A Case Study of English Majors' Participation in Oral English Class in China

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Abstract*— English speaking competence is one of the most important targets of English language learning，and to which great importance has been attached in teaching and learning. However, many Chinese students, even English majors of local universities have difficulties in speaking English fluently and appropriately. Classroom is a major setting for Chinese students to practice and improve their oral English so participation in class activities plays an important role in their competence and progress in oral English. This study aims to explore major problems that affect Chinese students' participation in oral English class. Based on an adopted and revised questionnaire and interview from previous researches, the study finds that anxiety, self-esteem and lack of courage are the major internal factors. Meanwhile, dull teaching materials and activities, as well as teachers' role are external factors that affect participation in oral English class. This article provides some empirical evidence for exploration into factors that hinder students' participation in an Chinese context.*

Keywords*— Students' participation, English majors, oral English class.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Student participation has been studied a lot by researchers all around the world (Hu & Kuh, 2002). Participation may refer to student and institutional level, academic and non-academic aspects of higher education experience. Previous studies have already pointed out that student participation is one determinant to a student's academic success and the quality of education (Kahu & Nelson, 2017). The degree of participation with academic-oriented activities is one of the key standards to measure student participation level.When it comes to oral English, it is assumed that the more students get engaged in class activities, the more progress they will achieve. Since Hymes' concept of communicative competence was introduced to China thirty years ago, teachers and researchers have come to realize that the ultimate goal of language teaching is to help students improve their ability to communicate. So speaking occupies an important and

indispensable position among the four basic language skills—listening, speaking, reading and writing, and should be paid more attention to. Language researchers and teachers have been aware of the importance of the language communicative competence. However, the English most Chinese students have learned is far from being sufficient to express their ideas.

II. PROBLEMS IN ORAL ENGLISH CLASSROOM

The English teaching process itself is a communicative process, which means that teachers and students are engaged in all the possible activities of exchanging information. There are typical problems in oral communication such as inhibition, lack of motive, low participant and mother-tongue interference.

The dominant problem is inhibition. Unlike reading, writing and listening activities, speaking requires some degree of real-time exposure to an audience. Learners are often inhibited from trying to say things in a foreign language in the classroom: worried about making mistakes, fearful of criticism or losing face, or simply being shy. Secondly, lack of motive. Even if they are not inhibited, students may complain that they cannot think of anything to say: they have no motive to express themselves controlled by the sense of guilty if make a poor speech. Then, low or poor participation. Limited by class hours, only one student can talk for a short time especially in a large-sized classroom. The interference of mother tongue is another factor. Students may tend to seek help with their mother tongue when have difficulties expressing their ideas. If they are talking in small groups it can be quite difficult to get more progress—particularly the less disciplined or motivated ones.

The above problems affect students' participation in oral English class. When it comes to participation alone, active participants are very often top students (Long, 2001). The active students tend to dominate class discussions, with silent students listening thus falling further behind (Liao, 2001). Some college students, who have at least

studied English for eight years including 6 years' study in middle schools, even can't answer some simple questions raised by the foreign teacher, 'What do you usually have for breakfast?', simply because of the lack of the words for "xifan、mantou" in English (Cai, 2002). Many researches have been done with English majors (Wang, 2002; Liao, 2001) indicating language incompetence accounted for low participation. To understand the reasons why students are not fully participated in oral class, a quantitative research is designed and carried out in Shandong University of Technology.

III. RESEARCH DESIGN

3.1 Objective of the research: To find out the reasons affecting students' participation in oral English class.

3.2 Research question: What prevents students' from actively participating in oral English class?

3.3 Participants of the research: 80 undergraduates enrolled in Oral English courses in Shandong University of Technology of China. 62 females (77.5 %) and 18 females (22.5%), and sophomores account for the largest proportion (67.7%) while the juniors the second largest (32.3%).

3.4 Instrument: questionnaire and interview. The questionnaire consists of two parts—students' role and teachers' role, including self-evaluation, attitudes towards teaching materials and teaching methods. It is revised by the author based on prior researches. The first part is made up of 5 statements concerning their attitude towards oral English learning and self-evaluation of their performance at oral English class.

3.5 Procedures. The author distributed 80 questionnaire papers to the participants and all are collected. 16 students are chosen for an interview concerning their attitude randomly.

IV. DATA ANALYSIS

All English majors who have done questionnaires want to learn English well and understand the importance of

speaking and eager to acquire high proficiency oral English. But 68% students are always inactive in oral English class. It can be seen that individual learners' internal factors place the key role in preventing them from engaging actively in oral English classroom, external factors like teacher's encouragement and dull topics are in secondary consideration.

According to interviewing, 14 interviewees (87.5) hope they can practise oral English more in class and after class with the teacher's help. 9 interviewees (56.3) thought they were too timid to volunteer to speak. 12 interviewees (75%) expects teachers to adopt some effective methods to encourage them to speak. 10 interviewees (62.5%) hope some more interesting materials to be used to motivate their speaking initiatives. There are also 4 students (25%) who require proper psychological training to gain self-confidence by reducing anxiety.

Regarding students' self evaluation of participation in oral English class. Most of the English majors(68%)regard themselves as inactive learners and more than half of the students as of 54% keep silent in oral English class. The inactive participators owe it mainly to the factors of personality and speaking competence.

V. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Results show that both internal and external factor affect students engagement in oral English class. Internal factors that affect class engagement include learners' anxiety, low self-esteem and lack of courage, which place the key role in preventing them from taking an active part in activities in the oral class.

5.1 Internal factors

5.1.1 Anxiety

In the survey, the majority (71%)attribute their inactive participation to their being nervous in speaking in public. Some students being interviewed have the some problem: "No matter what class we are having, we always feel nervous when speak in front of the class." And they just cannot control it; some say it occurs "when they make mistakes", "when they don't know what to say" or "they cannot follow the speaker".

From psychological perspective, their anxiety (Brown, 1994) is associated with feelings of uneasiness, frustration, self-doubt, apprehension or worry. The arousal of anxiety makes learners more reluctant to speak. This is because they underestimate their competence. As a result, when in communication, they divide the mental resources and can't devote themselves well to the task. In oral English class, silent or inactive learners usually appear more likely to avoid or withdraw from class activities and they often fail to take the initiative or participate in conversations, such as "keeping silent, responding only when necessary, being passive, and avoiding class entirely"(Oxford, 1999). Much of the anxiety is associated with understanding and speaking the foreign language. Speaking publicly in the target language is particularly the anxiety trigger, even those who feel little stress in other aspects of language learning. Most language research shows a negative relationship between anxiety and performance. Performance anxiety is an emotion inherent to participation in all stages of the event (Reis, Dionne & Trudel, 2015). Therefore, teachers should help the students take a proper attitudes towards anxiety, try to reduce the deliberately anxiety and encourage them to speak more in class activities to improve their speaking ability.

5.1.2 Learners' self-esteem

60% of the participants evaluate themselves poor in expressing themselves, which shows they are of low self-esteem. Self-esteem refers to an individual's sense of value or self-worth, or the extent to which people value, appreciate or like themselves (Phan, 2017). It expresses all attitude of approval or disapproval and indicates the extent to which individuals believe themselves to be capable, significant, successful and worthy. In short, self-esteem is a personal judgment of worthiness that is expressed in the attitudes that individuals hold towards themselves. People derive their sense of self-esteem from the accumulation of experiences with themselves and with others and from

assessments of the external world around them. High self-esteem causes language success and language success does cause high self-esteem. Both are interacting factors for language acquisition. Learners' self-esteem will no doubt cause them low language proficiency.

5.1.3 Lack of courage of taking risk

Anyone who has learned a foreign language is acutely aware that second language learning actually necessitates the making of mistakes, especially in speaking. Learners can really make progress by learning from their mistakes. If they never venture to speak a sentence until they are absolutely certain of its total correctness, they would likely never communicate productively at all. That means when learners who avoid risks are stalled by actual or anticipated criticism from others or by self-criticism, their language development becomes seriously stunted due to the lack of enough practice.

Research shows 58% of participants are afraid of being laughed by their classmates and 66％of them are afraid of being criticized by their teacher if make mistakes. This is because mistakes can pose both internal and external threats to one's ego. It can be concluded, to some extent, that the inactive or silent students in the classroom are those who are unwilling to appear foolish when mistakes occur.

5.2 External factors

The external factors involve teaching materials, teacher's factors, teaching background and teaching environments，among which teacher's factors play the most important part. Teacher' s factors involve teacher's talk, patience, tolerance and teaching methods used.

5.2.1Teacher discourse

Teacher discourse not only organizes the classroom activities but monitor the process of students' learning process. Effective teacher discourse can stimulate learners' interests, create a friendly language speaking environment, guide and adjust classroom communication activities so as to help learners produce effective language output (Jordan, 1997). Otherwise, ineffective teacher discourse hinders

students' willingness to speak in oral English class. Learners with a high level of willingness to communicate tend to engage in more frequent communication than those with low levels (Peng, 2013) .

Feedback shows that 66% of the participants owe their inactive engagement to being afraid of being criticized by teachers if make mistakes, 62% not receiving enough encouragement from the teacher and 15% find that teachers often point out their errors in speaking, which reduces their confidence. Positive feedback may more possibly lead to successful learning while negative feedback may lead to possible future failures.

5.2.2 Teacher support

Research shows that 42% of the subjects attribute their inactive participation to teachers' not giving them enough time and adequate support before they finish speaking task. To respond to questions, learners should be given adequate support. Teacher support has positive influence on enhancing students' academic motivation. Daniel and Araposthathis (2005) who made the point that reluctant learners became more motivated when they received teacher support. Were the teacher able to provide support and allow the learner to finish their turn, students would have an opportunity to produce better and more complete language.

5.2.3 Teachers' error correction

66% of participants attribute their inactive participation to fear of being criticized by teacher when they make mistakes, 15% to that teachers often point out their errors in speaking, which reduces their confidence.Traditionally, it is taken for granted that it is the teacher's responsibility to correct student's errors. However, sometimes teacher's correction does not significantly decrease the number of students' errors but frustrate them. As language learners, it can be safely anticipated that they will produce a fair amount of language errors (Ismail & Samad, 2014), so teachers should be careful and skillful when they correct students' errors in speech.

5.2.4 Dull teaching materials and activities

In the survey, 61% of the students owe their silence to dull topics and 37% of the subjects to the difficulty in teaching materials or activities. It indicates there exist some problems in teachers' teaching materials and activities which can hardly arouse students' interest of participation. Previous studies show that motivation is very strongly related to achievement and involvement in language learning. Unless learners can be highly motivated, they will not take an active part in class activities. Furthermore, the more they are involved in the activity, the more sustained effort they will make to succeed in the activity. If a task is too complex or incongruous, it is likely to induce confusion and an avoidance response. Proper tasks should provide learners with a feeling of competence and challenge.

VI. CONCLUSION

6.1 Implications

In the research,students owe their inactive participation to themselves and place hopes on teachers' help. It is seen that learners themselves are ware of speaking competence and do not want to keep silent. Below are some suggestions for local college English majors and average language learners in general.

(1) Not to be afraid of making mistakes and losing face in classroom participation, and do not skip a chance to speak English.

(2) To be well prepared before class so as to be more confident to take part in class activities.

(3) To understand that teachers' role as facilitators rather than authority who are always willing to assist. Thus, it is advised to grasp every chance to interact with instructors as well.

(4) To communicative more with teachers many a time to understand their requirement better and lessen the level of anxiety.

Meanwhile, it is an urgent task for teachers to analyze students' needs so as to overcome the obstacles of communication and improve their willingness of participation.

6.2 Limitations

This paper is more of a preliminary study with mixed method, in which the design of questionnaire and interview questions can be revised to be more comprehensive, and data can be analyzed with more depth. Results of this research may not be applicable for some top universities where more competent language learners are enrolled.

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Appendix I

<div align="center">**Questionnaire**</div>

Please choose "Yes" or "No" in following questions.

1. You think English is important to you and want to learn it well.

   Yes (   )   No (   )

2. You think oral English is as important as listening, reading and writing, or even more important.

   Yes (   )   No (   )

3. You hope you can speak English fluently and correctly.

    Yes (   )   No (   )

4. You are always very active in the oral class as you want to learn it well.

   Yes (   )   No (   )

5. You are not active in the oral class though you want to learn spoken English well.

   Yes(   )   No(   )

6. You own your inactiveness in the oral English class to:

   （1）   Natural nervousness in speaking in public.

   Yes (   )   No (   )

   （2）   Inability to express yourself.

    Yes (   )   No (   )

   （3）   Not knowing how to express yourself in English.

   Yes (   )   No (   )

   （4）   Difficulty in understanding and being understood.

   Yes (   )   No (   )

   （5）   Being afraid of your classmates laughing at you when you make mistakes.

   Yes (   )   No (   )

   （6）   Fear of being criticized by the teacher when you make mistakes.

   Yes (   )   No (   )

（7） Lack of encouragement from the teacher.

Yes (   )   No (   )

（8） Teacher's always pointing out your errors in speaking, which makes you lose confidence in yourself.

Yes (   )   No (   )

（9） Teacher's not always giving you adequate support before speaking.

Yes (   )   No (   )

（10） Boring teaching materials and activities in Oral English class.

Yes (   )   No (   )

Appendix II Data Analysis Results

Table 1 English Majors' Attitude Towards Oral English Class

Statements	Yes	No
1.Want to learn English well	100%	0%
2. Think oral English important	100%	0%
3. Hope to speak English fluently and correctly	100%	0%
4. Always active in the oral class	32%	68%
5. Always inactive in the oral class	68%	32%

Table 2. Reasons for Inactive Participation in Oral English Class

Statements	Yes		No	
1. Natural nervousness in speaking in public	71%		29%	
2. Inability to express yourself	60%		40%	
3. Not knowing how to express yourself in English	70%		30%	
4. Difficulty in understanding and being understood	23%		77%	
5. Being afraid of your classmates laughing at you when you make mistakes	58%		42%	
6. Fear of being criticized by the teacher when you make mistakes	66%		34%	
7. Lack of enough encouragement from the teacher	62%		38%	
8. Teachers always pointing out your errors in speaking, which makes you lose confidence in yourself	15%		85%	
9. Teachers not always giving you support before and during your speaking	42%		58%	
10. Boring teaching materials and activities	37%		63%	
Due to some of the above reasons, you choose to be silent in the oral English class	Always 11%	Often 43%		Sometimes 46%