APPLICATION OF MULTIPLE INTELLIGENCES THEORY
TO COLLEGE ENGLISH LISTENING AND SPEAKING CLASS
FOR EFL STUDENTS IN CHINA

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Abstract

APPLICATION OF MULTIPLE INTELLIGENCES THEORY
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FOR EFL STUDENTS IN CHINA

Xiao Luan

Under the Supervision of Kory Wein, PhD

Multiple Intelligences (MI) theory emphasizes the diversity and special intelligences of learners, highlights learner-centered learning, and pays attention to developing multiple intelligences of learners. MI theory has changed people’s traditional concept of intelligence, and it is of great significance to English teaching. This paper explores the possible ways to improve the efficacy of English listening and speaking class in colleges in China by incorporating MI theory from three aspects: the teaching environment, teaching methods, and teaching evaluation.

This paper reviews the literature on the issue of MI theory and current research on MI theory abroad and in China, exploring the application of MI theory to English listening and speaking class in colleges in China. This seminar paper seeks to answer the question, how can MI theory be applied to the college English listening and speaking class for EFL students in China? Overall, MI theory has a positive effect on English education, and it can make up many disadvantages of the current pedagogies and become an important theory in college English teaching.
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Chapter I Introduction

This paper briefly introduces the connotation, structure, characteristics, and significance of Multiple Intelligences (MI) theory (Gardner, 2011), expounds MI theory’s guiding significance to college English listening and speaking teaching for low proficient non-English majors, and discusses the teaching strategies that integrate MI theory with college English listening and speaking teaching. It aims to explore the feasibility of applying MI theory to college English listening and speaking teaching and whether MI theory can improve college students’ language competence and arouse their interest and motivation towards English learning.

Nowadays EFL teachers find that students’ comprehensive language abilities should be improved, especially the students’ listening and speaking ability. But with the traditional English teaching mode it is difficult to increase students’ enthusiasm for learning and arouse students’ interests to study (Lei, 1999). EFL teachers realize that a new teaching mode should be introduced in order to reform the traditional English teaching mode in which the teacher is considered as the center of teaching and learning. A student’s ingenuity, initiative, and interests are critical to learning (Yang, 2005) The Theory of Multiple Intelligence, proposed by Howard Gardner, has had a tremendous impact on the world’s education and has won the universal affirmation of the education sector. Since the end of twentieth Century, the theory of multiple intelligences has received a warm welcome in the mainland of China. Numerous school teachers, principals, parents and educational researchers are involved in the research on it. Most teachers who integrate MI into their classroom teaching achieve good results (Zeng, 2001).

Statement of the Problem

The problem expressed as a question is, how can Multiple Intelligences theory be applied to the college English listening and speaking class for EFL students in China?
Definition of Terms

Multiple Intelligences Theory (MI Theory): a theory proposed by Howard Gardner in *Frames of Mind* (1983) that differentiates intelligence into specific “modalities,” rather than seeing it as dominated by a single general ability.

Student centered learning: a type of learning that broadly encompasses methods of teaching that shift the focus of instruction from the teacher to the student. (Also called learner-centered learning.) Student-centered learning aims to develop learner autonomy and independence (Leo, 2007).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore the possible ways to improve the efficacy of English listening and speaking classes in colleges in China by incorporating Multiple Intelligences (MI) theory.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study is to place research into teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL), particularly in China, into the wider discussion of EFL teaching based on Multiple Intelligences (MI) theory and practice.

Delimitation of the Study

The paper will explore the nature of MI theory through a review of the literature revolving around the application of MI theory to English language teaching; it mainly focuses on the application of MI theory to English language teaching in China.

Methodology

The review of literature will be conducted in and through the Karrmann Library at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville. Searches of the literature will be conducted via the internet
through EBSCO host with ERIC, Academic Search Elite, JSTOR and CNKI as the primary sources. Key search topics included “multiple intelligences theory,” “English listening and speaking,” “EFL,” and “China.” The findings will be summarized and recommendations made.
Chapter II Review of Literature

The Implication of MI theory

In 1983, Howard Gardner, an American developmental psychologist, proposed the theory of multiple intelligences. The theory has proposed a severe challenge to the traditional intelligence theory. In the traditional view of intelligence, intelligence is a single, general capacity that every human being possesses to a greater or lesser extent, and it can be measured by standardized verbal instruments, then linguistic and logical abilities were highlighted. However, they totally ignore other components which may be of equal importance. Gardner holds that human intelligences are multiple. After studying the human brain, he defined intelligence as “the capacity to solve problems or to create products that are valued within one or more cultural settings” (p. 28).

Gardner (1997) defined the various modalities of intelligence as such:

**Verbal/linguistic intelligence**: the production of language, abstract reasoning, symbolic thinking, conceptual patterning, reading, and writing.

**Logical/mathematical intelligence**: the capacity to recognize patterns; work with abstract symbols (e.g., numbers, geometric shapes), and discern relationships or see connections between separate and distinct pieces of information.

**Visual/spatial intelligence**: visual arts, navigation, mapmaking, architecture, and games requiring the ability to visualize objects from different perspectives and angles.

**Bodily/kinesthetic intelligence**: the ability to use the body to express emotion, to play a game, and to create a new product.
Musical/rhythmic intelligence: capacities such as the recognition and use of rhythmic and tonal patterns and sensitivity to sounds from the environment, the human voice, and musical instruments.

Interpersonal intelligence: the ability to work cooperatively with others in a small group, as well as the ability to communicate verbally and nonverbally with other people.

Intrapersonal intelligence: the internal aspects of the self, such as knowledge of feelings, range of emotional responses, thinking processes, self-reflection, and a sense of intuition about spiritual realities.

Naturalistic intelligence: the ability to recognize patterns in nature and classify objects, the mastery of taxonomy, sensitivity to other features of the natural world, and an understanding of different species.

Existential intelligence: the human response to being alive in all ways (Gardner is still not satisfied that he has enough physiological brain evidence to conclusively establish this as an intelligence).

According to Gardner, human intelligences are multiple. Everyone possesses multiple intelligences and his or her own superior intelligence. Secondly, human intelligences can be developed. Human intelligences can be explored and strengthened through education and learning afterwards. Gardner points out that each everyone has the ability to develop all the intelligences to a relatively high level of performances under proper encouragement and instruction. Thirdly, intelligences usually work together in complex ways. No intelligence really exists by itself in life; intelligences always interact with one another. In the respect of assessing a
particular intelligence, the proper way should be to involve problems that can be solved in the materials of that intelligence.

**The Significance of MI Theory**

According to MI theory, people have different number of these nine intelligences. The combination and operation of these intelligences are peculiar as well. Compared with the traditional intelligence theory, Gardner’s study reveals a broader intelligence system. It draws educators’ attention to education reform. In a traditional education model, the focus of teaching is on the verbal-linguistic intelligence and logical-mathematical intelligence, while other intelligences are ignored (Gardner, 2011). Teaching evaluations focus on these two intelligences as well. Such educational ideas go against students’ all-round development. Therefore, multiple intelligences theory has a tremendous impact on the world’s education.

The traditional teacher-centered mode of English teaching must be reformed and be replaced by “learner-centered” teaching mode (Yucel, 2009). The “teacher-centered” English teaching mode only focuses on syntax analysis, language and words by rote. Yucel (2009) stated that the teacher-centered traditional learning methods cannot stimulate students’ interest in learning and achieve the ideal teaching effect, while the “learner-centered” teaching mode can arouse students’ interest and encourage students be active in class (P. 470).

The teacher’s role in an MI classroom contrasts sharply with that of a teacher in a traditional classroom (Gardner, 1997). In the traditional classroom, the teacher lectures as the center of the class. In comparison, in the MI classroom, the students are the center of the class. In its original usage, student-centered learning aims to develop learner autonomy and independence (Leo, 2007). Teachers shift method to combine students’ intelligences in creative ways to achieve effective teaching. Effective teaching is “difficult to define and still more difficult to measure. In
general, however, it must possess certain recognizable qualifications and must contribute to certain rather specific results” (Husband, 1947, p. 411). Based on the MI theory, everyone possesses multiple intelligences and his or her strongest and weakest intelligence. In the English listening and speaking class, teachers can make full use of students’ strongest intelligence, stimulate students’ intelligence potential. Then, the new teaching mode of English class based on the MI theory is to take the student as the center. The class mode requires the teachers to analyze all the students’ intelligence and give full play to the students’ advantages of intelligence. Through this teaching mode, teachers can stimulate the students’ enthusiasm, mobilize the enthusiasm and initiative of students, and strengthen the students' listening and speaking skills, to achieve the expected teaching effect (Chen, 2003).

The Problems in College English Listening and Speaking Teaching

In the process of learning English, students should grasp basic skills such as English listening, speaking, reading, translating, and writing. And most importantly, English listening and speaking is the foundation of learning. Originally, listening and speaking is the weak point for most ESL and EFL students. Since the 1980s English has been a required test for the national college entrance exam (Liu, Tan & Xie, 2014). When confronted with the test-oriented education reality, teachers usually tend to explain the words, grammar points, reading, and writing while teaching English. As a consequence, the “deaf and dumb” English phenomenon appeared in the ESL and EFL English class. Chinese learners are typically reticent and quiet in class. They are reluctant to participate in classroom activities; they hardly volunteer replies; they seldom answer. The students in the class often keep quiet or just nod. Liu (2014) did a survey on learning situation of listening and speaking course. The investigation indicates that students have a small vocabulary, students know little about learning strategies, and students have an inactive attitude.
toward extracurricular autonomous study. Influenced by the traditional teaching concept of English education, students do not attach much importance to English listening and speaking (Zhou, 2015). As Wu (2001) stated, “Learning English in a Chinese language environment is a rather daunting task” (P. 191). From the objective conditions of view, EFL students have seldom chance to communicate with foreigners. The English listening and speaking environment is not very strong. Over time, students are afraid to speak English in class and outside class (Zhang, 2009). This serious situation severely restricts students from communicating with others in English. Consequently, it is very important to improve students’ listening and speaking in order to cultivate students’ communicating competence under such a circumstance.

ESL students are poor in listening and speaking because they are not active in English class because of culture inhibitions. Ferris and Tagg (1996) pointed out that “Teachers should also be aware that the growing trend toward inclusion of student questions, comments, and presentations in classroom discourse may place an even greater burden on nonnative speakers than the traditional chalk-and-talk lecture” (p. 312). ESL students are not confident and very shy about speaking in class. The professors in this survey (a survey on academic listening and speaking skills for ESL students) often assumed that “cultural inhibitions” were the reason for ESL students’ “shyness” in their listening and speaking abilities (Ferris & Tagg, 1996). ESL students should overcome cultural inhibitions and communicate more with native speakers of English to practice English speaking skills (Ferris & Tagg, 1996). Teachers may even view participation as being indicative of an attractive personality or intelligence. In other words, teachers probably have both pedagogical and emotional reasons for wanting learners to actively participate (Delaney, 2012).

In view of the above reasons, due to the language environment in the mother tongue, EFL
students learn English under the pressure of cultural conflict, language training and examination, thus affecting their learning interest, confidence, and reducing learning efficiency and performance.

Current research on application of MI theory to English language education

Since the MI theory has been put forward, educators at home and abroad have been interested in the study of this theory. An overview of MI theory both at home and abroad will be presented in the following.

MI theory abroad

MI theory has attracted many scholars’ attention, and many studies have been dedicated to it. The most representative scholars, besides Gardner, are David Lazear, Linda Campbell, Bruce Campbell, and Thomas Armstrong.

Lazear (1991) examines the many ways one can teach with multiple intelligences, and presents lessons incorporating all seven intelligences into a single learning experience, including step-by-step explanations and examples from elementary, middle, and high school levels, highlighting suggestions and examples for integrating technology with the multiple intelligences.

Lazear (1994) explains the learning process from the perspective of multiple intelligences, and describes a variety of ways to develop students’ multiple intelligences in the classroom and outside the classroom to help teachers and parents to develop students’ multiple intelligences.

Lazear (1998) illustrates teachers will learn to step beyond the boundaries of the traditional linguistic-mathematical paradigm of assessment, and advocates that using MI-based rubrics is the key to building authentic and intelligence-fair assessments.

Campbell, L. and Campbell, B. attach great importance to the application of multiple intelligences theory in teaching. Campbell, L., Campbell, B and Dickinson (2004) offer the
knowledge to extend MI theory to effective classroom practice, and emphasize that teacher
should pay attention to the development and application of multiple intelligences. Campbell, B.
(1994) gives suggestions for teaching from a multiple intelligences perspective at the elementary
level, including classroom-tested sample lessons, themes, and curricula, shows the reader his
curriculum and teaching concept of the development process based on his own actual teaching
activities.

Armstrong (2000) analyzes the multiple intelligences theory in a broader perspective, and
describes how educators can bring Gardner’s MI theory into classroom everyday combining
clear explanations and practical advice. Armstrong (1993) offers seven more interesting
information about how the human psyche functions, and completes with checklists for
determining one’s strongest and weakest intelligences, exercises, practical tips for developing
each type of smart.

MI theory in China

The theory of multiple intelligences was developed more than thirty years ago. It has had a
very important influence on the development of education and teaching and the reform of
curriculum. In general, MI theory in China has undergone a long process of continuous
exploration, but the theory has had a positive impact on education reform in the country.

From a horizontal perspective, the impact of multiple intelligences theory on the
educational practice in China covers the fields of general education, vocational education, special
education, family education, etc. From the vertical perspective, in the ordinary school education,
the theory of multiple intelligences has a great influence on the practice and research of the
whole process of the education, from kindergarten to primary and secondary schools to higher
education. From the microscopic perspective, inspired by the theory of multiple intelligences, the
concept of talent, teaching objectives, teaching models and evaluation of school education in China have undergone different changes.

In China, the multiple intelligences theory had great effect on English teaching. Most educators have studied it and applied it into teaching practice. To some extent, the theory has facilitated the reform of English education, and teachers use it to improve students’ foreign language learning and achieve good teaching effect.

**Application of MI Theory to English listening and speaking class**

According to multiple intelligence theory, during the teaching practice, teachers should focus on the students’ various intelligences to stimulate students’ intellectual potential. Therefore, many advocate learner-centered practice based on multiple intelligences theory. Learner-centered practices move the focus from the teacher and instruction to the student and learning (Schuh, 2004, p.835). In order to teach effectively an English and speaking class, many argue that one must apply MI theory. In grappling with how best to explore using the multiple intelligences in their classrooms, teachers adopted several approaches, some of which are more successful than others. These can be summarized as follows:

- Using Gardner’s theory as a legitimate planning framework through which to offer students a variety of learning activities.
- Isolating each “intelligence” into particular activities.
- Including specified intelligences in specific lessons, to ensure that all intelligences were covered over a period of time.
- Incorporating all intelligences in all topics covered. (Hopper & Hurry, 2000, p.27)

Linda Campbell (1997) advocated MI theory can influence the creation and implementation of curriculums, stressed curricular adaptations of MI theory in lesson designs, interdisciplinary
curriculums, student projects, assessment and apprenticeships.

MI theory has a tremendous impact on the world’s education, but also won the universal affirmation of the education sector. Not only can it influence the development of human intelligence, but it can also play an active part in guiding our educational and teaching practice. Tang (2010), Li (2008), Liang and Zhou (2006) have studied the implication of MI theory on college English teaching. Several factors have been taken into consideration by the EFL educators, and they illustrate how to apply the theory into English listening and speaking class from the following aspects: teaching environment, teaching methods, and teaching evaluation.

*On teaching environment*

Tang (2010) suggested that creating a suitable learning environment is helpful for students to develop their multiple intelligences.

The main sticking point is that the English class is too traditional and rigid; it lacks practicability, culture and interests. The classroom atmosphere is not active, and to a certain extent it is suppressed and limits student creativity. Teachers should explore how to create an active teaching environment to arouse students’ interests in English listening and speaking. All children have different predispositions in the eight intelligences, so any particular strategy is likely to be highly successful with one group of students and less successful with other groups (Silver, Strong & Perini, 1997).

The current challenge in second and foreign language teaching is to provide students with learner-centered, low-anxiety classroom environment (Young, 1991). For Chinese EFL learners, they have little contact with English in their daily lives, practice is essential, and it is advisable for EFL teachers to give students opportunities to speak and build up their self-confidence in a positive and caring environment (Liu & Jackson, 2008). Therefore, teachers should try to set up a
suitable environment for the development of multiple intelligences and create an atmosphere to let students feel excited, confident, happy, and free to study English. We can design students’ organizations and activities according to students’ different intelligences. Teachers can help students to choose their own interest in the regional activities and the specific activity which is suitable for their own development of multiple intelligences. Students can display personal works in their favorite activities. This is an invisible exchange of knowledge and can promote the development of students’ intelligence (Tang, 2010). In the meantime, all the students in this environment can freely talk about their English topics and stimulate others to learn more about English in a different way.

**On teaching methods**

Based on MI theory, EFL teachers adopt various teaching methods according to the different teaching contents and enhance students’ learning by presenting in multiple ways.

During the teaching process, teachers try to use as many teaching methods as possible to effectively stimulate student learning. So long as materials are taught and assessed in only one way, teachers will only reach a certain kind of child. But everything can be taught in several ways. The more teachers can match youngsters to congenial approaches of teaching, learning, and assessing, the more likely it is that those youngsters will achieve educational success (Gardner, 1997). The rapid development of modern science and technology has made profound changes in education, making obsolete in many cases things like a textbook and chalk and a blackboard. Some researchers advocate autonomous learning based on computer network technology. Teachers could provide a graphic audio-visual comprehensive sensory stimulation, make an abstract concept vivid, and create an independent and interactive learning environment (Liang & Zhou, 2006). A variety of audio visual education equipment and materials are gradually
entering the classroom. Teachers can use these electronic audio-visual equipment and multimedia network technology to vividly show content to students. Various audio-visual methods can stimulate thinking, improve learning environment in the classroom and help students understand the teaching content (Mathew & Alidmat, 2013). Audio-visuals and multimedia network technology not only arouse students’ interests and make them active listeners and speakers of English, but they also stimulate the intelligence potential of every student, give full play to advantages of combination of intelligence and smart advantage of every student, so as to achieve the best teaching effect (Liu & Xie, 2009).

Cooperative learning is defined as “the instructional use of small groups in which students work together to maximize their own and each other’s learning” (Johnson, D. & Johnson, R., 1999, p.73). Cooperative learning provides students a more relaxed language learning environment, improves the ability of the students’ creative thinking, and makes them feel pleasant in the learning activities. In the process of cooperative learning, students actively participate in the learning activities with great enthusiasm. The learning task is shared by each member in the group, everyone benefits by mutual discussion, and each one airs his or her own views (Liang & Zhou, 2006). Cooperative learning can meet the psychological needs of students, and it is helpful to promote the harmonious development of students’ intelligence factors and non intelligence factors, ultimately achieve the goal to enable students to love learning and be happy to learn, and then to improve the teaching quality (Feng, 2013).

The most popular activity in college English listening and speaking class is group role-play. Xu (2010) made a research on arousing college students’ motivation in speaking English through role-play. According to Xu, motivation of speaking is very important to English teaching; the role-play activity can motivate students to participate in listening and speaking English.
The effective application of role play can alleviate students’ anxiety and awkwardness to speak English in class. Through role play, teachers can drive students’ enthusiasm for learning and make the knowledge on books vividly displayed in class. Therefore, it can not only improve students listening and speaking ability, but also help students understand the teaching content thoroughly, and enhance their interest in learning English and improve their English level (Chen & Xing, 1996).

On teaching assessment

Based on MI theory, educators propose implementing an assessment strategy to help students improve their English listening and speaking, using multiple evaluations to promote the cultivation of students’ self-cognition intelligence (Li, 2008).

The teaching process evaluation is to help students improve their English listening and speaking. Stanford (2003) stated, “Changing teaching strategies and curricula without changing assessment methods will not bring about the full benefit of MI theory for teaching and learning” (p.82). And according to Armstrong (2000), Gardner thinks that the traditional examination is often used to find the weakness of the people and not their strengths. Therefore, he severely criticized the test of intelligence and the traditional examination and proposed to establish a “real evaluation of individual oriented” concept. According to the evaluation of Gardner’s view, the teacher can give students’ an objective and dynamic assessment according to their interest and attitude in study and their communication skills and performance in class. During the whole evaluation process, we should not only consider the difference of students’ individual differences in intelligence, but also take into account the students’ learning basis (Li, 2008). The teacher can build students’ study records to evaluate each student based on the students’ individual differences. In the study records, teachers check with every student's criteria, record every bit
progress they make, settle all issues which may incur during their studies, and provide solutions to tackle those problems. Teachers take down the observation records of achievement that students show in the later teaching recording and put some video, pictures, charts, individual talks into the student's personal file. So, through the evaluation of the student records, teachers can not only record the whole learning process of students but also identify the strengths of each student's intelligence, reveal the students’ growth trajectory and the progress. Students can fully know the weakness and strength of their English study according to these records, and then activate the self-conscious and independence of the students’ English study (Wang & Wen, 2011).

Liang and Gao (2007) analyze the advantages of the assessment based on MI theory and indicate that it is beneficial to the cultivation of students' communicative competence and the cooperative learning, and it is helpful to cultivate students' critical thinking ability, problem solving ability and creative ability.

Summary

In the English listening and speaking class, multiple intelligences can enable students to be in a natural, rich language environment for English learning and communication. They can participate in lively and interesting activities that include visual, listening, singing, speaking, and acting. The application of MI theory not only improves students’ listening and speaking abilities; it also develops more fully students’ intelligences.

Teacher should adopt a variety of teaching methods and assessment according to teaching content and students’ differences in order to fully mobilize the initiative of the students to learn English, thus students will study English with greater enthusiasm.
Chapter III Conclusions and Recommendations

In conclusion, teachers must stop simply exposing learners to a lot of listening input and forcing them to speak English under pressure. As teachers, we must realize that the ultimate goal of listening and speaking courses is to increase learners’ skills and strategies for real-life communication. So, teachers should apply MI theory into English listening and speaking teaching for ESL/EFL students, trying to create an authentic English language environment for students to practice their listening and speaking. Then, on the one hand, teachers will have a good understanding of the students’ strongest and weakest intelligences, and on the other hand, students are motivated to study English effectively and their language communicative competence is improved.

Therefore, MI theory focuses on the learner, attaches importance to the learning process, and pays attention to cultivate the interests and multiple abilities of learners according to profuse teaching activities. So it can make up many disadvantages of the current pedagogies and become an important theory in college English teaching.

With the development of science and technology, the more scientific understanding of intelligence and the accumulation of new information about the brain and genetics will accelerate the studies on English teaching strategies from the perspective of intelligence based on MI theory.
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