A Study on SPOC Assisted College Oral English Teaching Strategies

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Abstract—With the rapid development of information technology, various online courses have sprung up and SPOC (Small Private Online Course) is one of them. In the meantime, Chinese colleges are in the process of transformation from traditional classroom teaching to web-assisted teaching, which demands for a corresponding adjustment of teaching techniques used to guide teaching practice. Therefore, after a deep investigation into the attitude of some students and teachers, based on the results of questionnaires and interviews, this paper proposes several strategies for SPOC assisted college oral EFL teaching, aiming to guide teachers to use online courses effectively and as a result, improve the quality of EFL teaching.

Index Terms—SPOC, teaching strategies, oral English

I. INTRODUCTION

With the rapid growth of information technology, great changes are taking place in the teaching mode of higher education. MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses), which are initiated by platforms such as Coursera, Udacity and edX, have sprung up since 2012. Chinese universities waited no time to put MOOC into practice vigorously. As time went on, various types of online courses derived from MOOC, and among them are x-MOOC, LOOC (Little Open Online Course) and SPOC (Small Private Online Course). In the recent years, China’s Ministry of Education has launched a series of web-based curriculum construction projects, such as Video Open Courses, Quality Video Open Courses and Quality Resource Sharing Courses. Most universities in China are in the process of transformation from traditional teaching to web-based instruction.

Compared with traditional teaching, the physical environment of online courses has changed, as well as the transmission mode of instructional information, bringing about a series of transformation in instructional concepts, teaching models, pedagogy, evaluation methods and relation between teachers and students, etc. However, most of the previous research on web-based courses was around the role of teachers, learners’ attitude toward online learning and autonomous learning. There was rare empirical research putting forward specific EFL teaching strategies of SPOC. As more and more SPOCs were constructed in Chinese universities, lots of teachers began to put online teaching into practice. But in fact, most of the online courses, including those related to EFL teaching, haven’t been made full use and one of the most important reasons is the lack of appropriate teaching strategies. Therefore, new strategies based on SPOC are needed urgently to help teachers deal with day to day English teaching.

In this study, an online course of oral English was fully put into teaching practice, aiming to provide appropriate EFL teaching strategies for SPOC assisted courses, guide teachers to use online courses effectively and thus improve the quality of college EFL teaching.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Basic Concepts

1. Teaching Strategy

Up to now, the understanding of the basic concept of “teaching strategy” is still different in academic circles. In the field of language teaching, there are mainly four perspectives which regard teaching strategy as a matter of procedure, principle, behavior and technique respectively. When the procedure view is taken, teaching strategies refer to the teaching procedures that have direct influence on the development of language ability (Marton, 1988). Scholars taking the principle view see teaching strategies as principles that promote effective instruction, for example, increasing time to finish tasks and stimulating high motivations, etc. (Pratt, 1994). The behavior view holders consider teaching strategies to be a series of useful instructional actions (Xiong, 1997). Whereas educationists utilizing the technique perspective equal strategies to techniques and methods (Raffini, 1996; Jonassen, Grabinger & Harris, 2010). All in all, the definitions are different, but their essence is the same. Therefore, it is believed that any procedure, principle, behavior or technique can be called a teaching strategy as long as it aims to achieve particular teaching goals (Wang, Q. & Wang, D. Q., 2002).

This study strived to give teachers specific guidance, so the technique view was taken, that is, any technique or method is looked upon as a strategy if it helps improve EFL teaching effect of online English courses.
2. SPOC
An online course is a web-based course constructed under modern educational ideologies and philosophies. It shows the teaching content and teaching activities of a subject through the network, and is a comprehensive whole of technical support environment, teaching objectives, teaching content and teaching strategies, featuring interactivity, openness, collaboration, sharing and autonomy. SPOC is a type of online course focusing on a private audience and aiming to complement regular face-to-face classes instead of substituting the traditional way of teaching (Fox, 2013). SPOC integrates online teaching with offline teaching. Being more targeted, timely and operable, and with more realistic evaluation results, SPOC is more appropriate for day-to-day teaching in general colleges.

The English online course utilized in this study was a SPOC, which was the result of a construction project of Quality Resource Sharing Courses administered by China’s Ministry of Education. Constructed by teachers at college and being a supplement of day-to-day classroom teaching, it aims to facilitate teachers to achieve their teaching goals.

B. Theoretical Basis
1. Constructivism
Constructivism is a philosophical viewpoint about the nature of knowledge. One prominent theorist known for his constructivist views is a Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget, who focused on how humans make meaning in relation to the interaction between their experiences and their ideas. When applied to education, constructivism changed the traditional way of teaching to a large extent. According to constructivism, knowledge acquisition is not taught by teachers, but obtained by learners themselves through meaning construction under certain context and with the help of teachers, learning partners and relevant materials. According to the social constructivist approach, an instructor’s role is transformed from a teacher to a facilitator, who provides guidelines, creates the environment and is in continuous dialogue with the learners to help them get to his or her own understanding of the content and arrive at his or her own conclusions. The constructivist approach stresses the need for collaboration among learners and authentic learning, where the students take part in activities directly to the application of learning (Brown, Collins & Duguid, 1989). Constructivists advocate learner-centered learning but don’t overlook instructors’ guidance.

The network course platform in this study carries a wealth of learning materials, including a lot of video resources from or simulating real life. The Forum Column and Group Work Column provide platforms for discussion and showing collaboration works. As facilitators, teachers offer students suggestions on how to use the online course, give them feedback on their homework and answer their questions through the Internet. Therefore, the English online course can make learners give full play to their initiative, complement classroom teaching and assist students to achieve their learning goals.

2. The Affective Filter Hypothesis
The affective filter hypothesis, one of the five hypotheses which are called the input hypothesis as a group, was put forward by American linguist S. D. Krashen in 1980s (Krashen, 1982). The affective filter is an impediment to learning or acquisition caused by negative emotional (“affective”) responses to one’s environment. According to this theory, certain negative emotions, such as anxiety, self-doubt and boredom, etc., function as a filter between the speaker and the listener. They reduce the amount of language input the listener is able to understand, thus preventing the efficient processing of the language input (Krashen, 2003). However, the blockage can be reduced by sparking interest, providing low-anxiety environment, reducing stress and bolstering the learner’s self-esteem.

In traditional classrooms, some students remain in a state of high anxiety due to their low learning ability, poor academic performance and such characters as self-abasement and shyness. Their learning is impaired by the “affective filter”. But in the network environment, the machine will not show the feeling of boredom or contempt, so the anxiety of students has been greatly alleviated. Learning in a relaxing environment and in a good mood helps improve learning effect.

C. Current Research Findings of Online Teaching
Scholars at home and abroad have done some research on web-based teaching. D. Wang (2006) developed a network teaching platform mainly consisted of BBS and BLOG in order to meet the interactive need of teachers and students. The result showed: the “Exhibition Hall” to show students’ works effectively stimulated students’ learning motivation; the interactive evaluation between teachers and students keep students interested in the course; the network platform also formed an effective monitoring to the curriculum teaching. All of those helped improve the teaching quality. T. Lu (2013) made a study on composition teaching reform based on the Internet. She put forward an ideal network platform of composition teaching, hoping that students could take initiative to explore, obtain and process information on the Internet under an interesting environment before they formed their own creative work.

As for EFL teaching, some research investigated the teaching model of college English autonomous learning in the environment of Internet. N. Chen (2016) proposes building a “2+2” Model. The former “2” represents the combination of college English learning online and offline. The latter “2” represents the application of cognitive strategy and monitoring strategy in the process of autonomous learning. Her study found students who were taught under the new “2+2” teaching model showed better performance in using cognitive strategies and monitoring strategies. However, the strategies employed in that research were general strategies and not typical of the Internet environment.
Some researches on learners’ attitudes toward web-based study were conducted. Erica Gomez Flórez and his partners conducted a case study that explored students’ perceptions about an English reading comprehension course in a web-based modality and found that students had different opinions about the course, its content and objectives, its level of difficulty, the time invested in the course, adult’s learning and the role of the teacher. They perceived that course represented an academic challenge; it was conducive to learning, and favored students’ autonomous use of time (Flórez, Pineda & García, 2012). Muhammad Umar Farooq and his partner investigated EFL students’ attitude toward E-learning, focusing on motivation. The majority of students hold the view that curriculum and classroom activities should be integrated with technology. The author concluded that training teachers and incorporating technology with curriculum may lead towards a better learning environment (Farooq & Javid, 2012).

There are a few studies on EFL instructional strategies of CALL (computer assisted language learning) and in the network environment. W. Liu (2009) proposed eight principles when choosing instructional strategies of college English teaching assisted by multi-media, such as learner-centered, communication and cooperation, etc. Then according to these eight principles, he furtherly put forward five teaching strategies: stereo input, classroom participation promotion, multi-channel communication, cultural influence and task cooperation. Q. Xia (2016) proposed five teaching strategies for college English reading course: task driven, selected theme, information arrangement, effective monitoring and evaluation, but he didn’t illustrate specific operation such as how to form “effective monitoring”. Most of the studies on teaching strategies gave suggestions from a theoretical point of view, lacking in concrete ways and techniques.

In the past ten years, the study of web-based language teaching has witnessed a shift from theoretical application to practical application. A larger part of the previous study focuses on the role of teachers, learners’ autonomy, learners’ attitude and feedback, etc. and a smaller part deals with instructional models. Unfortunately, few studies have been conducted on web-based EFL teaching strategies, let alone those based on SPOC. Under the new informational environment, English teachers are in urgent need of specific and workable teaching strategies in order to make full use of online courses to improve the quality of English teaching.

III. THE CHOICE OF TEACHING STRATEGIES

English I Online Course, which focused on improving students’ oral English ability, was one of the thirteen Quality Resource Sharing Courses approved by Beijing Information Technology College. The construction of this online course was finished in April, 2015 after two years of hard work. Seven columns were set up on the platform, including Course Guidance, Classroom Teaching, Micro-Lectures, Forum, Homework, Group Work and Self-Testing. It provided not only the space for teachers and students to exchange ideas, but also a wealth of data for learning English and a paper-free solution for the item bank’s establishment, management and test paper generation. Besides, students were able to submit their homework and group work on the platform, to which teachers could quickly give feedbacks. Therefore, English I Online Course was a multiple functional and resource abundant SPOC on campus.

During the process of this research, the teachers led students to make full use of the English I Online Course, which lasted four months. Students could access the online course through their own notebooks and mobile phones or in the computer rooms on campus.

Finally, based on the theories of constructivism and affective filter hypothesis, the definition of teaching strategy and after consulting some teachers and students, eight strategies for EFL oral English teaching assisted by SPOC were devised to be used in the questionnaire.

A. Text Guidance Strategy

A complete text-formatted introduction of the course is provided for students to learn about the content, the suggested learning methods, the assessment standard and the relevant teachers, etc. of the course.

B. Video Demonstration Strategy

Videos of English situational dialogues are provided to show students what kind of task they are going to finish in the unit.

C. PPT Assisted Learning Strategy

A complete set of PPT courseware is posted for students to preview or go over lessons.

D. Micro-lecture Strategy

Some language points are selected to make micro-lectures, assisting students to break through the difficulties and consolidate the key points.

E. Self-testing Strategy

Teachers devise online tests by using the item bank for students to make self-testing so that they can know their weakness and consolidate what they have learned. The platform grades students’ test automatically and gives answers and explanation at the same time.
F. Homework Strategy
Students submit their homework online in the form of text, audio or video.

G. Group Work Strategy
Students form groups to finish oral tasks and upload their group works in the form of audio or video, which will be graded by both teachers and students from other groups.

H. Forum Discussion Strategy
Students ask questions and discuss various English problems with teachers and their peers. Teachers select important points from the forum and explain them in detail in class.

IV. RESEARCH DESIGN

A. Research Question
The following question was addressed in the present study: In SPOC assisted college oral English teaching, what strategies are accepted and loved by teachers and students?

B. Subjects
The subjects in this study were 2016 freshmen from different majors. Under the guidance of their English teachers, the students made full use of the online course for a whole semester.

C. Research Methods
The methods of questionnaire and interview were employed in this research.

D. Instruments
1. Questionnaire
   The questionnaire was used to investigate students’ attitude toward those strategies and their using patterns. It was made in the form of Likert Five Point Scale. The points 1-5 represent the five scales which range from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”. The devising of the questionnaire items was exploratory. Based on 20 students’ written feedbacks toward the use of the online course, thirty items, which belonged to the eight strategies chosen previously, were established in the initial piloting questionnaire.
   The pilot study was conducted in one class of Grade 2015. Thirty-five papers were collected and the data were input into SPSS 17.0 to test the reliability and validity of the questionnaire. After the item FD2, which greatly affected the reliability, was replaced and a few individual items were modified, the final questionnaire was established, which consisted of 31 items belonging to eight dimensions of teaching strategies and one dimension of teaching effect.
   The questionnaires were distributed to Grade 2016 students who were asked to finish the questionnaires in the face of their teachers. Altogether 260 students filled in the questionnaires and 240 questionnaires were left in the final analysis after excluding the invalid ones.
   After the data were collected, the reliability and the validity of the questionnaire were tested in the first place. Factor analysis showed that every variable (or dimension) contained at least three items, conforming to the theoretical design; all factor loadings were greater than 0.50 (with the lowest of 0.58); the dimensions accumulatively explained more than half of the variations of teaching strategies (79.46%). The above results showed the questionnaire had good construct validity. Besides, the internal consistency test result showed the questionnaire had a Cronbach Alpha of 0.94 and that figure of most subscales was over 0.80 (with the lowest of 0.60). All of the test results indicated the questionnaire was a reliable instrument.

2. Interview
   Two kinds of semi-structured interviews were used in this study. The first aimed to investigate teachers’ attitude toward using those strategies and the problems they encountered during the SPOC assisted teaching. The second attempted to make clear some problems arisen from the questionnaire. The items of the questionnaire which had a mean score of lower than 4 were considered the most important and thus discussed in detail in the interview. Four teachers and fifteen students participated in the interview.

V. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Overall Attitude toward the Eight Teaching Strategies
The descriptive statistics show that the mean scores of the eight strategies are all above 3, indicating students generally have a positive attitude toward those teaching strategies based on SPOC. Five strategies are particularly loved by students, including Text Guidance, Video Demonstration, PPT Assisted Learning, Self-Testing and Group Work, all of which have a score of above 4. The two strategies with the lowest scores are Forum Discussion and Homework with mean scores of lower than 4. A concrete analysis of each teaching strategy is as follows.

### B. Specific Analysis of Each Teaching Strategy

#### 1. Text Guidance Strategy

Text Guidance has the highest mean score among the eight strategies. The mean scores of the six items in this division are very close and all of them are above 4, showing the course guidance materials in text format are highly approved by students. R. Liu (2006) also suggested a teaching strategy of providing text-formatted materials in her...
study. She held the view that texts were the oldest and the most basic reading materials. Compared with other types of materials, they were much easier to be obtained and processed. Most students felt comfortable reading texts due to their long-term study habit. Teachers also gave positive comments about Text Guidance strategy. They thought text-formatted resources had large quantities of information and were easier to make, thus remaining an indispensable type of resource in any kind of learning.

2. Video Demonstration Strategy

Table 2 shows the items of both VD1 and VD2 have a mean score of over 4 and the score of VD3 is lower than 4. This result indicates students are willing to watch the task demonstration videos acted by senior students instead of watching the English videos downloaded from the Internet. Three reasons were found through interviews. Firstly, the videos played by senior students had a lower degree of difficulty and were easier to be understood than relevant videos on the Internet; secondly, those videos were tightly matched with the tasks of particular units; lastly, the English level of the actors and actresses in those videos were similar to that of the students themselves, therefore enhancing their confidence of completing the oral tasks. However, the videos downloaded from the Internet couldn’t cater to the content of the course and had a greater degree of difficulty. As a result, they were less welcomed by students. This result conforms to Krashen’s input hypothesis which believes that the ideal input in foreign language teaching should be comprehensible, relevant and interesting (Krashen, 1994).

3. PPT Assisted Learning Strategy

As shown in Table 2, the mean score of MLL1 is above 4, indicating the majority of students have positive attitude toward Micro-Lecture Learning strategy which they think make them learn English in an easier way than traditional classroom teaching. But both MLL2 and MLL3 have a score of lower than 4, showing that the comment and note-taking functions attached to micro-lectures are not approved so much as merely watching micro-lectures. During the interviews, the students told the researcher they could make comment in chatrooms or in the forum as well as face to face. It was not convenient to exchange ideas here on the micro-lecture web page. As for the note-taking function, the students thought it much more convenient to take notes in their paper notebook. What’s more, the quality of micro-lectures affected the use of this strategy to a large degree. Exquisite micro-lectures attracted students much more than average-level micro-lectures.

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5. Self-Testing Strategy

The students have a positive attitude toward Self-Testing strategy in that all of the three items in this division have mean scores of more than 4. Doing an online test just needs a networking support and several clicks, so they are convenient to use. Students can do the same test repeatedly and get feedbacks immediately after they hand them in. The teachers also consider it a good way to make tests because it saves time and is more economical. Therefore, Self-Testing is a web-based strategy which fully embodies the advantages of network courses.

6. Homework Strategy

Table 2 shows all of the three items in the Homework strategy have a mean score of below 4, which indicates the students have a lower degree of satisfaction about submitting homework online. Some interviewees told the researcher that writing homework could help them remember, but online homework was typed and not beneficial to memorization. However, the students have a positive attitude toward submitting homework online. Three reasons were found through interviews. Firstly, the quality of homework could be improved by making it into quizzes or online tests; secondly, those quizzes or online tests were more convenient for students to submit their homework; lastly, students could take quizzes or online tests repeatedly and get feedbacks immediately after they hand them in.

7. Group Work Strategy

The mean scores of the three items in the Group Work division are all over 4 with the items GW2 and GW3 a little higher, indicating that Group Work strategy is welcomed by students, especially the peer-assessment method. Peer-assessment is one of the methods of multiple assessment. Some researchers made study on multiple assessment. It was found that multiple assessment effectively improved students’ interest in learning English (Chen, 2014), and that rich evaluation instruments, including self-assessment, peer-assessment, teachers’ assessment and network assessment, help promote students’ learning initiative and thus improve their learning effect (Zhu, Liu & Wu, 2014).

8. Forum Discussion Strategy

Unexpectedly, the scores of the three items in Forum Discussion strategy are all below 4. During the interviews, the students told the researcher that it was not convenient to discuss English problems in the forum, because they could deal with that in QQ group or WeChat group which were more popular among young people. Besides, students tended to favor face-to-face explanation. They hoped the forum could be a site where questions were asked, to which teachers could give specific explanation later in class.

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VI. CONCLUSION

A. Suggested Teaching Strategies of SPOC Assisted College Oral English Teaching

In the light of the previous analysis, some tentative suggestions on SPOC assisted college oral English teaching are put forward as follows.

1. Favorable Teaching Strategies

Six teaching strategies: Text Guidance, Video Demonstration, PPT Assisted Learning, Micro-Lecture Learning, Self-Testing and Group Work should be used regularly. They are favored by both students and teachers.

Text-formatted introductions about the course, including the goals and content of learning, the evaluation methods, the suggested ways of learning and information of relevant teachers, are supposed to be posted on the website, enabling students to have a general understanding of the whole course.

The videos about oral tasks of each particular unit, such as those about expressing gratitude or making apologies, should be presented on online courses so that students are able to learn what they should achieve in that unit straightforward and vividly before class and therefore, they can attend classes with a clear goal in mind. The videos had better be acted by senior students or selected from senior students’ group works in order to make the difficulty of the dialogues acceptable to students.

The whole set of teachers’ PPT courseware is expected to be uploaded to the network platform. Students can repeatedly watch them after class, so they can save note-taking time in class and concentrate more on what the teacher says.

Make interesting and exquisite micro-lectures to expound the difficult language points in order to help students comprehend and memorize them more easily. It is not necessary to encourage students to use the note-taking and comment functions attached to the micro-lecture videos.

Teachers are expected to compose online tests for each unit or each lesson with assistance of the item bank attached to the online course, and organize students to do online tests so that they can consolidate what they have learned, learn about their weakness and make it up in time.

Teachers can organize students to make groups and finish oral tasks which should be made into audios or videos that are required to be uploaded to the online course. The group works had better be scored by teachers together with students from other groups, forming a multi-assessment pattern.

2. Teaching Strategies That Should Be Exercised in Due Caution

Homework and Forum Discussion strategies haven’t received as much agreement as the other six. Text-formatted homework is not encouraged to be assigned while audio and video formatted homework can be submitted online occasionally. The Forum can be used as the room for asking questions, but detailed answers are unnecessary in the forum. Teachers should check the forum from time to time and explain the questions asked explicitly when facing students in class.

B. Limitation and Future Direction of the Research

On the basis of empirical study, this paper has proposed several teaching strategies used for SPOC assisted oral English teaching in colleges. It is hoped that the result of this study will have a practical guidance for language teachers to improve web-assisted college EFL teaching.

1. The suggestions put forward in this paper came from questionnaires and interviews and are a reflection of students’ and teachers’ subjective attitude. However, whether those strategies can really improve EFL teaching effect hasn’t been testified. Future experimental studies can be done on the basis of the strategies suggested in this paper to confirm the effectiveness of those teaching strategies used for EFL oral teaching assisted by SPOC.

2. This paper hasn’t explored the correlation between particular strategies and teaching effect. What strategies have a significant correlation with students’ learning results is expected to be studied in future research.

REFERENCES


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