluation of one particular teacher, the main issue to consider is the performance of his or her students. Therefore, students are indispensable for the success of teachers. For another, students rely on teachers to gain not only knowledge but also social virtues. Also, a harmonious relationship with teachers can well promote the overall development of students. In order to achieve their separate goals, communication between students and teachers is necessary. Through communication both in and outside the class, students and teachers realize mutualism.

2. Integrality

In ecology, many organisms constitute a stable and ordered community. And every organism itself is also a stable and ordered community, which is composed of many parts. In order to function well, the ecological system has to be well integrated.

For example, in a real school environment, if a student wants to make to the top in the class, he or she needs to make many preparations such as pre-learning, practice and reviewing. And he or she needs to coordinate these elements so that they can be well integrated. Satisfactory results will be achieved if the study elements are well integrated. In the same way, if a teacher wants to achieve satisfactory teaching results, he or she needs to integrate teaching elements such as arising students' learning interest, creating harmonious class environment and providing fair evaluation. On the other hand, students and teachers also form a community in which student and teacher can influence each other. The relation between students and teachers exerts great importance. Teachers should trust students first in order to gain the trust of students, and students and teachers share equal status and mutual respect. And these are the integrated elements for establishing a harmonious relationship between students and teachers. With integrated studying elements, teaching elements and harmonious teacher-student relationship, we can certainly achieve expected results. In essence, the Integrality of Ecological System is achieved.

3. Covariance

Covariance in ecology means that the evolution of one organism will influence another organism or some relative organisms, and these organisms will change correspondingly. In the real school environment, covariance happens very frequently. For example, if a teacher is passionate in the class, the students will be affected and perform actively in the class. And if a teacher sees the laziness in students' eyes, his or her passion might slowly fade away. In this case, the school environment can be seen as an ecological system, and the reaction between students and teacher is the covariance of ecological system.

4. Dynamic balance

In ecology, the structures and functions of the parts of the ecological system are constantly adjusting themselves so that to be coordinated with each other. This is called the dynamic balance of ecological system. In the school environment, teachers will set a teaching target for a certain period. In the process of achieving this teaching target, students need to constantly adjust their studying plans to catch up with what they have learned in the class. And the teachers should constantly adjust teaching plans, so that they will not be too far ahead of the schedule or lag behind.

B. *Characteristics of Oral English*

Oral language, as a face to face verbal language, is an important tool to communicate with others. Oral English is a term relative to written English, which includes the active oral speech and passive oral speech. Active oral speech refers to speaking and the passive oral speech refers to listening. As for the language learning, human learned to speak first, then was writing. So the same will go for the study of English. There are three basic elements for the learning of oral English.

The first element is vocabulary, which is the foundation of oral English. As the old saying goes "One can't make

bricks without straw”, vocabulary can be a barrier for many English learners. It’s a common phenomenon that many students get stuck while speaking English because they can not find one proper English word.

The second element is grammar. If we compare oral English as a pearl necklace, the vocabulary can be seen as the pearls, and grammar would be the thread that strings the pearls. Along with the structure of sentences, grammar plays a vital part in the learning of oral English.

The third element is pronunciation. Without the help of non-language tools, you can understand what others say only when you can recognize their pronunciation. And mutual communication happens only when both sides can understand each other’s pronunciation. In addition, the pause, stress and intonation will affect oral English learning directly.

According to these elements, we can generalize four characteristics of oral English. The author will elaborate in detail.

1. Synchronicity

When one speaks English, he or she can not prepare every sentence and then speak it out. As a matter of fact, speaking and linguistic thinking should proceed in synchrony.

A joke can well explain the synchronicity of oral English, which is about Chinese students speaking English. One day in America, a Chinese student fell from the cliff, then he shouted for help. Later on an American passed by and asked: “How are you?”. The student replied: “I am fine, thank you!”. The student never came out. This joke shows that the way many Chinese students learn English violates the synchronicity of oral English, which requires the synchrony of speaking and thinking.

2. Interactivity

Like other languages, oral English requires active communication between listeners and speakers. Take one famous television program *friends* for example, many people found that the daily talks interesting, and that should give credit to the interactivity of oral English.

3. Situationality

As for the same contents and topics, the way we express them varies with different situations. For example, in a face to face situation, one might say *hi, my name is Tom*. But in a telephone situation, he will say *hi, this is Tom speaking*. So we can see the way we talk should comply with the situation, or else we may make mistakes or offend others.

4. Comprehensiveness

Oral English require comprehensiveness in aspects including grammar, intonation, gestures and pronunciation. If one speaks without changing the intonation, the language will be dull. In addition, body language makes the language more vivid, which plays an important role in conveying information to others. To achieve the comprehensiveness of oral English, one needs to coordinate these elements properly.

C. Summary

After studying and comparing the characteristics of Education Ecology and oral English, the author found the similarity of these characteristics, which will provide theoretical support for the study of oral English teaching based on education ecology. The author will elaborate in the next paragraphs.

Synchronicity and mutualism. From the context mentioned above, we can know the action of speaking and linguistic thinking goes in synchrony, therefore these two elements rely on each other to exist. Without linguistic thinking, we have nothing to speak; without the need to speak, there will be no need for linguistic thinking. From this perspective of ecology, we can say the living of one organism depends on the existence of another organism. So synchronicity of oral English follows the mutualism in ecology.

Interactivity and integrality. In ecology, in order to function well, the ecological system has to be well integrated. As for oral English, the listener and speaker have to do their separate jobs, that is the listening and speaking. In addition, the listener and speaker form a community, in which the listener and speaker actively communicate with each other. In this sense, interactivity of oral English follows the integrality in ecology.

Situationality and covariance. In ecology, covariance means the evolution of one organism will influence another organism or some relative organisms, and these organisms will change correspondingly. The same goes for oral English, that is, the way we express the same contents varies with the change of situations. So the situationality of oral English follows covariance in ecology.

Comprehensiveness and dynamic balance. In ecology, dynamic balance means the structures and functions of the ecological systems are constantly adjusting themselves so that to be coordinated with each other. Similarly, a good English speaker can coordinate elements like intonation, pronunciation and body gestures. If he mistakenly conveyed the wrong message to others, he would adjust some of the elements. So the comprehensiveness of oral English follows the dynamic balance in ecology.

Oral English itself is just like a mini ecological system, and it follows the rules in ecology. This proves that the study of oral English teaching based on Education Ecology in feasible. In the following part, the author will analyze the problems in oral English teaching from the perspective of Education Ecology.

III. PROBLEMS IN ORAL ENGLISH TEACHING

This part the author will analyze the problems in oral English teaching from the perspective of Education Ecology. A

balanced ecological system should follow some certain principles, which includes the law of limiting factors, flower pot effect and law of niche. The author will illustrate the problems from these three aspects.

A. *Lack of Limiting Factors*

According to a scientific research, it is not the amount of nutrients but the amount of nutrients that are needed that determines the output of grains. If we want to increase the output substantially, the only way is to increase the amount of these needed nutrients. These needed nutrients are called limiting factors, which are more important than other factors. Some phenomena in oral English teaching violate the law of limiting factors.

1. Students' lack of interest

Take the author's experience as a part-time oral English teacher as example. When the author asked his students about their view about oral English, almost all of them told him that their oral English was not good. Few students told him that they liked speaking English. As we all know, interest is the best teacher. The author chose English as his major because he like English. However, many students lack interest for oral English. Since interest is an important limiting factor for the learning of oral English, oral English became one big barricade for many Chinese students.

2. Lack of English environment

Another important limiting factor for oral English is English environment. All of us can master our native language because we were born to this language environment in which everyone speaks the same language. But when it comes to the learning of second language, we do not have the language environment, so it becomes more difficult to learn it. In our English class, the dominated environment is still Chinese environment instead of English environment. Some teachers themselves can not speak English fluently, which will have negative impacts on students. In the long term, students will stay at where they started and hardly make any improvement on oral English.

B. *Lack of Oral English Practice*

Flower pot is an artificial living environment. Because of those comfortable conditions created by human beings, flowers in the pot can grow well in a short period of time. However, without careful attendance, those flowers will wither and then die.

In our English classes, teachers often plant students in flower pots. Chinese teachers often put great emphasis on procedural knowledge, such as words and phrases. And students are often required to memorize the procedural knowledge. However, these knowledge can only provide nutrients for students for a short period of time, but can not guarantee the long-term development. When it comes to reading, the students may understand the meaning of the text. But they can not speak English, because all they know is about words and phrases, and they haven't learned the skills for organizing these words and phrases.

C. *Teachers as the Authorities*

According to the ecology theory, niche refers to different positions of species. The species of the same position have to compete with each other and it's impossible that two kinds of species will get along with each other for a long period of time. Under the situation of resource shortage, species compete with each other seriously to get the greatest survival advantage in particular ecological position. The following two cases in oral English teaching violate the Law of Niche.

1. Disharmony of teacher-student relation

One of the key points of learning oral English is talking in English on a regular basis. English teachers inevitably play the important role of starting a conversation in English classes. However, the disharmony of teacher-student relation often stops the interaction between students and teachers from happening. Usually, Teachers' partiality in English classes lead to the disharmony of teacher-student relation.

Chinese teachers tend to categorize students into good student (refer to A in the following) and bad student (refer to B in the following) according to their performance. With that concept in mind, partiality may be given to A, and B may be neglected. According to the Law of Niche, B will try harder to compete with A. However, teachers' partiality will greatly frustrate B' confidence. Thus, the relation between B and the teachers becomes disharmonious. Gradually, B will lose confidence in oral English learning, and he/she will blame the teacher for his/her less satisfactory performance in English speaking.

Apart from the partiality occurring in classes, teachers' partiality in other situations such as extracurricular activities may also cause the disharmony of teacher-student relation. This violates the Law of Niche because students can not have an impartial environment to study and to compete with each other.

2. Teacher-centered teaching

The emphasis of English learning should be put on speaking. Although many teachers know that and often encourage students to speak English on a regular basis, they are actually hindering students from doing so. In fact, students are frequently required to recite procedural knowledge such as words and phrases, and students are limited by the dull practice like this.

A successful teaching should be student-centered. Students have the right to choose their own studying methods, at the same time, teachers should give a correct guidance to students. Therefore students and teachers have separate duties and positions. The Law of Niche is violated in teacher-centered teaching because teachers compete for a position which does not belong to them.

IV. BUILDING OF BALANCED ECOSYSTEM FOR ORAL ENGLISH TEACHING

In Education Ecological system, the teachers and students can be seen as ecological subjects, and teaching environment and teaching methods can be regarded as ecological objects. However, in the ecological system of oral English teaching, the subjects and objects violate three laws in Education Ecology. Therefore, this ecological system is not balanced.

From the perspectives of subjects and objects, this part of the paper focuses on the building of balanced ecosystem for oral English teaching. The process consists of three parts: providing limiting factors for students, switching emphasis to oral English practice and student-centered teaching.

A. *Create Limiting Factors for Students in Oral English Teaching*

In Education Ecology, students are the main subjects. As the author mentioned before, limiting factors are vital to the survival and development of the subjects. Therefore, by providing students with the limiting factors, they can achieve a better performance, which is conducive to the balance of ecological system.

1. Arousing students' interest in English speaking

As Confucius said: "People who know it are no better than those who love it; Those who love it are no better than the ones who love to know it." It's a universal truth that interest is the best teacher. Many students are not willing to learn English because they are not interested in English. Therefore, the first step in oral English teaching is to arouse students' interest in oral English learning.

In an English class, we can often find that most students are silent throughout the whole class, or some students are hesitating about whether they should speak or not. Anxious psychology, which is the anxiety and fear one expresses when he/she speaks in a foreign language, can destroy students' confidence in speaking English. Therefore, teachers should take some measures to avoid anxious psychology.

First, teachers should create a relaxed atmosphere in English classes. This requires teachers to abandon the traditional concept of "teachers are the absolute authorities". Teachers should not expect students' servile obedience, instead, teachers should be the close friends of students. Harmonious teacher-student relation will put students at ease in the class. In addition, the choice of English topic should be carefully considered. Generally, students will not feel anxious about familiar and life-related topics, such as movies, novels, music, basketball, social affairs, etc. Students all have their own opinions about these topics. However, political, military and technological issues are too intricate for students, which will make students feel stressed. Of course, the level of difficulty should be continuously adjusted according to the overall level of the students.

Second, learn how to ask questions and praise students. Usually, teachers like appointing one of his/her students to answer questions. This behavior will put students in intense anxiety. Changing the way of raising questions will achieve much better effect. For example, the class can be divided into groups, and for every question raised by teacher, students in the group will discuss the question together and then the representative of this group can answer the question. This can not only greatly avoid students' anxiety but also increase the interaction between students. In addition, teachers should never criticize on students' wrong answers. The learning of a language is the process of practicing and making mistakes. Teachers should encourage students to speak in English without worrying making mistakes. It is what they learn from these mistakes that lead to the master of English. More importantly, for any progress students make, teachers should give a positive response to them by using the expressions like wonderful, well done and good job.

In oral English teaching, teachers should help students release psychological burdens and keep them motivated in English learning. In this way, students will form an interest in English learning, which will make English learning more enjoyable.

2. Providing language environment for students

As we all know, a child can easily master a language because he/she lives in the language environment. In an English class, Chinese students hardly have any opportunity to practice oral English. Therefore, teachers should try to provide students with English environment. This can be done via extracurricular activities and the orientation of British and American culture.

Extracurricular activities like English Club, English Salon can provide students with good English environment. By participating in these activities, students are motivated to speak English because they are exposed into the English environment. By communicating with classmates on a regular basis, their oral English can be greatly improved. Multi-media classroom should also be open to students so that students can watch English movies or listen to English songs. In this kind of environment, English learning are turned into a natural process. In the long-term, the efficiency of oral English teaching can be greatly increased.

The orientation of British and American culture will also help to create English environment for students. For example, on some special occasions such as the Christmas Day and the Halloween, teachers can take this opportunity to organize all kinds of activities to give a culture orientation to students. Since the western festivals are becoming more and more popular in China, their culture can provide students with more favorable environment to learn English.

B. *Switch the Emphasis to Oral English Practice*

The objects like teaching environment and teaching methods also play an important role in Education Ecology. These

objects can provide subjects with favorable conditions to develop. We can provide students with these favorable conditions by switching the teaching emphasis to oral English practice.

According to the Flower Pot Effect, procedural knowledge like words and phrases can not help students improve their oral English. However, it is not realistic to require teachers to put aside some time in the class for oral English practice, because they have to finish the teaching targets of every semester. Teachers can only provide students with a few opportunities to speak English in the class. But this is far from adequate. Students need more time to practice oral English. This requires the establishment of the second class. A second class refers to a public stage for English communication. There are some different forms of second class.

English speaking competition. A good English speech requires a lot including intonation, pronunciation, stress, body language, eye contact as well as a clear idea that you want to convey to the audience. Therefore, English speaking competition provides students with a wonderful opportunity to practice oral English. Teachers can select some hotly debated topics from the newspaper or Internet. Students then prepare speech draft on their own. In the process of speech writing, students are highly motivated to learn the pronunciation of words, how to express an idea in a more precise way and how to behave while giving a speech to others. And by competing with each other, students can learn from each other. For example, student A have a good pronunciation, but the body language of student B is more natural. In addition, teachers should encourage shy students to take part in the competition, which can efficiently build up their confidence. So English speaking competition can not only improve students' oral English but also build their confidence in English speaking, which make English speaking competition a great opportunity to practice English.

Role play. The class can be divided into several groups, three to five students for each group. Every day when the class is over, the teacher can assign a task to one of the groups, that is to give a short scene play in English before the start of next English class. The topic should be interesting and easy for role playing. For example, if the group have five boys, topics like "Michael Jordan' travel to China" will be appropriate. One boy can act as Jordan, and the others can be his fans and reporters that interviews Michael Jordan. Since boys are interested in basketball, English role play can arouse their interest in English learning and help improve their oral English. What's more important, this activity will only take a few minutes, but the yielding will be twice the effort.

The use of multimedia devices. In well-developed areas, teachers can make full use of the multimedia room. Once in a week, students can have an English movie class. After a clip of English movie or other English videos, teachers can organize a dubbing competition immediately. Dubbing is interesting and is conducive to the learning of intonation and pronunciation. In a less developed area, English teacher can use the recording machine. For every sentence played in the recording machine, students are required to repeat. With the use of multimedia devices, English teaching is no longer a boring task, instead, students are willing to learn English and speak in English.

By providing students with the second class, students can not only learn the procedural knowledge in the class but also practice oral English in the second class.

C. *Switch to Student-centered Teaching*

According to law of niche, species of the same position have to compete with each other and it's impossible that two kinds of species will get along with each other for a long period of time. In a balanced ecological system, students should be in the dominated position of learning. However, teachers usually occupy this position, which directly causes the disharmony of teacher-student relation. So we should establish harmonious teacher-student relation and adjust teaching methods to realize student-centered teaching.

1. Harmonious teacher-student relation

A good teacher-student relation should be harmonious and democratic. This ecological atmosphere can motivate students to study with enthusiasm. A good teacher will never give up on students with bad performance. Instead, the teacher will care more about these students by constantly encouraging them. In return, these students will become more and more confident in study, and their performance will improve.

Apart from treating every student equally, teachers should also give full respect to students. Since every student has a different background, everyone may have different personalities. In addition, student culture is different from the adult culture because students are still immature both physically and mentally. Teachers need to fully understand the uniqueness of student culture and learn to analyze students' behavior from their perspective. In this way, students will be happy to communicate with teachers because they think teachers can understand them.

Emotional link between students and teachers is the essence of a harmonious relationship, which is also the foundation of efficient teaching. After Confucius passed away, his student Zi Gong lived near his grave for three years in order to express his sincere gratitude to his teacher. In modern society, teachers should abandon materialism and treat students with honesty and love. Only in this way can a harmonious teacher-student be achieved.

2. Teach less, learn more

Give a man fish and he can eat for a day; but if you teach him how to fish, he will eat for a lifetime. The idea of TLLM advocates that teachers should arouse the enthusiasm of students by admitting their subjective role.

In an English class, teachers need not to exemplify every detail in the textbook, instead, they should learn to make these dead and dull knowledge interesting for students to learn. In addition to propagating the doctrine, imparting professional knowledge and resolving doubts, teachers should teach students how to form healthy studying habits and effective studying strategies. In this way, students can enhance their self-study ability and achieve sustainable

development.

V. CONCLUSION

This paper mainly focuses on the study of oral English teaching with the ideas from Education Ecology. By listing and comparing the characteristics of oral English and ecological system, the author finds the common grounds for both parties, which provides the theoretical basis for the subject. In the next part, the author analyzes the problems in current oral English teaching from the perspective of Education Ecology. These problems violate three important laws in Education Ecology. Next is the building of balanced ecosystem for oral English teaching by giving solutions to the aforementioned problems. Only when we respect the laws and principles in Education Ecology can we make substantial improvement in oral English teaching.

There is still a long way to go in oral English teaching. The phenomenon of *dumb English* is still very common in China. A Chinese student spends an average of ten years studying English. However, the majority of students only get procedural knowledge such as words and phrases, while oral English is always the weakest part. At the same time, English is entrenching its role as a global language because of American dominance in economy and politics. Therefore, it is in urgent need for Chinese students to speak English fluently. In order to achieve this goal, the oral English teaching should deserve much more attention. In this way, Chinese students can improve their oral English substantially.

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