

Product-Oriented Blended Speaking Instruction Design

WU Xuehui^{[a],*}

^[a]Associate professor, North China Electric Power University, Beijing, China.

* Corresponding author.

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Abstract

The reform of foreign language teaching with blended instruction has brought new opportunities and challenges for teachers to integrate speaking instruction into different English courses. Based on the Input Hypothesis Theory and the Output Hypothesis Theory in Second Language Acquisition, this paper explores the effective strategy to improve college students' English-speaking proficiency by designing the product-oriented blended instruction. A tentative "Target-Input-Products" approach is put forward to guide both the teachers and learners in achieving learning outcomes. This strategy is conducive to personalized learning for students to improve their speaking competence under multi-modal learning environment and also helps to solve some problems caused by reduced credit hours in English teaching.

Key words: Product-oriented; Input; Output; Blended speaking instruction; Design

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1. INTRODUCTION

Speaking skill, one of the "four skills" involved in learning a foreign language, is usually believed to be difficult to teach, especially when the target language is very different from one's native language. Although undergraduate students in China are required to be able to use basic conversation skills to discuss daily topics

and those related to their study or future work with clear expression and conform to communication norms, many of them have difficulties in achieving the goal due to limited class time, lack of confidence, and little chance to speak English. There is no speaking course for non-English majors in the curriculum. Also, speaking proficiency is usually not tested in the examination so most students spare less time in speaking practice than the other three skills although they know the importance of improving their speaking skill.

As information technology evolves, blended course, commonly defined as the integration of face-to-face (FTF)/ traditional teaching with on-line study, has offered more opportunities for learners to be engaged in interactive learning experiences through artificial intelligence and mobile devices. This delivery mode at present makes it ideal to apply product-oriented approach (POA) (Wen, 2018) in teaching college students spoken English in a big class with limited course time.

With easy access to massive amount of language resources on-line and the use of intelligent speech recognition technology, many students today are willing to spend time practicing speaking under blended teaching (BT) approach. Teachers are faced with students who have more different learning experiences and have access to diversified learning materials. Therefore, it is of significance for teachers to explore effective instruction design and improve students' learning effects. Integrating on-line component into the oral practice enables the teacher to innovate instruction design for the purpose of deeper, more meaningful learning. It will be natural for the learners to engage in speaking activities in the whole process of learning instead of just in limited class time.

Instruction design, the essential element of pedagogical success, becomes more complex with blended teaching and learning increasingly applied in institutions and universities. Blended speaking instruction design should involve instructors and learners working together in mixed delivery modes to accomplish learning outcomes. Careful

planning will enable the learning process more effective and enjoyable. It is true that blended learning (BL) may help students improve their verbal expression and realize the product-oriented teaching effect (Zhang, 2018). However, with the growing amount of Moocs occurring on-line, learners are faced with a dilemma in their learning process: they may get loss of their learning target when switching frequently between on-line and off-line sources if they fail to integrate the two types of learning modes well. Meanwhile, the convenience and availability of abundant on-line courses and videos may also demotivate and discourage learners when they find them overloaded, uninteresting or unsuitable. While a growing number of papers focus on studying the application, satisfaction and effects of blended teaching, this study is to find an effective strategy for teachers to plan their blended instruction in order to achieve ideal outcomes in teaching speaking skill.

2. RESEARCH ON BLENDED TEACHING-LEARNING IN CHINA

The earlier research on BT in China started around two decades ago and mainly focused on its function,

significance and influence. In 2003, Zhu and Meng (2003) pointed out that BT was a mixture of teaching media, teaching mode and teaching content. Lv (2004) analyzed how it can be designed under information technology in terms of teaching purpose, content, strategy, multi-media and learners' characteristics. Since then, the research on the BT mode in China has received a lot of attention in college education. The survey by Zhao and Yuan (2010) revealed 55.7% of the students in Peking university were satisfied with BL, and another survey found 88.43% of the teachers in Peking university accepted that it was "very helpful" or "helpful" in teaching (Lu, Zhao, Yuan, & Li, 2011). Chen and Lv (2019) sent a survey to nearly 1600 teachers about the most ideal teaching approach and the result shows BT approach is on the top of their list.

With the extensive use of digital technology and the easy access to Moocs and other on-line instruction, the study on BT mode has been gaining increasing attention in the past few years. To get a better overview of the study conducted in the recent decade, the number of papers which are related to college spoken English and blended teaching and learning published in social science on CNKI during the period of 2012-2021 was shown in Table 1.

Table 1
The number of published papers under different categories

Related topic	2021	2020	2019	2018	2017	2016	2015	2014	2013	2012
BT	5440	4455	3035	1763	983	547	261	121	79	76
BL	1033	1023	794	555	379	296	158	95	77	74
CSE+B	42	37	34	16	13	6	6	0	3	0

BT: blended teaching. BL: blended learning. CSE: college spoken English. B: blended.

Table 1 shows that the number of papers on blended teaching/learning has been growing dramatically, while the research on using blended teaching/learning in college spoken English is increasing gradually, but the number is still very small.

The popularization of BT and great changes in the teaching pedagogy also bring challenges to both the teachers and learners. Zhang's (2022) questionnaire analysis reveals that "the overall readiness of college teachers for blended teaching is average, with higher readiness for responsibility and lower readiness for the environment". Although many teachers claim that BL may be effective and they are willing to use this teaching approach (Chen & Lv, 2019), there still exist some practical problems. For example, with on-line learning sources increasing fast, teachers need to explore the effective ways of integrating on-line and off-line materials and learners who feel difficult or are unwilling to adapt to new learning styles are more likely to fall behind. McGee (2014) also points out that a blended course solely based on delivery mode is a risk if there lack pedagogical strategies and designs. Therefore, only when the course is well-designed, can BL achieve expected learning outcomes.

3. BLENDED SPEAKING INSTRUCTION DESIGN

According to Krashen's (1985) Input Hypothesis, learners should have comprehensible language input when learning a language. Lacking input and emphasizing output will make learners anxious, thus hindering learning. However, only getting input is not enough for language learners to be able to use the language effectively. In responding to the Input Hypothesis, Swain (1993) proposed Output Hypothesis, which claimed L2 output was necessary for language acquisition, because only in the output stage can learners realize what they know and what they don't know. These two hypotheses complement each other and are widely accepted in the study of second language acquisition. Therefore, both input and output should be taken into consideration when designing the blended speaking instruction. In order to provide students with comprehensible language input, a questionnaire survey and a pre-test were conducted on freshmen's learning experiences and their needs at the beginning of the English course.

3.1 Questionnaire

The freshmen come from different provinces in China where the English curriculum could be different. The questionnaires, involving mainly two aspects in study – learning experience and needs, were sent to 432 students and 416 students responded with valid data. The result is shown as follows:

- My preferred learning approach is _____.
- Have you ever taken English oral test?
- What on-line source or software have you ever used in learning English?

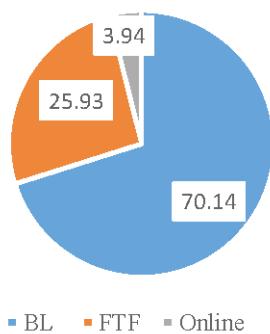


Figure 1
Learning approach

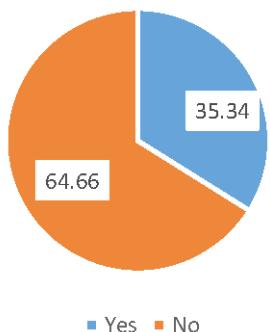


Figure 2
English oral test takers

The data in Figure 1 show that a majority of students (70.14%) prefer BL approach, about one fourth (25.93) of the students would like to choose FTF, and only very few students (3.94%) prefer to study online. The data in Figure 2 show more than half of the respondents had never taken any oral test before entering university.

Most students (86.54%) had the experience of using software to help them learn English, such as Baici zhan, Zhimi Danci, Jiguang Danci, which are mainly used for expanding vocabulary.

3.2 Course Features

The course, *General English*, consists of two different modules “Reading and Writing” and “Watching, Listening and Speaking” and lasts for only one semester, or more exactly, 16 weeks. The proportion of time allocated to in-class instruction and on-line learning is 3:1, with 12 weeks for FTF instruction and 4 weeks for on-line study. And

there are four class hours each week on one module and the teacher need to design the course for each module. The number of students attending the class is usually between 50 to 90. The data collected from the questionnaire survey show that 53.8% of the respondents have a strong desire to improve their speaking skill, 41.9% respondents think it is necessary to improve their speaking skill, while only 4.3% respondents think it is not necessary. A formative assessment is conducted to give students feedback about their speaking competence

3.3 TIPS Approach in Blended Speaking Instruction Design

With limited class time and a big class size, the lack of speaking opportunities is one of the major problems that undergraduates have in learning English. The design of blended speaking instruction not only combines on-line and off-line learning approach but also finds more opportunities for the students to speak English and puts emphasis on the learning outcomes. The existing teaching models such as BOPPPS, O-AMAS and SIOP tend to focus on giving guidance to only the instructors in planning teaching. Since blended teaching-learning involves both the teachers and students, a comprehensible approach “Target – Input – Products (TIPS)” is applied in the instruction design to guide both of them in their teaching and learning practice. This approach changes from the “teacher-oriented” traditional teaching to “learner-oriented” or “outcome-oriented” teaching.

All the three stages in TIPS are student-centered. First of all, the specific “target” makes it clear for both the teacher and the learner to be aware what to achieve for each lesson. When learners are faced with growing amount of knowledge and information on-line, it is essential for them to be aware of what they need to learn and master exactly. With a clear goal in mind, the students are more likely to focus on the learning materials (input) and assigned tasks (products). What should be done in each stage is shown in figure 3 below:

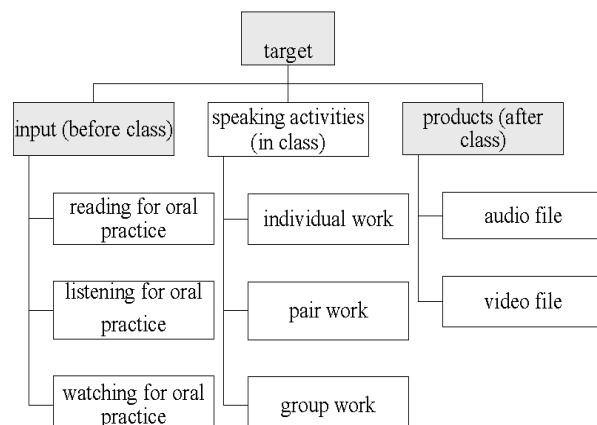


Figure 3
The process of TIPS approach

Under TIPS approach, the teacher sets one learning “target” each time and sends explicit rubrics to their students. Then the students have access to the target-related learning materials through reading, listening or watching to become familiar with the topic so that they are able to be engaged in interactive activities in class. Classroom activities are more like real-life situations and therefore students can get valuable feedback from both teacher and peers. After pre-class preparation and in-class practice, students complete their task and submit their verbal products either in audio or video file, which could be viewed by the teacher and peers.

For example, one target given to the students is to produce a 5-minute video to introduce their university in English. The teacher provides some related introductions to the students in different forms, such as words, sounds or videos. The students may also search for related topics by themselves. And then they study the words, phrases and sentence patterns used in making introduction and imitate them to prepare their own introduction by using speech recognition technology before class. In this way, students know exactly what speaking skills they will be learning in each lesson and check their pronunciation by themselves. There are different interactive activities such as individual work, pair work and group work to enable them to have real-life communication in class. The feedbacks of their performance from the teacher and peers help them clarify their problems and understand how to make improvements. Finally, the students collaborate with peers to produce their own video by giving a guided-tour of the campus as the final products.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Encouraging Chinese students to speak English used to be hard for teachers. Applying TIPS approach in the teaching classes shows most students become interested and active in speaking activities and the time they spent on oral practice was also recorded. The data from one education platform that students use for speaking practice is collected in the following table:

Table 2
Data of students' oral practice

Class	Number of students	Number of tasks finished	Total time spent by each student (minutes)	Average score
1	47	36	76	84
2	54	41	98	86

The table shows students in class 2 finish more tasks and spent more time on oral practice and they also score higher than those from class 1. The on-line resources provide students with flexibility in speaking practice. In addition to completing the assigned tasks, learners can also choose what they are interested in to learn by themselves, which greatly enhanced their motivation in

using English. Meanwhile, each student's data is also available in the teacher's account.

TIPS blended speaking instruction design emphasizes the teacher's role as scaffolding and facilitator and the student's role as participator and producer. That is, the teacher creates lessons which are interesting, goal-directed and achievable for learners and provides support until the students can fulfil their task in the end. The ultimate purpose of improving speaking skill is not to score high in tests but to be able to express themselves, deliver information and discuss with people in real life.

One of the great advantages of the TIPS blended speaking instruction is that, with speech recognition technology, students are able to take oral practice by themselves. The difficulty of communicating in English for students lies in the fact that it is difficult for them to find people to talk with outside the classroom. Although foreign teachers are ideal for giving guidance to help learners speak English, the high cost often makes it less possible for most of them.

Another advantage is that it can ease learners' anxiety of making errors when they speak English. Learners feel relaxed talking to the machine and they can compare their pronunciation with the standard one. Moreover, they can talk repeatedly until they are satisfied with their expression. According to statistics, students need to ensure 200 hours of dialogue in a year to achieve steady progress in English speaking skills. Speech recognition technology makes it possible for learners to practice their speaking alone.

The third advantage is personalized feedback from the software, the teacher and the peers in various situations. Timely feedback is an effective way to help learners avoid fossilization in the process of learning to speak a language. However, in traditional teaching, it is less possible for the teacher to give timely feedback to each and every student in a big class. The teaching-learning platform based on information technology can help teachers monitor the learning effect of each student and provide timely solutions to their problems. Some learning software automatically gives feedback about the accuracy and fluency through speech recognition. And in-class activities also enable students to know how to improve their communication skills from the feedback given by the teacher and peers.

There also exist some problems in adopting blended teaching-learning approach. First of all, the teaching process is more complex than the traditional way. It requires the teacher to plan the curriculum in more details and spend much time monitoring students' on-line learning activities and give timely feedback. Secondly, students' experience of using the platform and software will also affect the learning effect.

5. CONCLUSION

Speaking skill needs to be improved through appropriate input and repeated practice. TIPS blended oral English

teaching mode can optimize various teaching resources, meet students' personalized learning in a multimodal environment, greatly improve students' self-confidence and learning effect, and solve some problems caused by the reduction of English class hours. The role of teachers in this teaching mode runs through the whole teaching-learning process. A clear target helps students know better why they are engaged in the activities they will be completing in class and gives them a chance to take ownership over what they need to master. Personalized feedback enables students to effectively avoid the fossilization in speaking practice. TIPS blended speaking instruction design is not simply an integration of e-learning and traditional learning, more importantly, it enables both teachers and learners to share the same target and focus on the same products. Speaking activities are integrated into the whole process of listening, reading and writing modules to help learners maximize their speaking opportunities.

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