

Formative Assessment in Oral English Classroom and Alleviation of Speaking Apprehension

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Abstract—Researches on Language Anxiety have aroused public concern around the world, most of which suggest that language anxiety exerts a detrimental influence to language learners in their process of language learning. Chinese English learners usually do a good job in passing all kinds of English test while are poor at oral English referred as “dumb English”. It is safe to conclude that “dumb English” is the best manifestation of foreign language anxiety. Formative assessment characterized by being interactive among students themselves, peers, and teacher, highlights the immediate and effective feedback to learners, which is in accordance with the nature of student-centered approach. This study aims to explore the effectiveness of applying formative assessment in oral English class to alleviate students’ speaking apprehension. Two innate classes are chosen to be the controlled class and experimental class. Data in students’ English classroom speaking anxiety scale is collected and analyzed after pre-test and post-test together with an interview. It is revealed in this study that the implementation of formative assessment in oral English classroom is proved to be effective to alleviate students’ speaking anxiety in experimental class. In response to this finding, implications for practical practice of formative assessment in oral English classroom are discussed.

Index Terms—formative assessment, foreign language anxiety, oral English apprehension, feedback

I. INTRODUCTION

Foreign language anxiety refers to those negative feeling as tension, discomfort, self-doubt in language learning. Foreign language anxiety (FLA) is defined by some researchers as "a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process" (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986). It is widely considered detrimental to language learning. Substantial studies have confirmed that foreign language anxiety, as a kind of affective factor, exerts a negative influence on language learning and achievement ((Horwit 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner 1991; Young 1991). Arnold (1999) indicated that among those affective variables, anxiety is the greatest obstructive affective barrier to language learning. A research made by Sanchez Herroero and Sanchez (1992) implied students’ foreign language anxiety can account for 38% variance in English proficiency among middle school students in Spain. In addition to researches on the relationship between foreign language anxiety and language proficiency, many researches have associated foreign language anxiety with other factors, such as learning strategies, willingness to communicate, self-efficacy, producing results in a mixed way, but there is a consensus among researchers on the source of foreign language anxiety. Anxiety related to classroom activities is mainly reflected in one’s apprehension to express in foreign language publicly such as oral presentation, role play, oral quizzes. Much evidence has revealed that speaking in foreign language publicly is the most challenging and anxiety-evoking basic skill among four basic skills in foreign language classroom (Koch & Terrel, 1991). Woodrow (2006) pointed out oral English apprehension is the best manifestation of language learning anxiety. Aida (1994) mentioned that the essence of Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), the chief instrument to measure foreign language anxiety, is designed primarily to measure learners’ speaking apprehension in the classroom setting. Chinese English learners are known to be capable of passing various kinds of English exam while poor at speaking in English, which is referred as a term “dumb English” in China characterized by unable and unwilling to speak, and even afraid to speak in public. It is safe to conclude that “dumb English” is the best manifestation of foreign language anxiety. Speaking apprehension is a "type of shyness characterized by fear of anxiety about communicating with people" (Horwitz et al, 1986). Speaking apprehension can be reflected in many ways, such as contorted sounds or with an edge to the sound, inappropriate pronunciation of the target language, avoidance of eye contact, unnatural facial expression, forgetting some simple words or expressions familiar to them, simply keeping silent when required to speak, even sweating or shivering while speaking in public, which are some typical symptoms and manifestations of oral English apprehension in language learning. A negative correlation between anxiety and oral English proficiency has been found by some researchers (Kitano 2001; Phillips 1992).

Anxiety as a kind of affective factor may impede foreign language learning and achievement. Summative assessment, a means to assess learning achievement, is by no means helpful to relieve students’ anxiety, especially for less proficient English learners while formative assessment, a means to monitor and regulate learning process, features prompt feedback. If students can receive continual positive feedback, which in turn will build up their confidence and relieve their anxiety. The primary concern for summative assessment on English speaking is to evaluate students’ ultimate

performance rather than to provide feedback so as to monitor students' dynamic learning process, which results in the neglect of direction for students' affective factors, language, and culture. Many studies highlight the importance of learning process which is in accordance to the essence of formative assessment. The concepts "formative" and "summative" were first put forward by an American philosopher Michael Scriven. Later, different definitions of formative assessment came into being. For example, Gipps have defined formative assessment as the process of evaluating, estimating or assessing students' work or performance and using this to regulate and improve students' performance (Bell & Cowie, 2001, p. 6). Formative assessment is characterized by being interactive, with teachers assessing the quantity and accuracy of student work as part of the assessment more than once in the middle of learning. Teachers' diagnostic skills are highlighted in the process of assessment. Black and William (1998) "provide strong evidence from an extensive literature review of 250 journal articles and book chapters to show that classroom formative evaluation, properly implemented, raises academic standards in learning." Therefore, in college speaking English teaching, teachers are expected to make use of the dynamic learning and assessing process in which teachers and students work together to monitor students' learning process, regulate their learning strategies to achieve their learning goals so as to arouse their learning motivation, relieve anxiety, and finally foster autonomous learning.

This paper attempts to see the influence of speaking apprehension in classroom oral English achievement and if the application of formative assessment in college oral English class has any effect on alleviating students' speaking apprehension level. Pedagogical implications to language instruction are discussed for oral English teachers so as to establish a low anxious environment with a comprehensible input. The research questions include the following one:

(1) Can the application of formative assessment in oral English class effectively alleviate college non-English majors' speaking anxiety?

II. PROCEDURES

A. Participants

A total of 115 students (103 females, 52males) first year non-English majors from law and history school at West China Normal University participated in the study. Class A1 consisting of students from history school with students 58 is called experimental class while Class A1 consisting of students from law school with students 57 is called controlled class. Subjects from the two classes have approximately equal English proficiency on the whole. All the subjects in both two classes are required to attend the pretest, post-test of English Classroom Speaking Anxiety Scale with similar contents, and interview.

B. Instruments

Two similar questionnaires are designed to be instruments of the study in order to investigate Chinese non-English majors' speaking apprehension. Referring to Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) by Horwitz E.K. (1991) and Chinese cultural background, the author designed the English Classroom Speaking Anxiety Scale (ECSAS) with 33 items according to a five-point Likert Scale. The specific terms "English", "speaking English" or "English class" is used to replace terms "foreign language" and "foreign language class" so as to enable the questionnaire to be feasible and appropriate to the present study. The ECSAS comprises three parts including communicative anxiety, oral English test anxiety, and negative assessment anxiety. Theoretically, total scores for the 33 items will range from 33 to the maximum 165, the higher the score is, the more anxious the student is. All the subjects are required to take part in the pre-test and post-test of ECSAS to see whether there is significant difference in all the subjects' anxiety level before and after the experiment.

Interview is also carried out to figure out the effect of the application of formative assessment on oral English class and subjects' change of their psychological activities especially anxiety. In terms of the degree of formality, semi-structured interview is adopted.

C. Preparation for the Study

The study was conducted for one academic year, from September, 2013 to June, 2014. Both the pretest questionnaire for speaking anxiety was carried out at the beginning of September, 2013 in a normal English class. SPSS18.0 is used to analyze data.

Traditional teaching methodology with summative assessment for oral English instruction is still adopted in the controlled class, Class A1 in Law department taught by the author while the Class A1 in History department are also taught by the author with the application of formative assessment in oral English class. At the beginning of the first month in the experiment, the author explained and demonstrated the basic principle and method of application of the formative assessment in oral English class to students in the experimental class, and negotiated with students together about the specific standard for self-assessment and peer-assessment, which may arouse students' interest and ensure smooth conduction of the experiment.

Formative assessment should be goal-oriented. Oral English teachers should identify students' oral English level at each period, and design corresponding oral activities for students to meet the learning goals set beforehand. Immediate and advancing assessment activities in classroom including self-assessment, peer-assessment and teacher assessment may help both teachers and students have a full awareness of students' own learning process toward the goals set

beforehand, which also helps teachers to integrate these evaluation information to guide their next curriculum design and instruction (Black & William, 1998). With regard to design of oral English activities, it varies in form and function. Some mechanical and indispensable oral activities serve basic atmosphere-activating function, such as duty report, group discussion, text recitation, which ensures whole participation of the general class. Some advanced and more functionally communicative oral activities also should be designed for students' communicative competence to develop, such as debate, role play, drama play, and story-retelling. In the practice period, students should be motivated to speak aloud without too much pressure and anxiety. Mistakes except some typical ones should not be corrected immediately in discussion process in front of the other students by peers or teacher but taken down in portfolio of each student to protect students' proper pride. Teachers are expected to monitor and regulate students' practice process to provide timely and effective feedback. The design of oral activities should be goal-oriented, interest-oriented, communication-oriented, and knowledge oriented. The formative assessment comprises three aspects, self-assessment taking up 15% in the whole assessment system, peer-assessment taking up 15% and teacher assessment taking up 30%. The final oral English test taking up 40%. Every week, students would be assigned with an oral task to fulfill after class, such as a drama play, students within groups are supposed to design and take down drama dialogues, review and finally practice together. The specific performance including progress made and problems confronted by group members as well as students' introspection on problem-solving, self-assessment and remarks from peers should be taken down in portfolio and deliver to teacher so that teacher can provide timely feedback when he observes the final performance.

D. Application of Formative Assessment in Oral English Class

Self-assessment refers to objective intrinsic introspection on one's learning. In the process of self-assessment, students were required to summarize progresses made and reflect on existing problems in a diary each week so as to identify future striving direction. After they fulfilled each oral task, their assessment of specific performance was recorded in their portfolio. Students were encouraged to spend more time listening and watching more original materials, such as VOA or BBC news, American TV series, for instance Friends, and imitate so as to correct and improve their own pronunciation and oral English proficiency.

Peer-assessment is conducted within groups organized by 4 students. Group members cooperated to perform oral activities, for instance, group discussion, situation dialogue, rehearsal of drama. Teacher was supposed to identify specific tasks assumed by respective student to ensure them not shifting duties onto others. After each presentation, they were asked to fill in the portfolio with regard to assessment for group members involved. Assessment was made from the perspective of speakers' speaking speed, intonation, cohesion and coherence of dialogues, the appropriate choice of words, the degree of flexibility in choosing some expressions to replace words or phrases difficult to express, sense of cooperation with partners and audiences, facial expression, and even body language. Both self-assessment and peer-assessment should be frequently and immediately made after oral activities were finished according to criteria set before, which builds up students' confidence and passion.

Teacher-assessment

Teacher-assessment, an indispensable tool of formative assessment, is an ongoing assessing process. Teachers are expected to set some examples for students about making assessment before experiment and in the ongoing process of experiment. Classroom observation, an effective teaching technique for teachers to record and assess students' participation and presentation performance in class, is aimed to identify problems encountered by students and help them conquer, to make clear the degree of their interest in classroom activities so as to improve teaching method accordingly, to make sure whether students have grasped certain learning strategies and achieved progress. When it comes to portfolio, it is teachers who should assume the responsibility to review students' portfolio to see exact problems encountered, self-introspection, decision-making, and progress made by students so as to provide immediate feedback to monitor and guide their learning direction.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 4.1 is Means and Independent-sample T-test to demonstrate the result of pre-test between the experimental class and controlled class in speaking Apprehension level.

TABLE 4.1
MEANS AND INDEPENDENT SAMPLE-T TEST IN PRE-TEST

	Class	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	T	P
Speaking Apprehension	Experimental Class A1	58	96.34	14.35	0.292	0.771
	Controlled Class A1	57	95.60	13.08		

The mean difference between the controlled class A1 in history department and the experimental class A1 in law department in speaking anxiety is a little higher than 1.00, with Sig. Value being 0.771(>.05), which implies there is no significant difference in speaking apprehension level between the experimental class and controlled class.

Table 4.2 is the result of Means and Independent sample of post-test between the controlled class and the experimental class in speaking apprehension level.

TABLE 4.2
MEANS AND INDEPENDENT SAMPLE-T TEST IN POST-TEST

	Class	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	T	P
Speaking Apprehension	Experimental Class	58	88.50	14.61	-2.632	0.010*
	Controlled Class	57	95.11	12.17		

In order to examine the result of the application of formative assessment in oral English class to alleviate students' speaking apprehension, formative assessment is implemented in the experimental class, while traditional teaching methodology with summative assessment is also conducted as usual. The Sig. (2-tailed) value in speaking apprehension between the two class is 0.01(<0.05), which implies that significant difference exists between the controlled class and experimental class in their speaking apprehension. Students' speaking apprehension in the experimental class A1 of History department has been alleviated compared with that of the controlled class. Students' speaking apprehension in controlled class A1 of Law department has not alleviated their speaking apprehension with statistic difference.

Table 4.3 is the paired samples T-test of the pretest and post-test between the two groups in their speaking anxiety level.

TABLE 4.3
THE PAIRED SAMPLES T-TEST OF THE EXPERIMENTAL GROUP

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	T	P
Speaking Apprehension	Pre-test	58	96.34	14.35	18.933	0.000**
	Post-test	58	88.50	14.61		

As is illustrated in table 4.3, there is statistically significant difference in anxiety level of the students in experimental class A1 in History department with the Sig. Value being 0.000(>0.05). The anxiety level after experiment is much lower than that before experiment. With regard to the controlled class, although students also have made some progress, the mean score after the experiment is lower than that of experiment before the experiment by less than 1.00, it is not statistically significant. Their speaking apprehension level is still comparatively high in post-test.

IV. MAJOR FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

This paper aims to find out whether the implementation of formative assessment in oral English class can alleviate students' anxiety level and improve their oral English proficiency.

The implementation of formative assessment in oral English class is proved to be helpful for students to alleviate their speaking anxiety. In addition to assessment on oral English proficiency, formative assessment is also implemented to monitor and regulate students' command of learning strategies, sense of cooperation, motivation in an open and comforting atmosphere, and the grading way is not definite score but rough grade, which may relieve students' speaking anxiety. In the process of implementation of formative assessment in oral English class, students were first required to discuss with teacher and group members about the grading criteria, the learning objectives, and learning strategies, which endows students with opportunities to be self-directed in the learning process, and a non-threatening environment for students to study. It might be explained from the theoretical basis of formative assessment, constructivism featuring students-centered teaching methodology and students' learning initiative. In the process of formative assessment, students regulate and monitor their learning by making self-assessment and accepting feedback from their group members and teacher. Students are deeply motivated by the urgent need for their self-centered participation, which boosts their esteem and confidence. In other words, students' active participation in oral activities, positive feedback received from peers and teachers or even negative feedback prompting them to identify their problems so as to set up new learning objectives can contribute to strengthening of their confidence and relief of speaking anxiety. Students felt relieved when involved in group atmosphere with primary focus on group cooperation and interaction instead of individual performance. For instance, when preparing for drama play, student didn't fulfill task alone but cooperate and interact with group members, in doing so, they developed their potential to design actors' line, facial expression, body language, and plot. Each group member learned from others' strong points to offset their own weakness, and enjoyed happy moments in the process. Harmer (2007) stated that there were three advantages in drama play. Firstly, Drama play has advantages of being interesting which can boost students' motivation. Secondly, it prompts every student to be actively involved in activities, especially those shy and introverted students. Thirdly, students can enlarge their vocabularies and became more confident when drama play in classroom activities is shifted to real communication. Finally, their speaking anxiety is relieved. In comparison to formative assessment, summative assessment is more stressful. Students are graded in final exam. Little time is spent for students to build successive learning objective to achieve, to make clear their own problems, to introspect on learning process. Students, especially poorly performed oral English learners, might be dealt with a direct blow when getting simple final score without any hint about what problems to overcome, what direction to work ahead. They might get more anxious. It is a vicious circle.

In interview, a student A with good oral English proficiency said that in the experiment, he came to be well-informed of what to learn, how to practice, and what problems to correct, then he was no longer anxious about presenting himself

without any preparation beforehand, and whenever he read positive feedback recorded in portfolio, he was deeply inspired to work harder and practice more, do almost not worry about speaking aloud in public. Besides, a student B with poor oral English proficiency reported that at the beginning of oral activities practice, he was very nervous to speak aloud, but every one was inspired to participate in the group activities, gradually he became sort of relieved although he did not improve his oral English too much. He enjoyed happy moments of students' presentation in classroom such as drama play, film imitation, and did not feel so anxious about speaking English any more. Harlen (2003) indicated formative evaluation contributes to lower level learners' learning in that it enables lower-achieving students to make progresses step by step. Formative assessment not only works out in endowing equal learning opportunities to all parts of the community, but also diminishes special need placements. A student C said that students in other classes were jealous about the curriculum design of his class in which students have so many opportunities to participate in oral activities actively and improve oral English, and the primary focus for them to study English is to improve overall English competence especially listening and speaking proficiency. The student interviewed was so satisfied and proud of the experiment in his class. A student D said that several times later after participating in oral activities, he was not nervous as he had been before, and though he also made some mistakes in oral expression, he was also courageous enough and well-determined to practice further. Moreover, peers in the same group cooperate to practice oral activities, and the good language learners can point out weaknesses for poor language learners to correct and improve in a comforting atmosphere, and when it is presented to whole class, they are not so anxious on account of their full preparation. As for test anxiety, students reported that there was no such an absolute summative assessment for them to anxiously prepare for, therefore, their test anxiety is lowered.

V. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

While other studies focus on speaking anxiety with other factors such as learning strategies, communicative language teaching, this paper is intended to deal with the effect of implementation of formative assessment in oral English class on alleviating speaking apprehension. Finding in this study indicates that students in experimental class in which formative assessment is implemented proved to be less anxious than students in controlled class. After implementation of formative assessment in oral English class, students with high speaking anxiety at the end of experiment displayed lower speaking anxiety level than before, which illustrated the effectiveness of implementation of formative assessment in oral English class to relieve students' speaking apprehension. Based on the study, a sequence of implications can be implied as follows:

Students should be well-educated that the key to perform well in class is the practice process in which students makes clear learning objectives, monitor and regulate learning process, spot their own weaknesses, make improvement accordingly, and make clear every step of their learning process so that they can improve their oral English and surely do a good job in the process of peer-assessment and teacher assessment. Moreover, more cooperative oral activities for practice instead of individual oral task should be designed, for students feel not so anxious when accompanied by their partners. In the preparation of group task, peers should make peer-assessment strictly and objectively by previously-established grading criteria.

Feedback is significant to students in that positive feedback motivates students to build confidence to take part in more oral activities actively, and negative feedback gives them opportunities to introspect on their learning process and find out problems so as to improve accordingly. Feedback should be given immediately and effectively with specific information after an oral activity is conducted so that students can know clearly what problems to overcome and what new objectives to establish. Moreover, more encouraging and inspiring feedback should be accorded to students so as to arouse their motivation for learning, build up confidence and gradually relieve speaking anxiety. Students' painful failure experience in speaking English may lead to strong fear of communication. Therefore, motivational and meaningful topics for discussion should be designed by teachers to arouse students' interest so as to make full preparation for the topic so that they can get positive feedback.

Teachers should have a full awareness that they first act as initiators who take the initiative to establish harmonious atmosphere for students and discuss together with students about the detailed implementation method of formative assessment, about the detailed grading criteria, and help them identify their practicing objectives. Students should be well-trained to understand the principle and primary operational approach of self-evaluation and peer-evaluation. Inharmonious relationship between teacher and students may suppress students' learning motivation especially in depressing classroom atmosphere. Besides, teachers are expected to recognize the differences of students and set up corresponding grading criteria, with higher requirements for well-performed students, relatively lower ones for poorly-performed students when they makes their teacher assessment. Every student, especially the poorly-behaved ones, has his potentials and advantages which can be developed to its full through proper teaching and assessing method. What's more, in the process of learning, they should act as mediators, mediating among single students, groups, curriculum design. They help students monitor their learning process, find out their own weakness, and adopt proper strategies to achieve news objectives. When teachers act as assessors to conduct teacher assessment, they should adopt the principle to praise more, especially to praise from the concrete perspective about the specific improvements made by students, which strengthens students' sense of achievement While summative assessment can only provide them a judging result which plays no role in for students to take command of their learning process.

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