USING IMITATION AND RECITATION TO IMPROVE ORAL ENGLISH FOR ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE (ESL) COLLEGE STUDENTS IN CHINA

Approved: ___________ Date: __April 29, 2010__
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CHINA

A Seminar Research Paper

Presented to

the Graduate Faculty

University of Wisconsin-Platteville

In Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirement for the Degree

Master of Science

in

Education

by

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2010
ABSTRACT

USING IMITATION AND RECITATION TO IMPROVE ORAL ENGLISH FOR ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE (ESL) COLLEGE STUDENTS IN CHINA

Under the Supervision of Dr. John Nkemnji, Ph.D.

The problem presented in this paper was designed to address the question, “what are the relationships between imitation, recitation and improving oral English ability for those learning English as a second language?” The population for the study was made of college students in China planning on teaching. A brief review of literature on the studies of improving learners’ oral English was conducted from a variety of secondary sources. A second review of literature related to studies of imitation and recitation and their impact on improving oral English ability was conducted. Through a review of the literature, it became clear that using imitation and recitation are effective methods of improving oral English for ESL students in China.
Statement of the Problem

The problem addressed as a question is as follows:

“What is the relationship between imitation, recitation, and improving oral English ability for those learning English as a second language in China?”

Methods and Procedures

A brief review of literature on the studies of learning strategies to improve learners’ oral English was conducted. A second review of literature relating to studies of imitation and recitation strategies to improve oral English was also conducted. The findings were summarized and recommendations made.

Summary of Results

Through a review of the literature, it is obvious that most researchers find that spoken language is very important to the learning of English for ESL college students. The ESL college students’ learning strategies are also significant. In most studies, the imitation and recitation strategies are the two most effective approaches to improve oral English for ESL college students.

According to several reports on this subject, most studies have proved that imitation or recitation is beneficial to oral English learning. It is the main
evidence that these two approaches play an important role in language learning. Meanwhile, the memorization strategies mentioned by previous researchers are similar to recitation because memorization is a part of recitation.

Through the results of the study and personal experience, it seems that ESL College learners’ brains are mature and have built up rich schemata for learning a new language. Their strong logical reasoning and judgment enable them to make inferences and conclusions on their own. They are psychologically mature in terms of motivation and self-control. So the first and most important thing for Chinese ESL college students is to find effective learning strategies that will assist them in the new or second language learning. The imitation and recitation methods are the main effective ways. However, in the future, researchers might explore more specific training forms to enhance their oral English competences further besides just imitation and recitation strategies.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

With the rapid development of the Chinese economy, exchanges between other countries and communication with westerners are becoming increasingly common. English has become an important tool and a universal language for Chinese people to communicate with the world. Improving oral English for ESL students through imitation and recitation as teaching methods were reviewed in this seminar paper.

In China, many students study English through writing words on paper or preparing for and completing a written examination. Obviously, it is a good way to improve written English or get a high score on examinations, but it is not an effective method to learn to speak a second or foreign language. Oral communication is a chief way to study a second language well. The uses of oral English learning approaches are significant for helping ESL students learn to communicate well. According to Krashen’s second language acquisition theory, language input must be in sufficient quantity and interesting.

Statement of the Problem
The problem addressed as a question is as follows:

What is the relationship between imitation, recitation and improving oral English ability?

**Definition of Terms**

**Imitation:** Imitation is an advanced behavior whereby an individual observes and replicates another’s. It also was a fundamental method of instruction in ancient Roman and in Renaissance humanist curricula, the practical counterpart to rhetorical theory. In this paper, it used as an effective method in oral English teaching.

**Recitation:** Recitation means a repetition of what has been said before. Recitation input is a comprehensible input, and the language materials are carefully selected, meaning they are pure, authentic and beautiful texts, which are comprehensible easily by ESL students. In fact, it is advantageous to the output production of language, because the multiplying ability (saying, writing) is produced on the basis of understanding input.
Delimitations of the Research

The research will be conducted in and through the Karrmann Library at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville, over 88 days. Primary searches will be conducted via the Internet through EBSCO with Academic Search Elite and Wilson Index as the primary sources. Key search topics included “imitation,” “recitation” and “second language acquisition”.

Method

A brief review of literature on the studies of learning strategies to improve learners’ oral English was conducted. A second review of literature relating to studies of imitation and recitation strategies to improve learners’ oral English was also conducted. The findings were summarized and recommendations made.
CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Characteristics of ESL College Learners in China

In China, classes teaching English learning do so mainly to those ESL College learners. The main groups of College English learners in China are therefore second language learners. It is stated that the learners’ psychology is concerned with cognitive and non-cognitive factors. The cognitive factors mainly cover how to learn, how to grasp learning strategies, and so forth. The non-cognitive factors mainly refer to learning interest, learning motivation, learning persistence, learning habit, etc (Zhao, 2003). ESL college students in China already have a lot of self discipline, so they can arouse learning interest, strengthen learning motivation, keep up learning persistence, and form good learning habits.

Schema refers to knowledge stored in the learner’s mind, including all the known concepts, past experiences, and background knowledge, which exist in the general pre-structure in brains. Personal knowledge and experience, emotions, and capacity, etc. all belong to this structure (Hu, 1996). In brains of ESL students; abundant schemas about everything they’ve ever touched have
taken shape. Because the learners’ first language is Chinese, so the schemas are formed mostly in Chinese thinking. It is obvious that learners need an English schema, formed in English thinking, in order to develop English speaking ability. So a great deal of English input is necessary. ESL learners need to not only know Chinese culture or some similarities of Chinese and English, but also imitate the specialized knowledge English culture possesses to form English schemas. Having various kinds of English schemas in mind can simplify one’s thinking processes before one speaks and decrease one’s embarrassments confronting different cultures. While reciting, ESL learners can make full use of the schemata in their brain to channel their output the right way.

The ESL students have strong logical judgment and abstract understanding ability; they can understand the rules without too many explanations. After they understand the rules, they can imitate them creatively in practice. Ausubel (1964), a linguist, proved through experiments, that in the second language learning process, a child is likely strong in pronunciation, but in the identical time, the speed for a child to study another language is lower than that for an ESL college learner, who is stronger in vocabulary and grammar study.
Broughter (1978) writes, “Motivation is a basic principle of all kinds of teaching--the language student is best motivated by practice in which he senses the language is truly communicative, that it is appropriate to its context, that his teacher’s skills are moving him forward to a fuller competence in the foreign language.” ESL learners should be allowed to put what they have learnt into practice and look for the training forms through which they can make oral production activity. Thereby, they’ll find there’s still more for them to learn in communication, and they will always be curious and highly motivation. The originator of “Crazy English,” Li Yang, says, “In order to say a perfect and pure, natural and exquisite English sentence, I resolved to listen to recorded tapes 100 times, have perseverance to repeat 100 times and have infatuation to shout 100 times.” To learn a foreign language is long-term, hard work, and it asks for learners’ powerful self-control in all aspects. Obviously, personality has already been established in ESL college learners and they display a strong self-control in all aspects. They can focus more attention on study, and they are good at participating in learning programs and blocking out external interference.
The Introduction of Oral English

Definition of Spoken Language

People speak to communicate some kind of information to the listeners. They speak for a purpose. They use the language to do things. They perform functions, using the language in order to achieve a particular purpose, to have special effects on the listeners. Whatever people’s purpose for speaking may be, they have to go through two processes before they can communicate clearly to listeners (Ls). First they have to plan what they want to say. Then they have to make sure that they actually utter it in such a way that Ls understand their meaning and purpose for saying it.

The Understanding of Oral English

As we know, oral English is often used in dialogue as a communicative tool that is spoken by two or more people. So understanding oral English is very important for Chinese students to improve oral English. Actually, it is a common problem for many Chinese students studying oral English that they can’t understand oral English clearly and accurate. These word and phrase-sentence levels of understanding are seen by psycholinguists as a first level of understanding necessary for the comprehension of all spoken language.
This level of understanding also can be used in the oral English. This level of processing is called the Construction Process by Clark and Clark (1977) and the structural level by Foss and Hakes (1978). Both suggest that at this level, what listeners (Ls) are trying to do is to understand the proposition or propositions expressed by speakers’ (Ss) sentences. By proposition they mean the subject matter of a sentence, according to its literal meaning. Normal sentences can express one or more propositions.

Natural oral English is less syntactically accurate than written English. If judged by the standards of writing English, it may be said to be “imperfect.” This is not a criticism, just a statement of fact. In addition to its frequent syntactic “imperfection,” native speakers’ oral English does not consistently and accurately follow the standard rules of pronunciation, stress, and intonation.

The Oral English Learning Strategies Used by ESL college Students

According to Griffiths (2004) and Rubin (1981), pioneering in this field, identifies two kinds of learning strategies are effective methods for improving oral English for ESL college students. These are direct learning and indirect learning. The direct learning was divided into six types (clarification/verification, monitoring, memorization, guessing/inductive
inferencing, deductive reasoning, practice), and the indirect learning was divided into two types (creating opportunities for practice, production tricks). It is clear that memorization is an important pattern of direct learning; it shares the same characters with recitation or can be regarded as a process of recitation. In indirect learning, creating opportunities for practice is an effective method to learners, and the process of imitation is necessary to practice as many as possible. That is to say, imitation is a kind of method for us to get opportunity to practice. Therefore, it is obvious that recitation and imitation are very useful to improve oral English.

Deng Xiaoli (2002) mentioned that “changing the viewpoint that students must grasp English words first, then can help ESL college students improving oral English,” which means that students should learn English words by speaking, not by first learning words then speaking. Thus, ESL college students have a good environment for learning language, they can imitate each other.

Actually, watching English films is a good method to improve ESL learners’ oral English. Wang Yan (2008) said that “English film is an encyclopedia of cultures, customs and so on in English-speaking countries, and
is the most comprehensive encyclopedia of spoken English. Watching a large number of English films is a magic weapon for you to completely overcome English ‘Listen’ and ‘say.’ English movies take you to a new world. You can learn the phrases, sentence structure, and the expression of a variety of content in the film. What you need to do is to consider yourself as a role in the film, you experience your lives and so do others. In short, watching a movie is better than living in the United States a day, and also you can learn authentic spoken English.” Obviously, imitating the pronunciation of an actor is an essential approach to improve oral English when watching the films. So we can find out imitation strategies are very important to improve oral English by ESL college learners.

The Relationship between Imitation, Recitation and Improving Spoken English

The relationship between imitation and recitation

In the early periods, Lin Yutang, believed that imitation and recitation were the right paths of learning English (Wu, 1994); in modern times, scholars insist that in pronunciation, the learning process of imitation is the inner learning character. Xu Guozhang erudite in Chinese and Western knowledge, recalled the experiences of learning English: “I spent five hours reading aloud
the last part of the book, thirty pages with twelve thousand words. Then read again, spending at least three hours. After several times, I could almost recite the whole story. When I answered the questions about this part in the final-examination paper, I felt that sentences came into being naturally without intention.” (Xu, 1995)”His words prove the proverb, “Practice makes perfect.”

Imitation and recitation are interrelated with one another, composing a whole course of primary-stage English speaking ability development. Imitation is an initial stage in this course and learners can imitate specific linguistic knowledge, and their main work is assimilation or digestion; recitation is a higher stage. There is input in the process on the one hand, and it can provide learners an opportunity to make a mechanical speech. In fact, in the general sense, imitation contains reciting, and reciting are higher forms of imitation. Learners imitate writing, thinking process, lexical choices, sentence patterns application, writing skills, and original English thinking, etc. while reciting. It’s even safe to say that the knowledge learners have acquired comes from imitation. In a narrow sense, however, imitation and reciting are considered as individual ways to cultivate learners’ English speaking competence. Imitation solely refers to copying pronunciation, intonation, and grammatical structures, which comprise the basic knowledge of improving English speaking ability,
and learners, receive this knowledge passively. Imitation is the initial stage of creation. But recitation can be used to practice greater English speaking ability, such as sentence patterns, situational conversations, thinking structures, and English logic. In addition, reciting can make learners use the recited knowledge actively. The target of learning English is to make learners turn their passive knowledge into active knowledge and use this language flexibly in practice. Therefore, we can see that only these two forms are integrated and carried out progressively, can develop students’ English speaking ability step by step.

**Characteristics of Imitation**

Among the schools of thought of foreign language teaching in the world, such as Direct Method and Audiolingualism, imitation is put in the eminent place in their teaching procedures. Their theoretical foundation lies in linguistics and psychology, namely that language is a kind of skill or habit, which can be achieved by a great deal of repetition and imitation. British educationist H. E. Palmer (1964) assumes that language learning is not a science but an art, which asks for myriads of imitation and practice to obtain resemblance and likeness. The cognitive school in SLA (Second Language Acquisition) assumes that, to some degree, the principle of second language acquisition should be in accordance with first language acquisition. It is also
considered to be reasonable by scholars that SLA can follow first language acquisition process as a model and derive good experiences from it. Thus, imitation can’t be denied in the process of Chinese college students’ English learning, especially speaking. Chinese college students can create new sentences with situational meanings by imitation.

It is universally accepted that much of life’s learning of language development, acquiring new skills, and social integration is based on the imitation of others. It is a complicated process. Chinese college students have strong imitating ability and can apply their logic and inference to complete some tasks. Therefore, the learning strategy of imitation is suitable for them.

The Relationship between Imitation and Improving Oral English

To imitate, there must be a model. Because of this model, imitation has a number of benefits to improve oral English

Because there is a model in the process of imitation, Chinese Students learners can develop cognitive mechanisms of imitation that apply to language change in spoken communication by models;
Learners can make speech production and acquire perception of target language according to models;
Models enable learners to relax; hence, they can concentrate better on what they are learning; therefore, adult learners can better their mentation, remove their linguistic psychological blocks, and bring up their confidence, which leads to their increased interest in imitation and more initiative to imitate;
Besides, more imitation exercises can result in automated language, which leaves more time for learners to notice other things in communication and lead to fluency in their expression consequently.

Characteristics of Recitation
When we say the sentence “Do you mind opening the window?” instead of “Do you mind to open the window?” we don’t know the reason why we say so. In this case, English beginners must turn to their teacher to ask for explanations, but their teacher may tell them that there is no reason and they must memorize it. Similar sentences or other linguistic points exist in large number in English. Even if sometime we know the reason we cannot let these linguistic forms escape our lips. Then, only by means of internalizing and stylizing these sentence patterns and expression models can learners be provided with competence of engendering infinite speeches. But how to
internalize and stylize these patterns or models? Reciting can be employed effectively.

Recitation is a kind of study tactic used or advocated by many outstanding linguists and educators. Through Krashen’s second language acquisition theory, we know that acquisition language is subconscious linguistic competence that it means students have integrated competence in language expression under natural conditions after they own enough language input. Therefore, the study should focus on providing students with the best language input, In order to promote language acquisition. The best language input must follow these conditions: first, the language input must be comprehensible; second, the input must be in sufficient quantity; third, the input should be interesting and relevant (Zhang, 2000). Only the full input in order to have enough output. Actually, the comprehensible input is an important status of environment in language acquisition, it also an essential conditions in language acquisition. Recitation input is a comprehensible input, and the language materials are carefully selected which is pure, authentic and beautiful text, it is also comprehensible easily by students in the ESL Classroom. In fact, it is advantageous to the output production of language, because the “multiplying
ability (saying & writing) is produced on the basis of understanding input” (Wan, 1997).

Recitation can help to deepen the understanding of the target language, heighten the memory effects of vocabulary, sentence and other expressions, regulate students’ language output, and enhance students’ speaking and writing ability. Therefore, it can be concluded that reciting is a good strategy of amalgamation of input and output for Chinese students to improve oral competence.

Linguist Peter Skehan (1998) has ever probed into the inherent mechanism of language learning in terms of cognitive psychology. He points out that there are two types of language knowledge stored in long-term memory: one is the knowledge forming rule-based analytic system; the other is the knowledge forming memory-based formulaic system. The former accounts for little space in memory, but its strength is its flexibility. In instantaneous communication, learners need more time and attention to exercise these rules and regulations so that they can hardly perform accurately, fluently, and perfectly. The latter includes a large number of formulaic linguistic forms so that learners can draw them out from memory rapidly under the time-limited
pressure and assure accuracy and fluency at the same time. The advantages and disadvantages of these two kinds of systems can just be complementary. In the long run, whether one can achieve effective learning that makes cognitive structure is permanently changed. But how can make cognitive structure change permanently? Learners can internalize what they have input and make this knowledge be their own by analyzing, comprehending, judging, and reconstructing. Here, what is called internalized knowledge is what Stock (1978), a Canadian linguist researching second language learning, called recessive language. He thinks that recessive language exists in learners’ subconscious layer, and perhaps they can’t realize this knowledge clearly, but they can use the knowledge in context without thinking. This brings us to the realization that the more recessive language one can grasp, the higher the proficiency of using the target language. Reciting can bring input about target language. However, if the input can’t be used flexibly in practice, reciting is only a way of inputting and the outputting function will be omitted. Thereby, learners’ speaking proficiency is improved halfway. A sound strategy to consolidate reciting input is to combine reciting with manifold production exercises, such as presentation, role play, carrying on conversation and so on.

**The Relationship between Recitation and Improving Oral English**
1) Reducing Anxiety

The scholars have concluded a lot of research about learner’s anxiety in learning English. Alpert and Haber (1960) thought facilitating anxiety can help learners to improve the study result. However, (Horwitz & Young, 1991) thought anxiety is an effective filter that hinders learners in obtaining the great fluency in English. Krashen thought ESL learner’s attitudes or emotions, such as confidence, motivation, and anxiety can affect their language acquisition. Language acquisition can be got effectively in the condition of the no anxiety (Zhang, 2002). Actually, asking students to speak English always bring anxiety in ESL study. Throughout the spoken English teaching activities in the University, teachers always select activities such as class presentations, pair work, role-play, and debate and so on to improve Chinese students’ Oral English Ability in the ESL Classroom. These activities are among the most anxiety-arising caused by the activities of the class, as many researchers and scholars have advanced, such as Young (1991). As a result, teachers may encourage students to do recitation before participating in similar activities. For example, students can recite famous masters’ speech, or try to work out some expression of the exchange terms in specific scene. This will allow students to speak and to participate in activities with sufficient self-confidence, rather than tense confusion. In addition, recitation is a very familiar traditional Chinese
language teaching method; using familiar methods to provide students’ knowledge can effectively reduce the anxiety level. (Shu & Zhuang, 1996).

2) Others

Recitation is a form of input as well as output, which integrates various senses and inputs language through these channels, then delivers the language content into learners’ short-term memory and asks them to repeat what has been input by spoken output. It makes up for the deficiencies of input and output. That is to say, it creates language environment for ESL learner to practice oral English.

Learners can have more models like sentence structures or patterns to imitate directly in speech through reciting so that their speech is varies and fluent. Recitation helps learners to form English thinking. It has been mentioned above that what learners recite is surface structure of a sentence and then what is left in the mind is meaning of the sentence. Then conception or preposition comes into being, and finally English thinking is formed little by little.
Recitation plays an important role in spoken English. Recitation emphasizes memorizing materials, and these materials are often composed by fixed idioms, phrases, and patterns, which can lighten learners’ burden to process language, make their language more accuracy and influent, and leave no room for learners to think in Chinese.

Recitation can help learners saving time to think and make speeches do successfully in real communication, so that they can reduce their anxiety and a sense of urgency, which has positive effects on accurate and prompt oral English expression.

Recitation can exert a subtle influence on learners to help them form internal language systems gradually in the light of language acquisition order, so that they can boost their English perception through apperceiving author’s sensibility, rhythm, and thinking.

Recitation requires learners to read and memorize. Reading repeatedly can make vocal organs and oral cavity muscles meet the needs of English pronunciation to form a skilled mouth movement memory. Besides, it can help to set up the memory of listening so that it is favorable for learners’ listening
comprehension improvement. Through reciting, students will not feel strange about the sentence patterns they have recited, so they make it easy to understand more complicated sentence patterns. Their listening and speaking comprehension will be improved naturally.
CHAPTER 3

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As more and more ESL college students learn English for the purpose of communication, the urgent study of how to improve ESL college learners’ oral English comes into being. Through theoretical analysis and practical demonstration, the imitation-recitation strategy is presented in this paper to help ESL college learners develop oral competence. In the review of literature, it is clear that ESL college learners are a common learning group which has its own characteristic advantages and disadvantages in language learning in psychology. Their brain has matured and has built up rich schemata; their strong logical reasoning and judgment enable them to make inferences and conclusions on their own. They are psychologically stronger in terms of motivation, and self-control. However, their disadvantage is obvious. With their confirmed muscles in oral cavity, sterling pronunciation of English seems more alien to them; they are self-conscious and hesitant to open their mouth. This transfer from mother tongue makes their English learning arduous. Thus, for them, effective learning strategies are urgently called for. Comprehensible input is essentially important in language learning. Output is based on input; but input
itself can’t be the only way to develop learners’ oral competence. Output exercises are necessary. A learning strategy that can offer learners opportunities to practice should be found; English grammar rules have a strong productivity, that is to say, if ESL learners can imitate and internalize grammar rules in mind, there will be the possibility for them to produce infinite sentences in ‘English learners’ production, it is found that two gaps exist between learners’ linguistic knowledge and the meaning they want to express, and between learners’ present English speaking ability and the native-like English speaking competence. It is the “two gaps hypothesis.” To help ESL learners find a means by which the two gaps can be bridged, memorization of language chunks is suggested. Imitation and reciting are good learning strategies to develop English speaking ability for ESL college learners. At the same time, it is found that these two strategies can help ESL college learners make the best use of their advantages and bypass the disadvantages. ESL college learners’ rich schemata, strong logical reasoning, and judgment help them imitate and recite effectively, imitation works well in producing sterling English pronunciation and reciting can provide learners with opportunities to practice English bravely, reciting can also help smooth away the negative effects from the mother tongue.

The imitation and recitation strategies are designed to develop ESL college learners’ oral competence in primary stage. The training forms for ESL
college learners are excluded in this paper. Under the guidance of this paper, ESL college learners can explore more specific training forms to enhance their oral English competence further through imitation and reciting strategy.
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