A Learner-centered Curriculum of Speaking Class for 
Non-English Majors 

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Abstract  
Most non-English majors have still lacked communication proficiency after 2-year college English learning. Thus, more and more colleges begin to carry out college English teaching reform, in which the speaking proficiency is emphasized. China University of Geosciences (CUG) is one of the pioneers—a teaching reform was carried out in March 2003, in which the English class for non-English majors fell into three parts: speaking and listening, reading, and writing, which are given respectively by three teachers. This thesis, on the basis of the reform and a research, aims to design an auxiliary curriculum for the spoken English teaching.  

Introduction  
College English is traditionally taught and learnt as a comprehensive course, namely, listening, speaking, reading, translating and writing are combined as a whole. College English Syllabus (modified version) (1999) has set criteria for the five language proficiencies. Among them reading proficiency ranks first. In teaching practice, in order to help students pass CET-4 and CET-6, which are considered as the token of students’ proficiency in English, most colleges would spend more class time on reading rather than the other four language abilities. Thus, though many students can pass CET-4, even CET-6, they can’t accomplish everyday communication in English. Spoken English test has been added since 1999 as an alternative for those who obtain more than 80 marks in CET-4 or more than 75 in CET-6. Though with the publishing of lots of innovative coursebooks, which live up to the “student-centered” principle and emphasize speaking proficiency, there is not much change in the English teaching and learning for non-English majors. Listening and speaking hasn’t been emphasized. As a result, most college students still lack communication proficiency after 2-year college English learning.  
China University of Geosciences (CUG), a key university in China, has about 3000 non-English majors in each grade. Every year, most students can pass CET-4. The pass percentage is about 10 percentage points higher than the average percentage for colleges in China. However, because most students come from the rural area, they are good at written English rather than spoken English because of the limited teaching condition in the rural area. In order to improve the present status, a teaching reform was carried out in March 2003. The English class for non-English majors now falls into three parts: speaking and listening, reading, and writing, which are given respectively. Speaking and listening take the percentage of 43% in the 280 class periods for college English teaching. And 2/3 of the speaking and listening class is devoted to speaking. As a
teaching experiment, especially for the speaking part, it is important and necessary to design a proper curriculum for speaking class.

Curriculum provides a framework that helps the students to learn as efficiently and effectively as possible in the given situation (Brown, 2001). Since CUG is one of the pioneers in the reform, before an authorized curriculum is established by the departments guiding English teaching, an auxiliary sub-curriculum is designed to guide the teaching of spoken English. In fact the “curriculum” here is between the curriculum and the course design, for it possesses the characteristics of both.

Generally a curriculum includes four core components: the goals and objectives, teaching materials, teaching methods, and tests. To design a learner-centered curriculum is a collaborative effort between teachers and learners (Nunan, 2001). Thus the collection and analysis of students needs is the first step. Needs collection and analysis is an integral part of systematic curriculum building (Brown, 2001). In early researches, Brundage and Mackeracher (1980) indicate that adult learners are profoundly influenced by past learning experiences, present concerns and future prospects. And it has been suggested that content in the learner-centered curriculum should be justified in terms of relevance and motivational potential for the learner (Nunan, 1988). As it is a leaner-centered curriculum, students’ needs constitute the basis of the its building. Goals and objectives, teaching materials and methods, ways of tests are based on the analysis of students needs. Teaching materials and methods are designed to stimulate students to learn instead of teaching them as usual.

**Instruments**

In order to collect students’ needs systematically, several instruments — questionnaires, interviews, existing test marks, observations are employed. Among them questionnaires offer accurate and specific information of students. Thus a questionnaire, which includes 20 questions regarding students’ opinions of the speaking class and their expected curriculum for spoken English teaching in classroom, etc., becomes the most important source of student needs information. The questions cover goal and reasons for learning English, content and material selection, teaching methods, test and evaluation of speaking proficiency.

The subjects of the questionnaire are 297 students from 10 classes. All the students are sophomores. They have been taught in relatively traditional ways, which has been mentioned in the introduction. In this semester (the fourth semester), they are given speaking class, reading class, and writing class respectively.

Besides, 5-6 students in each class are interviewed to get an insight into some questions that are not developed in the questionnaire.

The students have had a spoken English test in each of the past 3 semesters, which was a part of the final exam and scored according to the syllabus for CET spoken English (but the criteria were below those of CET-SET). Their marks in the third semester are referred to as their starting line.

The subjects’ behavior and progress in spoken English class are observed and recorded.

**Results and Discussion**

For personal information, 166 students (52%) think speaking is the most important ability. But only 117 (51%) think they can achieve everyday talk in English, although 269 students (91%)
have got no less than 9 (the full marks are 15) in the test. Another 43% only can say broken sentences and words in English. Fortunately, only 2 students think spoken English class is unnecessary. In other words, more than 99% of the students think spoken class can help to improve speaking proficiency.

Table 1 and Table 2 show the findings of goals and reasons for learning spoken English. It’s obvious that the vast majority expect, after taking the spoken English class, to achieve everyday talk and be able to discuss some topics with native speakers, including something academic. 148 students (50%) consider spoken English as a distinguished skill. So teachers mustn’t teach to test, but teach to effective communication.

### Table 1 Goals of learning spoken English

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Goal</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>accomplish everyday conversation</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>accomplish everyday conversation and discuss some familiar topics</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>accomplish everyday conversation and discuss some professional topics</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>speak as well as a native</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 2 Reasons for learning spoken English

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pass spoken English examination</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talk with English speakers while traveling</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study abroad</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Find a better job</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have a distinguished skill</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For the topics for exercises, most students don’t like the topics far from them. 189 students (64%) prefer the topics related to everyday life closely, such as personality, education, love, etc. 173 students (58%) prefer the modified material. In the interview, they explain the reason—this type of material is more suitable for them. Sometimes the authentic material is too difficult for them. But most of the refinement should be limited to replacing complicated words with easy ones, not the sentence structure. What’s more, they think the context of the modified materials should be from real life, not created in a “childish” way.

Students seldom spend time in speaking after class. In the interview they say that they only spend 30 minutes or so in reading aloud each morning. So most students rely on spoken English class to improve their speaking proficiency. More spoken English classes are expected each week—78% think it is proper to have spoken English class twice a week.

For the organizational forms of spoken class, students prefer to different forms according to their own interest. Table 3 shows their choices. Among these activities, group discussion and games are relatively popular with students. What’s more, it doesn’t matter the activities are organized in groups or in pairs, for both have their unique advantages.

### Table 3 Which activity do you prefer? (The subjects are directed to choose more than one answer to this question).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>reading aloud</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>recitation</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dialogue</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>role-play</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>story-telling</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Teachers play an important role in the organization of class. 119 students expect teachers to speak 70-90% English in class, and 102 students expect 90%. Nobody suggest teachers speak less than 50% English in class. 214 students expect teachers to circulate around the classroom so that they have chance to talk to the teachers and have them correct their errors and mistakes. But they don’t like teachers to interrupt them and correct their mistakes on hearing them. 187 students prefer teachers to note down their mistakes and discuss with them after class.

256 students don’t think the marks in the final spoken English test can reflect their speaking proficiency effectively. In the interview they say they should be awarded each time. So the behavior and progress in each class must be recorded as the evaluation of the speaking proficiency. 71% of them think if they can accomplish the communication task, they should pass the examination, for a lot assistant methods can be used in the real communication, such as body language, facial expressions.

Conclusion

According to the analysis of students needs, the following underlined items should be included in a possible learner-centered curriculum for spoken English class.

1. The goals and objectives

To develop the students’ communication proficiency so that students can talk with native speakers not only on everyday topics, but also on something academic related to their majors or in their professional fields:

a) to use everyday English fluently and accomplish the tasks such as shopping, dining, etc.

b) to build confidence in further learning (e.g., studying overseas)

c) to add some terms to the learning so that they can make conversations or give a report on something academic.

2. The content and materials

A range of authentic materials at different proficiency levels should be designed and used to assist students to practice spoken English. The materials should reflect the outside world as well as foster independent learning by raising the consciousness of the students and making them more aware of the learning process (Nunan, 2001). Today most coursebooks for spoken English have culled materials from different sources: video tapes, recordings of authentic interactions, radio and newspapers, etc. But levels of difficulty have to be controlled. In the four semesters, topics and materials have to be chosen from the easy to the difficult, or from those needing less vocabulary to those needing more. The topics that are related to real life closely, such as culture, education, etc. and that they have more words to say have to be picked out to cultivate their interest to communicate. Some terms related to students’ majors can be added so that the can talk about the topics related to their majors.

3. Teaching Methods

Communicative language teaching and classroom acquisition studies provide theoretical basis for the teaching methodology in spoken English class. In speaking activities, tasks are designed and organized in the way that is similar to real life. Pair work or group work makes no difference.
The core is to achieve the communication task, so as to develop the communication skills of students.

Teachers are expected to speak English as much as they can. Each student is expected to have a chance to talk with the teacher in each class. The teachers should correct the errors and mistakes of students by repeating the correct sentences or discuss with them after class.

The organization of activities should be changed from time to time in order to cultivate students’ interest.

4. The Test

Tests, here, as a systematic process of determining the extent to which instructional objectives are achieved by pupils (Gronlund, 1981). It is not something that only takes place summatively at the end of a course. Informal and continual monitoring should be happening through the course. Students’ behavior and progress must be recorded as part of the final test. Task-based tests can be designed to examine students’ proficiency in communication. The criteria in CET Spoken English Test Syllabus can be referred to not only for the test, but also for the practice in class. However, if a student can accomplish the communication task, though he may not speak English fluently, he can pass the exam.

Problems and Suggestions

Generally speaking, students, teachers, teacher aids, program administrators, and any governing bodies or supervisors in the bureaucracy above the language program will be involved in the design of curriculum. This “curriculum”, however, is restricted to the Listening and Speaking Section in CUG. It only offers a reference for the college English reform. Besides, the data analysis of the research may have some inefficiency so that some data are not absolutely accurate. Thus further researches must be carried out to complement this “curriculum”.

The other big problem lies in the teaching. Students expect a class of about 20 students in order to have more chance to talk and be corrected by the teacher. But now most classes have more than 30 students. It’s difficult for the teacher to have a chance to talk with each student in each class. Thus some assistant teaching methods, like computer English teaching program recommended by the authority, can be used to relieve the stress in a “fat class”.

References


