

APPLYING CONSTRUCTIVISM TO IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF COLLEGE ORAL  
ENGLISH TEACHING IN CHINA

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By

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Abstract

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Abstract: English education has been developed very well in China in the recent decades; however, there still exist a lot of difficulties to be solved. Nowadays, college students' English communicative competences are still not good, and "dumb English" is very popular among them. There are a lot of factors causing this problem, for example, the ingrained traditional cramming method of teaching; stereotyped teaching model; and exam-oriented education tendency. The English education reform should meet these factors that lead to "dumb English." Constructivist learning and teaching theory infuse new ideas into college oral English teaching. This paper discusses the problems existing in oral English teaching in China. It briefly introduces constructivism theory and then points out some effective ways to solve these problems guided by this theory.

Keywords: constructivism; oral English teaching; China

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

English is an important tool of international communication. It is more often spoken than written, and the ultimate goal of learning English is to express ideas and communicate with others. However, most Chinese college students' spoken English is called "dumb English," which is a pressing problem that should be given attention. Some of them even cannot make simple conversation with people from English speaking countries, though they have learned English for decades. What leads to poor oral English teaching in China? Are the traditional teaching methods the cause of our greatest problem?

In traditional teaching methods, the teacher is the center, and he or she imparts knowledge to students. Students are actually the cognitive subjects, but they always remain in a passive state during the whole teaching process, so they cannot use their initiative and creativeness for more practice and further learning. Therefore, the educational quality cannot be assured and students' English skills are poor, especially their communicative skills.

In order to change this situation, domestic and foreign educators have completed a lot of research from both theory and practice, and decided on constructivist theory. Although constructivist theory is not perfect, it has the striking ability to solve the fundamental problem of oral English education in China.

This paper is a report on the reasons why oral English teaching methods in Chinese universities are not successful, pointing out the approaches to change them according to constructivist theory. The ultimate goal is to improve the quality of oral English teaching in Chinese universities.

## **Statement of the Problem**

The paper will solve three main questions:

1. Why is Chinese students' oral English poor?
2. What is the nature of Constructivism?
3. How can teachers apply constructivism to college oral English teaching?

## **Definition of Terms**

**Constructivism:** Constructivism explains what knowledge is and how people acquire it (Abdal-Haqq, 1998). Constructivists maintain that knowledge is the explanation or hypothesis of new things or phenomenon rather than “the truth,” and people make the explanation or hypothesis according to their practical experience. George, Gagnon, and Michelle (2006) mention that when we describe what students are learning, “knowing” is a more suitable word than “knowledge.”

**Grammar-Translation Method:** Grammar-Translation Method is a traditional English teaching method and is commonly used in China. It originated in the Middle Ages in Europe, and was used to teach Greek and Latin (Jin, 2007). In this method, the teacher first analyzes the grammar rules of the target language, and then lets students translate sentences or texts into or out of the target language by using the rules.

**Teacher-Centered Instruction:** In a teacher-centered classroom, the teacher is the main focus and students abide by his or her rules. Most of the classroom time is occupied by the teacher's instruction, so students “are allowed limited responsibilities” (Garrett, 2008, p. 35).

**Student-centered Instruction:** In this teaching process, the instructor and students are all focused, and students construct knowledge in the process of interacting with their teacher and

classmates (Minter, 2011).

Situated Instruction: Situated Instruction is a teaching method “for relating subject matter to the needs and concerns of learners” (Efe, Demiröz, & Akdemir, 2011, p.550). The instructor should create appropriate learning context, which can motivate students actively construct new knowledge.

### **Delimitations of Research**

The data of this paper are mostly collected from oral English classes in Chinese universities.

### **Method of Approach**

A brief review of constructivism learning theory has been conducted. Another review on English teaching in China has also been conducted. The review of literature has been conducted over a period of 120 days using the Karmann Library of the University of Wisconsin-Platteville. The search engines, Wilson database, EBSCOhost database and ERIC, were the primary guides for the review. Keywords for the search were constructivism, oral English teaching, and China. The findings have been summarized and synthesized, and recommendations made.

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Constructivist learning theory was introduced to China almost thirty years ago, but it is not commonly used. Actually, it is not only a learning theory, but also a teaching theory. The traditional teaching methods in China face significant change.

#### **Origin and Evolution of Constructivism Theory**

Constructivism, a relatively new theory of western educational psychology, is a further development of an important branch of cognitive learning theory. Constructivism as a concept was first proposed in *Construction of Reality in the Child*, a book written by Jean Piaget in 1945 (George, Gagnon, & Michelle, 2006). Piaget believes that children construct knowledge on their own initiative instead of accepting it from the outside. Piaget's concept is called personal constructivism, which is considered "the root of constructivism and is the beginning of the idea of constructivism" (Liu & Chen, 2010, p. 63).

With the further research of many scholars, some other types of constructivism emerged; however, they have common ground "among most constructivism-based approaches to teaching and learning" (Harris & Graham, 1994, p. 234).

#### **Connotations of Constructivism**

Constructivism explains what knowledge is and how people acquire knowledge (Abdal-Haqq, 1998). Liu (2008) states that knowledge "is dynamic, ever changing with the experience and is inherently subjective and provisional" (p. 10). Constructivists maintain that knowledge is the explanation or hypothesis of new things or phenomenon rather than "the truth,"

and people make explanations or hypotheses according to their practical experience. In pace with human progress, knowledge could be rewritten and sublimated (Jia, 2010). Therefore, when we describe what students are learning, “knowing” is a more suitable word than “knowledge” (George, et al., 2006).

In traditional teaching, people hold the idea that learning is the process of the instructor teaching students the “truth” and students copying it. Constructivists’ understanding of learning, however, is totally different. They believe that study is the process of learners’ actively constructing meaning rather than passively receiving information (George, et al., 2006). Therefore, learners play the main role in this process. They construct new knowledge “through a combination of individual reflection and various interactions between the teacher and the students and students themselves” (Gordon, 2009, p 48).

According to constructivist theory, situation, cooperation, conversation, and meaning construction are four essential elements of study. For constructivist, situation is the learning context created by the teacher. Through an appropriate context, learners’ study and life experiences could be closely linked, which is a benefit to their learning. Cooperation and conversation are effective ways for learners to exchange and enlarge their ideas, and they can facilitate their language learning. Meaning construction is the internal relationships among “properties of things, regular patterns, and within things themselves” (Liu, 2008, p 11). It is the last step of learning.

In a word, constructivist learning theory stresses on autonomous learning, cooperative learning and deep thinking. In constructivism, learning has a greater emphasis than teaching because learners construct meaning by themselves (George et al., 2006). Therefore, we should change our teaching methods to reflect this.

Constructivists insist that the student is the subject of cognition, so the learner is the center in the whole process of foreign language teaching. Consequently, the teacher's role should be changed. He or she should be the organizer, guider, and helper in the student's learning process. Education means guiding students to find the truth instead of pouring the facts into students (George et al., 2006).

Besides, from the view of constructivists, educational situation and cooperative learning play important roles in study. It's essential for the teacher to provide appropriate learning context, so that students can use new knowledge based on prior experiences or knowledge. Some cooperative activities in English class, such as role-play or group work, can give students opportunities to speak out and learn from others.

### **Reasons for Students' Poor Oral English**

English teaching in China is "textbook-based, teacher-dominated and test-oriented" (Jin, 2007, p. 31). Although great importance has been attached to English learning for decades, many students' English skills are still very weak, especially their spoken English. The following are some possible reasons for this phenomenon.

#### **1. Grammar-Translation teaching method**

Most of the English teachers in Chinese colleges still adhere to the traditional Grammar-Translation Method, which originated in the Middle Ages in Europe and was used to teach Greek and Latin (Jin, 2007). In this method, the teacher first analyzes the grammar rules of target language in detail, and then let students translate sentences or texts into or out of the target language by using the rules.

The Grammar-Translation Teaching Method is beneficial for students to master grammar rules and linguistic details. In this teaching method, however, teachers often explain English grammar and sentences in Chinese, which creates a disadvantageous learning environment and leads to students' dependence on their mother tongue. Another result is that students' oral English is not good because of their poor pronunciation and intonation (Jin, 2007). By this teaching mode, most Chinese college students cannot use English naturally.

## **2. Teacher-centered instruction**

The English teacher often plays a leading role in English classes in Hong Kong, and the classes are quantity driven (Mok, 2010). Actually, this phenomenon not only exists in Hong Kong, but also other cities in China. In English class, the teacher uses most of the time to have an exhaustive lecture on linguistic details, and students are only responsible for listening, answering questions and taking notes. In this case, students only passively wait for the teacher to impart knowledge to them, and they remember little because they have no learning initiatives.

Although students might learn a lot of linguistic knowledge in a short time, the knowledge is hard to understand and internalize. As time goes by, students fall into the bad habits of relying on their instructors and memorization skills.

## **3. Neglect the role of “situation” and “cooperation”**

Constructivists give great importance to situated instruction and cooperative classroom activities. Traditional teaching methods in China, however, only pay attention to the teacher's analysis or explanation.

Many oral English classes in Chinese colleges are still insisting on the cramming method

of teaching. In this teaching method, English teachers spend most of the time explaining sentences or conversations in textbooks, but seldom give students some real learning context to use new knowledge. Furthermore, students rarely have chances to interact with their teachers and classmates, so they cannot practice their oral English effectively. This is why their English is called “dumb English.”

#### **4. Emphasis on written examination**

In China, examination is the only way to test students’ learning. Mok (2010) says that China has the “examination-driven education systems” (p. 265). Therefore, students spend a lot of time doing exercises in English, and they rarely use the knowledge in real settings and communicate with others. English teaching in China emphasizes grammatical accuracy while neglecting communicative competence, so all of the entrance exams are written tests.

In this way, on the one hand, many students think the ultimate goal of studying English is to cope with the test, so English study is a burden to them, and they have no interest in learning it. On the other hand, students never practice their oral English because the examinations are without oral parts.

## CHAPTER 3

### CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the review of existing literature about oral English teaching in Chinese universities and constructivist learning theory, the following conclusions can be drawn.

The traditional teaching method is not beneficial to college students' oral English learning. Firstly, students are passive accepters of linguistic knowledge in the oral English class. Secondly, students don't have an advantageous learning environment or real situation for practice. Thirdly, students have few opportunities to speak out or communicate with each other in English. Lastly, almost all English examinations in China have no oral part.

To change the present state of oral English teaching, there are four approaches to reform it with constructivist learning theory. Those are student-centered instruction, situated instruction, cooperative learning and examination reform.

#### **1. Student-Centered Instruction**

Since constructivists maintain that learning is the process students actively constructing rather than passively receiving knowledge, learners should construct English communicative competences on their own initiatives. In this case, teachers should not purely consider students as objects into which knowledge is infused. Instead, they must realize and respect the active status of students and awaken students' independent consciousness, so that students can perceive the teacher as a guide, organizer, and supervisor in their learning processes (Dong, 2007).

First of all, the teacher ought to arouse students' learning interests in learning oral English and make students realize the importance of oral English. It is well known that interest is the best teacher. Students will be characterized by diligent study and fondness for English if they

have an interest in oral English. For example, the teacher can provide varied, interesting classroom activities for students according to the teaching materials. On the one hand, the instructor could utilize various educational resources to support teaching. On the other hand, the instructor could begin or start the teaching activities with games, such as role-play, which make oral English study interesting and practical. Moreover, students won't think of oral study as a burden anymore.

Secondly, teachers should let students construct knowledge by themselves. The main distinction between constructivist teaching method and the traditional one is that teachers do not directly instill ready-made knowledge into students. Guided by constructivism, teachers make use of students' curiosity and thirst for discovery, leading students to discover problems and solve them on their own.

In this method, students are viewed as the center, but it doesn't mean people totally despise the role of teacher or diminish the teacher's responsibilities. There is no doubt that the teacher is crucial to student's education, but students feel less nervous about expressing themselves and making mistakes in a student-centered classroom (Freiberg & Lamb, 2009). The key to this teaching mode is that teachers must be skilled in organizing, promoting and guiding students to participate in the activities in class.

## **2. Situated Instruction**

Constructivists have assumed that appropriate teaching environments will motivate students to actively construct knowledge. The teacher should create realistic settings to attract students' attention and inspire them to establish connections between their prior experiences and new knowledge. In the settings, on the one hand, the teacher can present new information to

students; on the other hand, students can apply what they have just learned.

Powell and Kalina (2009) claim “effective teaching methods include creating an environment students feel free to create unique concept and structures to place in their memory for further retrieval” (p. 248). In this way, the new knowledge will be remembered by students and be used in the future. For instance, the instructor can bring the new words and sentence structures by telling a story, and students can use the new knowledge by role playing game of that story.

### **3. Advocating Cooperative Learning**

Cooperative learning can occur between teachers and students or among students. Through cooperative learning, students participate in class, and they think or discuss together. As a result, their learning attitudes are changed from passive ones to active ones.

In Chinese universities, oral English class is often a big class, so many students don't have a chance to speak out. This problem can be resolved through cooperative learning. Take think-pair-share as an example, the instructor could divide the whole class into small groups, so students can discuss, explain and justify with their group members, which can help students retain the new information.

### **4. Examination Reform**

English examinations in China put too much emphasis on accuracy, while ignoring students' communicative and language use ability. Jin (2007) mentions that students feel the examinations are more interesting when the language use sections are added. Consequently, some important English exams should add oral tests. In this way, students will recognize the

importance of oral English. Moreover, teachers could use some other methods to check students' language retention, such as oral presentations and questionnaires.

In conclusion, constructivist theory can complement the weakness of traditional teaching methods in China. Through these four approaches, the students in oral English class will be more active. They will remember the phrases or sentence structures better by using them instead of reciting them mechanically.

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