Encourage Learners in the Large Class to Speak English in Group Work

Fanshao Meng

College English Department, Xuchang University

Xuchang 461000, Henan, China

E-mail: springmfshmfsh@yahoo.com.cn

Abstract

Large-class English teaching is an inexorable trend in many Chinese universities and colleges, which leads to a strange and serious phenomenon that most students' English is ironically but vividly described as "the dumb English". Therefore, cultivating students' communicative skills and developing their language competence has become a clear focus and an urgent task for all the college English teachers in China. This paper explores some useful speaking activities that can be adapted in group work in some way to suit Chinese learners. It suggests that it is necessary to reform the current instruction model in College English classes, and the group work can help develop the students' competence of English speaking.

Keywords: Large-class teaching, Group work, Competence, Speaking opportunities

1. Introduction

The increasing enrollment of college students from 1990 in China pushed college English teaching to confront with a new challenge: the inexorable trend of large-class English teaching in many universities and colleges. According to the statistics of the survey conducted by the National College English Committee, the average number of students in college English classes surpassed 80 in 2005. As far as my university is concerned, in the fall semester of 2006, there were 36 large classes with about 100 students, which made up approximately 75% of the college English classes. Owing to the widely acknowledged difficulty of managing a large class, most teachers naturally adopt a traditional teacher-centered or lecture-like approach for large class teaching, that is, students sit in straight rows facing the teacher, who does most of the talking. Through years' of English study, students have managed to learn large amounts of vocabulary and every subtle grammatical rule by heart, and passed the CET-4 or CET-6 (national College English Test required for undergraduate students), but in the real communications, they are completely at a loss what to say and how to express themselves in English. Their English is ironically but vividly described as "the dumb English", which is such a strange and serious phenomenon that completely goes against the normal principle of communicative language teaching and learning and deviates from the objective of College English Curriculum Requirements issued by the Ministry of Education in January 2004, which stipulates that " the objective of College English is to develop students' ability to use English in an all-round way, especially in listening and speaking, so that in their future work and social interactions they will be able to exchange information effectively through both spoken and written channels…"Therefore, cultivating students' communicative skills while developing their language competence has become a clear focus and an urgent task for all the college English teachers in China.

In fact, in recent years, in line with a more learner-focused view of education, there has been increasing interest in language learners themselves and how they approach the task of learning. Language teachers should always keep in mind that in any situation, students should always be the center of the classroom and the center of learning, and cultivating students' communicative competence depends greatly on the practical use of the language and the frequent interaction with the peers. On the basis of the idea proposed by Nation (2002) that a balanced language course should consist of four major strands of meaning-focused input, language-focused learning, meaning-focused output and fluency development and considering the language learning features and the present ineffective large class teaching method, I am thinking of implementing group work to promote students to speak English, which is the most important praxis for effective teaching in the large EFL classrooms.

As most problems may have a variety of causes which to some degree reflect the variety of individuals in a class, there is likely to be a variety of solutions rather than one possible solution to this problem. From this perspective, this article focuses on the problem of students' insufficient ability to speak English mainly caused by large class teaching and tries to suggest a package of complementary solutions to approach the problem. Besides, this classroom problem is solved mostly through the application of pedagogical skills rather than through administrative or disciplinary procedures.

2. Group Work can Encourage Learning

The concept of group work, to some extent, in which students generally work together in face-to-face groups engaging

in discussion and assisting one another in understanding isn't something new. Richard Felder, an expert in teaching, once suggested group work was especially important for large classes, where getting students engaged was usually a challenge. The larger the class, the more imperative it was to use it. David Johnson's research at the University of Minnesota further showed that getting students to do things in small groups in class was the only conceivable way to get large-scale student involvement in a large class. With these small groups a teacher could immediately engage everyone in a large class in learning activities. Shy students were more likely to ask and answer questions in a group setting. The same was true with low-skill students. Michael H. Long and Patricia A. Porter (1985) presented five pedagogical arguments for the use of group work in second language learning concerning the potential of group work for increasing the quantity of language practice opportunities, for improving the quality of student talk, for individualizing instruction, for creating a positive affective climate in the classroom, and for increasing student motivation.

In essence, compared with the traditional teacher-centered teaching approach, group work is learner-centered, task-based and especially distinctive in three aspects. First, it is multiple-interactive. In conventional teaching, only interaction between teachers and students is promoted. Group work encourages multiple interactions including interactions between students and interactions between teachers and students. Second, it is quality-oriented. In the natural setting of communication in a small group, learners are not only limited to produce hurried and isolated sentences. Rather they can engage in cohesive and coherent sequences of utterances, thereby developing discourse competence. Meanwhile, learners can take on roles and adopt positions and produce a range of language functions associated with those roles and positions. For example, in a problem-solving activity, learners can suggest, infer, qualify, hypothesize, generalize or disagree. Third, it is productive. Unlike the teacher-fronted classroom where learners just receive systematic instruction in grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation of the language, group work provides more language practice opportunities for conversations, where students can work together to produce language through speaking and given appropriate materials to work with or problems to solve, they can engage in the creative language use and develop communicative competence in the English language.

According to Nation (1988), group work can help learning in the following ways: learning the content matter in the activity, learning new language items from other participants in the activity, development of fluency in the use of previously met language items, learning communication strategies, and development of skill in the production of comprehensible spoken discourse. All these serve as the learning goals which can only be achieved through speaking activities in group work.

3. Use Group Work to Increase Speaking Opportunities in the Large Class

Creating and adapting group work activities to develop students' speaking skill are part of classroom management strategies. To use them, a teacher needs to adopt appropriate ways and to train learners to work effectively in groups. The results are a very productive learning environment with a lot of fun for everyone. The following are some of the group work activities and strategies which can be used to promote students' ability in speaking in the large class.

3.1 The Superior-inferior Arrangement

The superior-inferior arrangement is the most common group work in which one or two learners, in the superior position, have all the information that the others in the group need, and know what the correct answers should be. One of the common techniques used in this arrangement is *Draw with feedback*. One learner has a picture which he describes to the other learner who draws it by following the description. When the learner who draws the picture has made her attempt, she shows her drawing to the learner who describes the picture. The learner who describes the picture looks carefully and then tells the learner who draws the picture what is wrong with the drawing and continues describing until the drawing is eventually the same as the original. Then learners can change roles. The aim of this technique is to give learners practice in describing and giving directions as well as communicating with each other. Typically, this activity can be varied based on the information provided such as *Follow the map, Draw it, Complete the map, Complete the picture, Arrange the furniture, Put them in Order* and so on.

The other common technique is *Interview* in which one learner is usually asked questions by several interviewers. Interviews can be used to involve everyone in the activity and can cover personal information, likes and dislikes, understanding of previously studied materials such as written texts or pictures, or interesting past experiences. During the interview activity, the learner being interviewed should add extra information to the answers to the questions and the interviewers should use the information provided by the interviewee as basis for further questioning. This strategy is useful for keeping a conversation going and is a worthwhile speaking activity.

Other suitable activities include *finding a story, questioning, information transfer, giving directions and completion*. Research on peer teaching (Allen, 1976) shows that the superior-inferior arrangement can result in a lot of useful learning.

3.2 The Combining Arrangement

Learners in this kind of group work are all on an equal footing and each one has information that the others need in

order to complete a piece of work. Because of this, each learner must communicate his information to the others so that all the information can be combined to complete the task. By using combining arrangement activities with small groups within a large class, the positive feelings of group members towards each other, including those from different racial groups increase. The activities of combining arrangement includes *matching* (pictures, words and descriptions, and pictures and descriptions), *completion* (completing a picture by exchanging information and completing a story by pooling ideas), and *ordering* (putting the sentences or pictures of a story in order), among which the most useful ones are those involving *split information* and *strip story*. The strip story is a split information ordering technique that provides a large amount of speaking practice. The teacher chooses a story that learners have not seen before and which has as many sentences as there are learners in the group. He writes each sentence of the story on a different piece of paper and gives each learner one of these pieces of paper. Each learner has to memorize his sentence and destroys the piece of paper. Then each learner tells his sentence to the others in the group, and without writing anything down, all the learners must organize themselves to solve the problem by putting the sentences in the right order to tell the story. The teacher takes no part in the activity. Sometimes puzzles can be used instead of a story to make the activity more interesting and challenging. Gibson (1975) describes a combining technique that is done with a group of ten people or more working together.

Techniques which involve split information have been called various names-dycoms, jigsaw groups, two-way tasks, combining arrangement and information gap activities. Split information activities involve a balance of information between the learners with each learner having about the same amount of unique, essential information. The splitting of information can involve the following kinds of materials-a written text, a picture or pictures, text and pictures, and each of these can be split in various ways. For Example, in *Complete the map,* each learner has a map of a town. However, on one learner's map only some of the roads are named. On the second learners' map the railway station and the airport are shown. On the third learner's map the shops and factories are indicated. On the fourth learner's map the park, the school and hospital are given. By combining their information, a complete map can be made. Activities involving split information like this can help with the learning of content material and language including learning new language items, developing fluency with previously met items and practicing communication strategies. Meanwhile, such activities can ensure participation, encourage negotiation and feedback, improve students' attitude to learning and suit some learners' preferred interaction styles.

3.3 The Co-operating Arrangement

The essential feature of the co-operating arrangement is that all learners have equal access to the same information and have equal access to each other's view of it. The purpose of a cooperating activity is for learners to share their understanding of the solutions to the task or of the material involved. Cooperating arrangement requires some degree of equality between learners, particularly a rough equality of skill. Research shows that group performance is often inferior to the best individual's performance if there is an exceptional individual in the group (Hill, 1982). Thus, for cooperating activities, it is best to put exceptional learners in one group rather than to spread them across groups. The most suitable tasks for cooperating group work include: *ranking activities,* (ranking a list of items), *brainstorming activities* (brainstorming the use of a paperclip on a desert island), *classification activities* and *problem solving activities*. In particular, problem-solving tasks often involve personal, moral or social problems which are useful materials for group discussion because they encourage learners to use and share their knowledge of the world. They are more preferred by teachers because they are highly motivated goal-directed and have a very important feature of definite outcome to the activity which can get learners involved. Nation (2000) suggests a lot of topics for problem-solving tasks in his book *Creating Adapting and Using Language Teaching Techniques* which language teachers can choose, design and adapt.

There are four steps that can be followed in making problem-solving tasks. Firstly the teacher focuses on a learning goal such as a focus on language, content, skill or discourse and presents the topic to the learners, for example, *a student who cheats in the exam or a friend who steals things from the shop.* Secondly, the teacher decides on the problem and its outcome, which may be a solution or a list of solutions. Thirdly, he specifies the context of the problem, and finally splits the information and assigns roles. Usually, the problems should be presented with more options, description of choices and background information to lead to more learning. After that, learners form small groups for problem-solving discussion, which can be organized using pyramid procedure. They can either brainstorm the problem and think of as many solutions as possible or select from a number of solutions and rank them. And then the group shares its solution or decision on a course of action and reasons with the whole class.

The major problem with cooperating arrangement is encouraging each learner to play an active part in group. Various strategies have been used to deal with non- participation. One way is to give each learner in the group a different job to do. Another is to have a reward structure. A third way is to change group size or people in the group to provide optimum climate in each group for participation to occur.

3.4 The Individual Arrangement

In this kind of activity, each learner has the same information but must perform individually with a part of that

information. The most useful activity is *Say it!* All learners in a group can see a grid. Each section of the grid has a different task. Each learner in turn calls on another in the group to perform the task outlined in a particular box in the grid. Sometimes a *Say it* activity can be made into a small scale role play, which is usually based on a text learners have just read.

The other suitable tasks for the individual arrangement include *problem-solving role play, retelling a story* and *completion.* Especially, role play is a feature which can be added to a speaking activity because it not only allows a wider range of language functions and language varieties to occur and exploration of issues, but also adds interest to the activity and results in repetition of the speaking activity. As role play has its risk of embarrassment and withdrawal of cooperation, it should get preparation which may include a role card with a written description of roles learners play or using an expert group/ family group procedure where learners who have the same roles get together in a group to practice and talk about their roles. When they are ready, they go to their mixed groups. There are several kinds of roles and jobs. The most common one involves taking on a different personality. Other roles involve discussion-helping procedure. For example, one learner encourages others to speak by asking, 'What do you think?' or 'Which one do you favor?' Another learner can have special responsibility for summarizing what others have said, like 'So you think that…' or 'So you decided that…' Another can raise problems like 'But what if…' Another deliberately disagrees by saying 'No. That's not a good idea. I think…' or 'I don't agree with you. I think we should…' Another has the job to praise the good ideas. As each learner has a task, he must contribute to the discussion.

Generally speaking, group work techniques which are appropriate for encouraging learners to speak English in a large class include the most useful ones like information transfer activities, split information tasks, matching activities, ordering activities, ranking activities, role play, problem solving discussion, interview activities, say it, and completion, of which some share the feature of superior-inferior group work, other have the characteristics of combining arrangement, the co-operating arrangement and the individual arrangement. When a teacher creates and adapts the above speaking activities, he should always be clear in his own mind about the learning goal for each technique, that is, he should choose the activities and the ways of varying them with learning goal in the mind, and then he should make sure the outcome of the activity and the way information is distributed. At the same time, he should pay attention to the seating arrangement and the social relationship between the members of the group to keep learners busy, interested, active and thoughtful. According to the four major strands of a balanced language course, speaking fits within the strand of meaning-focused output, which must be complemented by meaning-focused input, language-focused learning and fluency development in roughly equal proportions.

4. Match the difficulty of Speaking Tasks with the Learners' Proficiency

As we know, too many difficulties in the speaking tasks will overwhelm the learners, while too few will leave them restless, so it is important for a teacher to be able to spend time on an item or skill, try to bridge gap between the difficulty of the task with learners' proficiency and bring the knowledge and skills largely within the learners' experience. One way of bring a task within the learners' experience is to inform learners of the learning goal and outcome of each task. Once the task is "well-informed", learners may have a clear picture of how to find the best possible answer rather than setting for a weaker alternative, which enhances the negotiation of meaning and tends to stimulate interaction. Typical goals involve language items, idea or content, skill and text or discourse. The outcome is the decision that is made to complete the task. For example, in the ranking activity, the outcome is a ranked list of items. The other way is to provide learners with chances to practice what they need to do the task by pre-teaching the needed language items and skills. The tasks provided in this way can increase the quantity and quality of the language learners generate. Another way is by using staged tasks. Teachers can base the skills and centered tasks on the curriculum. At the very beginning, relatively easy tasks are chosen for learners to do and gradually the difficulty of the tasks is increased. Another way is by recalling learners' previous experience through negotiating with each other. Techniques like semantic mapping, expert group/ family group procedure, 4/3/2 activity, pyramid procedure are all the good and useful ways of practice and preparation for speaking to occur successfully and for the fluency development strand. Krashen and Terrell (1983) suggested language emerge when the learner is ready.

5. Create Conditions for Speaking to Occur in Group Work

The learners concerned are the non-English majors at colleges and universities, who apparently already possess the linguistic competence. What they need is proper conditions which not only allow but encourage them to talk in English. As experienced, well-trained English instructors, we should know the importance of structuring time in our lessons for learners to practice their English with partners or in groups. After all, learners build fluency and accuracy by talking, not by listening to the teacher talk. There are several important general factors that may make speaking activities more effective in large class.

Interest is the most important enabling condition for speaking. According to intrinsic motivation theory, interest is an in-born drive to display one's ability and confidence. In order to arouse learners interest in speaking, firstly, the teacher should choose materials that fit the learners appetites such as topics in newspapers and magazines, the latest news on

line, personal, moral and social problems and many other issues of students' concern, which the class can brainstorm and spark a lot of discussion in small groups. As expected, learners will show great enthusiasm in speaking in a state of relaxation and enjoyment. What's more, the teacher may ask learners to choose subjects that they are fond of. One effective way is through the use of *issue logs.* Each learner decides on an interesting topic and over a period of several weeks collects information on this topic from newspapers, radio and television news, books magazines and interviews etc. Each week the learner reports orally to a small group who discusses the report and every two weeks produces a written summary of recent events related to the topic. These activities involve the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing with repeated attention to the same topic area and can provide conditions for interest and fluency development.

Encouragement can give learners confidence in speaking. Most learners are afraid of speaking English because they are shy and nervous and afraid of making errors. Even when a learner has a high level of language proficiency, he still unavoidably makes errors. As McArthur (1983:107) suggests "he knows very well what he should have done, but owing to the nervousness, tiredness, pressure and the effects of inner translation, he just lapses and forgets for a moment what to do". Brown (1980:164) also proposes "Human learning is fundamentally a process that involves the making of mistakes." Therefore, teachers should create an atmosphere in which learners are encouraged to talk in English and are praised for talking. If a teacher places too much attention on errors and neglects the necessary encouragement, he will lose sight of value of the positive reinforcement of clear and free communication. Clearly, encouragement can give learners self-confidence and are more important than constant correction in the speaking class.

Non-threatening tasks provide learners with chances to talk in a relaxed and informal environment among peers. According to Nation (1997), learners are reluctant to speak English because they feel the task is threatening and embarrassing. One way of dealing with this is letting learners choose the groups they work in so that they feel comfortable with the group members. Another way is no participation of the teacher in the discussion as he may be the cause of embarrassment. For example, in the combining group work, learners are communicating with each other as equals and the teacher is not involved, which can achieve more communications and a lot of fun. Others may include getting learners prepared for the task and choosing topics that are relevant, personalized and meaningful.

Setting up a monitoring system is a practical strategy for speaking English in group work. A monitoring system may include assigning each learner in the group a job whose duty is to keep the speaking activity going in an effective way, building up a punishment-reward system accordingly and giving learners continuous assessment and making record of personal achievement.

Making English a necessary part for the task is considered to be an effective way for learners to speak English. Such speaking activities as split information tasks, interview, ranking, making decision, strip story and problem-solving role play require learners not only to repeat language items but also produce the generative use of the language. Therefore, everyone in the group has no choice but communicate in English in a purposeful way. For example, in the combining arrangement, there is a need for each learner in the group to communicate with the others.

Other factors such as creating the extracurricular activities and taking advantage of computer-assisted language learning can also be used to help to approach the problem. Obviously smaller classes can provide more opportunities for interaction. However, if not properly organized, small classes are often approached as if they were large, with hardly any interaction. Similarly, with the implementation of group work plus special rich speaking activities, large classes can be approached as if they were small.

6. Conclusion

The varieties of speaking tasks in group work and range of solutions suggested in this article are directed to the traditional teacher-centered teaching approach in large English classes at colleges and universities in China and the serious consequence it brought. Such solutions should not be seen as alternatives but mainly as complementary ways of dealing with the problem. That is, it may be more effective to try an integrated set of various ways of dealing with the problem. The problem of encouraging learners in large class to speak English in groups has been approached from the four directions: the advantages of group work, the application of the various group work activities, the viewpoint of learners' proficiency for speaking, feasible conditions for speaking activities in groups, all of which contribute a lot to the problem.

In summary, with the application of learner-centered instruction mode to college English teaching and the implementation of group work in large class, more and more learners will be highly motivated, be exposed to authentic language, have chances to participate in discussion or speaking activities in groups, and become relatively fluent and successful in terms of message communication. In addition, several change will unavoidable occur. The teacher's role will change from a lecturer to a guide leading learners through the different processes of meaning-focused input, language-focused learning, meaning-focused output and fluency development, a referee standing in the way of chaos, directing confusion towards productive conversation, a monitor controlling groups to free exchange of information, a

facilitator and even a co-learner. Learners also assume new roles in the group work. They are collaborators and active participants rather than the only passive knowledge receivers. The class mode will change from teacher-centered, teacher-led and teacher-fronted to learner-centered and task-based. With these changes, most of the class time will be devoted to the learners, which allows for a greater quantity and richer variety of language practice. Consequently, the structures and the features of the speaking tasks in the group work will make the college English classes more attractive.

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