

## The Application of Project-based Learning Mode in College Oral English Class

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### Abstract

The constant strengthening of international exchanges has gradually increased the requirements for college students' oral English ability, and colleges and universities have also carried out oral English courses accordingly. However, as far as the current situation of oral English teaching is concerned, the classroom performance is not satisfying, and it is predicted hardly to meet the needs of the society. Project-based Learning lays stress on the combination of teachers' guidance and students' learning, and places great emphasis on students' independent learning and cooperative learning. This paper researches the construction of college oral English teaching based on Project-based Learning, and mainly focuses on the analysis of the problems existing in college oral English teaching, the necessity of applying Project-based Learning in oral English teaching, and the issues that should be paid special attention to in the application process, with the expectation of providing a reasonable reference for the teaching of oral English in college.

**Key words:** Oral English; Project-based Learning

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### 1. INTRODUCTION OF PROJECT-BASED LEARNING

The concept and practice of Project-based Learning (PBL)

originated from the architectural design competition held by the art and architecture school in Rome, Italy at the end of the 16th century. It is a student-centered teaching method and its theoretical source could be traced back to Dewey's "learning by doing". The four steps of Project-based Learning are: proposing research objectives, formulating project plans, implementing and presenting projects, and evaluating projects (Bas & Beyhan, 2010). Under the guidance of the teacher, a relatively independent project is handed over to the students themselves. The collection of information, the design of the plan, and the implementation of the project are all the responsibility of the students themselves. Through the progress of the project, the students understand the entire process and grasp the basic requirements in every link. In this teaching mode, the teacher is not the leader, but the guide, instructor and supervisor in the student's learning process. This is consistent with the concept of experiential teaching which enables students to comprehend and construct knowledge, develop abilities, generate emotions, create meaning through creating actual or repeatedly experienced situations and opportunities that present or reproduce and restore teaching content, in accordance with the cognitive characteristics and laws of students. Generally speaking, Project-based Learning involves complex tasks. The characteristics of it are as follows: First, PBL focuses on content learning, rather than specific language skills acquisition; second, it is student-centered, and teachers play an important role in guiding the entire process of PBL implementation; third, PBL is a cooperation-oriented rather than competition-oriented, and students can complete a project within a group or in the form of a whole class; fourth, PBL has a motivating effect on students, contributing to improve students' self-confidence and autonomous learning ability (Wang, 2019).

## 2. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF APPLYING PROJECT-BASED LEARNING IN ORAL ENGLISH CLASS

There are at least forty students in a normal oral English class, among which some students show a relatively low interest in oral English and are reluctant to participate in oral practice. What's more, there is a lack of timely, effective and comprehensive communication between teachers and students, and within students. The Project-based Learning method stresses on students' cooperative learning and advocates students' learning by doing. From this perspective, Project-based Learning enables students to generate intrinsic learning motivation, prompt students to actively participate in and complete projects, which is beneficial to cultivate students' problem-solving ability, communication skills, form critical thinking and productive thinking, and develop the habit of independent thinking and the spirit of cooperation and mutual assistance (Beckett, 2002). The Project-based Learning method gives students the opportunity to learn to design, execute, produce, and evaluate projects in real and challenging projects through individual and group perseverance, so as to achieve expected learning goals and achieve self-improvement (Bas & Beyhan, 2010). The Project-based Learning method is applied in class, so that students can use their knowledge and skills to independently discover and solve problems in the process of completing the project, and then cooperate to explore and solve problems. On the one hand, these skills are improved, and on the other hand, in cooperative learning, students' self-esteem, self-confidence, sense of responsibility and team awareness are also enhanced. The experience and achievements obtained through the application of Project-based Learning in class have a wide range of promotion and application value which may inspire other courses in the same school to adopt Project-based Learning method in their own way. At the same time; it can provide useful reference for other colleges and universities to implement college English teaching reform.

## 3. THE CURRENT STATE OF COLLEGE ORAL ENGLISH CLASS

With the development of science and technology, international exchanges and cooperation have become increasingly frequent, as a result, the importance and status of the English language are getting more prominent (Ju, 2012). College students will inevitably use English to communicate with their partner in their future career. Therefore, the spoken English ability will definitely have a profound impact on students' future employment. The key to the setting of oral English courses in colleges and universities is to improve students' oral English

ability and lay the foundation for their subsequent oral communication. However, in the case of the current situation of college oral English class, several aspects as follows still remain to be concerned.

### 3.1 Teaching Mode

Nowadays, in oral English class there are still some teachers using the traditional teaching mode in which a mass of common phrases, common sentence patterns and correct oral forms are instilled into students who are not exposed enough to oral practice? Some teaching methods are also relatively simple and outdated, resulting in a lack of enthusiasm among students for spoken English. In large class, students lack of opportunities for oral practice and language output. Compared with students' "speaking", this traditional teaching mode places more effort on teaching than guiding students to open their mouths (Li, 2019). And in specific class activities, some teachers pay too much attention to the correctness of students' language form, which causes students to overly concern their expression in language form, such as word choice, sentence structure while ignoring the content and as a result fail to achieve the communicative purpose.

### 3.2 Choice of Course Content

In the traditional oral English class, students mainly carry out oral practice with the topics provided by the teacher. These topics generally come from textbooks, which may have been written many years ago. Some of the topics are already outdated and far from the students' actual life. Coupled with the lack of actual situations, students are not so attracted in learning. If things go on like this, the initiative of students' oral practice will be affected, and some students even get tired of oral activities.

### 3.3 Psychological Factors of Students

The English teaching in the domestic compulsory education stage is deeply influenced by the exam-oriented education (Wang, 2018). Most schools only pay attention to the cultivation of English reading and writing ability and ignore the importance of improving the oral ability. So do students. Even in the higher education stage, the improvement of oral ability has not been paid enough attention by students. On the other hand, due to the relatively low oral proficiency, students will feel flustered, nervous and fearful when they communicate with each other in English, which is not an unusual phenomenon in oral class. It will be found that some students severely lack of self-confidence in learning, even if they are capable of speaking English fluently and accurately. There are also a small number of students who are afraid of being teased by teachers and classmates and are ashamed to open their mouths. They often give up the opportunity of oral practice and choose to keep silent. These psychological factors lead to students' fear of oral communication which hinders their improvement in their speaking skill to a large extent.

### 3.4 Ways of Giving Feedback

At present, most of the evaluation of students' oral activities in class mainly comes from teacher's unilateral comments. Some teachers pay too much attention to students' word choice and grammatical errors in oral expression, while ignoring evaluation of the actual content and emotion conveyed, which deviates from the intended teaching objectives. In addition, big class teaching has its own disadvantages. Due to limited class hours and less interaction between teachers and students, students cannot get timely feedback from teachers, and it is also impossible for teachers to give each student useful and detailed feedback on how to improve their speaking skills. Making matters worse, there is also a lack of interaction among students, thus it is hard to form a strong learning atmosphere within class. The above adverse conditions will form a state in which teachers and students take things as they are.

## 4. GENERAL STEPS OF PROJECT-BASED LEARNING IN COLLEGE ORAL CLASS

In order to improve the above-mentioned status of oral English learning and enhance students' initiative and enthusiasm for participating in class, it is suggested that teachers adopt Project-based Learning method in class. Project-based Learning involves four specific steps, proposing research objectives, formulating a scheme, implementing and presenting projects, evaluating projects. The following will specifically explain how the four steps of Project-based Learning mode are implemented in oral English.

### 4.1 Proposing Research Objectives

Research objectives play a guiding role in the specific implementation of the Project-based Learning mode. In this mode, teacher is the guide and should scientifically and correctly grasp the research objective of each class. The research objectives in Project-based Learning in a specific oral English class actually refers to the teaching objectives in each class. In each oral English class, Teachers should explain the teaching objectives in detail to the students, and at the same time, propose some oriented questions, and then gradually guide students to think deeply and have an accurate understanding toward the teaching objectives. The propose of research objectives seems to be easy and simple step, but in fact it puts forward higher requirements for teachers. In addition to thinking about how to make students have a clear and accurate grasp of the teaching goals, the more important thing is how to arouse students' interest and how to make a specific learning objective more motivating and challenging.

### 4.2 Developing a Project Plan

After clarifying the purpose of the research, students' needs to develop a project plan. Students can conduct research in the form of fixed groups or temporary groups according to the actual situation. Fixed groups refer to the team formed at the beginning of the course. Each group consists of 5 to 6 members. Generally speaking, a new project is often executed within fixed groups. The members of the temporary group are constantly changing. Students can freely form a project group according to the actual situation of the project or their own interests and hobbies. For example, students with the same interests can form a team freely. The members of both of the fixed group and temporary groups must have a clear division of work so that each team member can participate in this project and play a necessary role. Whether it is a fixed group or a temporary group, the team members must coordinate and cooperate, and clearly divide the tasks such as searching related information, making courseware, presenting research findings, summarizing and reflecting, to ensure that everyone can participate in the whole project research.

### 4.3 Executing and Presenting Projects

During the implementation of the project, each team must strictly follow the plan. In order to improve the efficiency of project research, teachers, as guiders and supervisors should properly and timely participate in each group's discussion to help solving problems to ensure that the group discussion does not deviate from the main topic, and should constantly motivate and inspire students, so that students can still keep passion for learning even when they encounter difficulties. In the process of project presentation, students can decide their own way of project presentation according to the teacher's requirements and learning objectives, such as situational dialogues, sitcoms, slideshows, etc. It is worth mentioning that no matter in the process of project implementation or project presenting; English should be used all the way up. In this way, students can not only learn the standard expressions in oral practice, but also improve their English expression skills.

### 4.4 Project Evaluation

Although the project research is concluded in the form of reporting and presenting the outcomes, evaluation and feedback work is also essential. (Markham, 2011). Teachers should give evaluations to students in many aspects, such as how well students participate in group discussions, how is students' performance in presentation part, whether students successfully complete project tasks, and whether students report their projects in a reasonable form. At the end of the project presentation, students are most expected to be recognized by others. The praise at this time can enhance the students' self-confidence and inspire their ambition to continue to do their best.

Therefore, teachers should explore the strengths of the project team as much as possible, and at the same time maintaining an objective and fair attitude, and promptly correct students' mistakes or irregularities. It is necessary to give an objective evaluation and comprehensive introspection, through which students can timely summarize experiences and lessons. A great progress could be made no matter in knowledge, skills, emotions, and attitude, and they can complete more projects better in the future.

## 5. ISSUES THAT SHOULD BE GIVEN SPECIAL ATTENTION IN PROJECT-BASED LEARNING MODE

In view of the problems existing in current oral English Learning in colleges and universities, it is necessary to apply Project-based Learning mode to actual teaching. The general implementation steps are as described above. But in the specific implementation process, there are several aspects that teachers should pay special attention to.

### 5.1 Paying Attention to Students' Inquiry Process and Providing Guidance

Project-based Learning emphasizes "learning by doing". Students receive specific tasks, carry out collaborative exploration activities with their peers, and form opinions until they produce qualified project works. In the communication with their team members, students can find their own lack of knowledge, and then acquire new knowledge. From this perspective, cooperative inquiry is fairly significant in Project-based Learning. Therefore, teachers should pay close attention to the executing process of the whole project, rather than overly concerning with the final results of the research. Of course, teachers should actively play the role as each group's supervisors and guides and offer a helping hand when students encounter difficulties.

### 5.2 Heterogeneous Grouping Based on Students' Language Level

The application of Project-based Learning is also a test of students' knowledge and skills, emphasizing cooperative learning among students. To achieve a better learning, effective and fluent communication among group members is essential. Students' English level varies a lot within a same class. In order to conduct a qualified and effective teamwork, and give each student an opportunity to get progress, it is best to divide students of different language levels into a group. It is a good way to learn from each other's strengths to offset their own weakness. At the same time, it should be mentioned that every member in a group should have a chance to take the position of the team leader to make sure that not only each

student can participate in the project, but has the sense of responsibility to manage a teamwork of high quality.

### 5.3 Arranging Appropriate Tasks

American linguist Krashen emphasized in his monitoring hypothesis that language input must be comprehensible in acquisition process, and he also mentioned that learners can obtain a new language structure only by learning an  $(i + 1)$  structure. Here,  $i$  structure stands for the structure that the learns already master, in other words, it refers to learner's current language level. Therefore,  $(i + 1)$  structure slightly beyond learners' existing language ability. The  $(i + 1)$  structure opinion has important implications for teachers' teaching. As a guide, teachers should, on the premise of fully mastering oral English teaching content, actively examine students' existing oral proficiency, and provide appropriate oral English learning materials, and design learning activities of reasonable difficulty. It is necessary to ensure that students rely on their existing abilities to complete this task and at the same time need to pay a certain amount of effort, so that students can gain a sense of achievement and have a strong motivation to keep learning.

### 5.4 Choosing Attractive Project Topics

Interest is the best teacher. It's the best that the learning materials provided in oral class could arouse students' interest. In addition to the oral topics from textbooks, teachers can collect sources related to learning objectives through internet, such as short English videos, English talk shows and topics that students may pay more attention to. To attract more students to actively explore and take part in class learning, teachers could design various activities according to different topics, such as imitation, repetition, retelling, etc. This also puts forward higher requirements for teachers. For a specific teaching objective, teachers have to explore various materials and think over all sorts of ways from novel angles which can enable students to devote themselves into class learning willingly.

### 5.5 Building a Learning Environment with Low Emotional Filtering

American linguist Krashen (1982) believes that emotional factors are an adjustable filter that can promote or hinder language input. The affective filter hypothesis refers to the psychological barriers that prevent learners from making full use of the received comprehensible input to acquire language. The affective factors related to second language acquisition mainly include three aspects: motivation, self-confidence and anxiety. The first two are proportional to the learner's learning effect. The stronger learning motivation is and the more confident the learners are, the better they learn, and vice versa. However, the anxiety of students in the process of learning has the opposite effect. Appropriate anxiety can encourage students to accept challenges bravely, while too much anxiety will put students in a state of defense and fail to achieve

satisfactory learning results. Emotional factors related to second language acquisition - self-confidence, motivation and anxiety, put forward requirements on classroom circumstance, especially for students who are not good at English speaking. These students need to reduce their excessive anxiety and protect their self-confidence. The chosen learning materials selected by teachers should not be overly difficult, and class activities designed should be simple and clear, so that students can experience the joy of progress and reduce their anxiety. At the same time, a harmonious teacher-student relationship can also have a positive effect on students' learning. Teachers should actively eliminate the excessive sense of distance with students and improve students' willingness to actively participate in Project-based learning. In addition, a normal class period is limited, If students can not finish their project in class, they should be given more time after class. Also, teachers can organize students to conduct after-class project research based on learning goals and permit students freely form a team for more relaxing communication and interaction which is in favor of enhancing students' sense of acquisition and self-confidence.

### 5.6 Collecting Evaluation from Three Parties

Feedback is essential for the completion of the project, but it should be noted that it's best that feedback comes from three parties, respectively from teachers', peers' within project group, other classmates'. At the end of the project, the students will attach great importance to teacher's evaluation of the group's performance. What deserves teachers' more attention is that they should not put too much effort on correcting students' mistakes or non-standard word choice in their oral expressions, but should offer more process evaluation, such as students' performance in cooperation and problem-solving in the whole project period. At the same time, compared with teachers, it's a truth that group members have a deeper and more thorough understanding of each other's performance in the whole process of project. Therefore, group members should be given the opportunity to do their own evaluation and reflection. It should not be forgotten that except for teachers and the project team, there is another part of the audience in the classroom, that is, other project teams. The evaluation of this part is also very meaningful to the project team since this is a great chance for both sides to learn from others' strong points to offset their weakness. And also to students who make comments, this is a great exercise for their oral practice. For students, compared with the teachers' remark, peer evaluation helps build a relatively relaxing atmosphere in which their enthusiasm, confidence and critical thinking ability could all be improved. If there is not enough time in class to carry out peer evaluation, it's necessary for teachers to let students use their spare time to finish it. The forms of peer evaluation should be varied; both verbal and written

expressions are fine. The latter is more recommended since the comment it shows is more visual and detailed, which will help students notice their own problems in a great way.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The adoption of Project-based Learning mode in college oral English class is a great way of not only fully excavating teachers competence, exerting their guiding role, but also gradually cultivating students' ability of independent learning, cooperative learning and inquiry learning so as to achieve the purpose of "learning by doing". For students, teachers' explanation of the teaching objectives and learning content, and also students' collecting, organizing of related information are actually a kind of continuous input of information. And the whole discussion part of the project and especially the reporting part in the end belong to the information output process. From this perspective, it achieves the unification of information input and output. For teachers and teaching, arranging learning content to students in the form of projects has greatly improved teaching efficiency and enhanced teaching quality. At the same time, it stimulates students' enthusiasm, initiative in learning, and improves students' autonomous learning, advances students' English accomplishment while meeting students' personalized learning needs. In this mode, each student has the chance to participate in the completion of the project and it is also possible for teachers to observe each student's performance, which just overcomes the disadvantages of large class teaching. In general, college oral English learning based on Project-based Learning is an effective way to cultivate students' innovative and practical ability. The application of this mode can create more independent learning space for students, and can promote the overall development of students while improving the efficiency of oral English class teaching.

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