A SURVEY STUDY ON STUDENTS' BELIEFS ABOUT ENGLISH DORMITORY PRACTICE — A REPORT FROM THE IEDC PROGRAM

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Abstract

The article is to get some feedbacks from students on the efficiency of the English Dorm practice in improving their oral ability and factors influencing their oral development. Empirical evidence provided by the survey indicates that college students' new proficiency in speaking is due to the traditional teaching method and students' attitudes to oral English practice play an important role in their engagement in the practice and above all. Dorm practice proves to be an satisfying way to enhance students' oral ability by creating a more natural language setting for students after class and forcing teachers to use a new communicative competence approach in class. At last, the author gives some suggestions for researchers to achieve an ideal goal in this field.

Key words
English Dormitory practice oral ability SLT

1 The Conception of English Dormitory and IEDC Program

Since the beginning of the 19th century to meet the needs of the rapid development of the modern society, more and more linguists and English teachers have shifted their attention from only developing students' both English majors and non-English majors' reading and writing ability to promoting their listening and speaking ability as well. Thus, to enable students to express themselves effectively has become a big ambition for many English teachers. Up to date, there have appeared several literatures on the research in this field in our country. However, till now, there is still not a very satisfying way in practice to improve students' oral ability, especially for those non-English majors who don't have any oral course to attend as a routine in college. To achieve this goal, our university decided to employ a brand new kind of teaching approach called Interaction between English Dormitory and Class Teaching (IEDC) for short model for all the non-English majors in grade 2004 from Sept. 2004.

According to this new teaching model, several English Dormitories (EDorms for short) were set up for those freshmen who voluntarily registered as EDorm members before they entered college. On the one hand, EDorms are provided with several privileges such as regular opportunities to communicate with foreign students sent by the university's guidance from both Chinese and foreign teachers and extracurricular activities to take part in. On the other hand, while all the students are encouraged to speak in English in dormitory after class, EDorm members should promise at least 20 minutes of oral practice everyday. At the same time, teachers are required to use a new communicative competence.

IEDC program IEDC program is also called as EDorm program short form for Interaction between English Dormitory and Class Teaching. A project doing research on enhancing college students' English oral ability financed by the Educational Bureau Zhejiang province.
approach in class instead of the traditional grammar translation method. They are requested to assign some oral tasks, topics should be related to the intensive reading course. for students to fulfill after class, and at the first class of each session, they should call 15-20 students, both E dorm and non-E dorm members, to give a presentation in forms of report, dialogue, debate or role play, etc. about the assignment for 15 minutes and students’ performances are recorded as a criteria for their finals. Up to now, the IEDC model has been practiced in Grade 04 for three semesters with 716 students in E dorms and to our surprise, students’ speaking ability has been greatly improved in both fluency and accuracy.

2.1 The Survey

The design of the questionnaire

As one way to assess the effect of the IEDC teaching model, a questionnaire was conducted on students with an intention of investigating factors influencing their oral ability improvement and above all, their beliefs about the E dorm practice.

Questionnaire was designed as self-reporting for individuals, which was developed on the theoretically assumed aspects of the learners’ E dorm identity. Question 1: oral practice experiences. Question 2: attitude to English speaking. Question 3: problems in the practice and their instructive factors. Question 9: and most important of all, their beliefs about the efficiency of E dorm oral practice and length of time they committed to the practice every week. Question 6: So the questionnaire is as follows:

1. You are E dorm members. Yes [ ] No [ ]

2. You began learning English at:

   Elementary school [ ] Junior high school [ ] Senior high school [ ] College [ ]

3. Before you went to college, you practiced oral English a lot [ ] a little [ ] never [ ]

4. You like to speak English. Yes [ ] Very much [ ] Not at all [ ]

5. You think improving your oral English is important to you. Yes [ ] Maybe [ ] Not at all [ ]

6. You think E dorm practice is an efficient way to improve your Oral English.

   Yes [ ] To a great extent [ ] Not at all [ ]

7. How many hours do you engage in oral practice in dormitory every week?

   More than 4 hours [ ] 3 hours [ ] About 2 hours [ ] About 1 hour [ ] Less than 1 hour [ ]

8. Other than improving your speaking ability, did you get any other benefits from the E dorm program? If yes [ ] then what are they?

9. What are the barriers for you to persist in speaking English in dormitory every day?

10. Do you have any suggestions and hopes for making the E dorm program more efficient?

2.2 Participants

All the students participating in the questionnaire are non-English majors randomly chosen from Grade 04 in our university.

2.3 Time

Questionnaire was carried out at the end of December 2005, or to say, three semesters after the IEDC model was employed.

2.4 Procedure

Before the delivery of the questionnaire, students were informed about the nature of the study and were confirmed that there was no right or wrong answer on it and their responses would not affect their course grades, so they were urged to answer anonymously and forthrightly.

2.5 Coding

After examined carefully, 139 questionnaires were regarded as valid with 97 from E dorms and 42 from non-E dorms falling into 2 groups. Responses to questions were processed respectively according
to these two groups in order to make some comparison between them while responses to questions 8-10 were sorted out altogether.

2.6 Results

Participants' beliefs about E dorm oral practice are listed in Table 1 and Table 2 respectively according to the two groups and responses to Questions 8-10 are listed in the descriptions sorted out by author as below.

a. Responses to questions 2-7 by the first group were

Table 1 Beliefs about E dorm oral practice from E dorm members

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statements</th>
<th>Choices</th>
<th>numbers</th>
<th>percentages of students making the choices</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2 Started English learning from</td>
<td>Elementary school</td>
<td>Junior school</td>
<td>Senior school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Practiced oral English before you came to college</td>
<td>Alot</td>
<td>A little</td>
<td>Never</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>12</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Like to speak English</td>
<td>Very much</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>64</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Oral English is important to you</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Maybe</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 E dorm practice is efficient in improving your oral ability</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>To a great extent</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>70</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Hours of speaking English in dormitory every week</td>
<td>4 hs</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>14 hs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

b. Responses to questions 2-7 by the second group were

Table 2 Beliefs about E dorm oral practice from non-E dorm members

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statements</th>
<th>Choices</th>
<th>numbers</th>
<th>percentages of students making the choices</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2 Started English learning from</td>
<td>Elementary school</td>
<td>Junior school</td>
<td>Senior school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Practiced oral English before you came to college</td>
<td>Alot</td>
<td>A little</td>
<td>Never</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Like to speak English</td>
<td>Very much</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Oral English is important to you</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Maybe</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 E dorm practice is efficient in improving your oral ability</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>To a great extent</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>30</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Hours of speaking English in dormitory every week</td>
<td>4 hs</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>14 hs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

c. For questions 8-10 students' responses were collected and revised altogether. They were

1 Question 8 Other than improving your speaking ability did you get any other benefits from the E dorm practice? If yes then what are they?
Yes | 116 | 8 | 06 |
— In helping students overcome shyness or self-consciousness | 396 | 6 | 06 |
2. Question 9: What are the barriers for you to persist in speaking English in dormitory every day?
- Lack of self-discipline
- It is very hard for all the members to have the same free time to talk in English
- Our lack of vocabulary forces us to talk in Chinese
- Sometimes partners have inaccurate pronunciation
- Lack of suitable English spoken atmosphere
- Lack of forceful organizers
- Lack of interest
- Lack of topics

3. Question 10: Do you have any suggestions and hopes for making the Dorm program more efficient?
- Teachers should further reinforce the activity by taking powerful measures
- To be offered more guidance by both Chinese and foreign teachers
- To be offered more opportunities to communicate with foreign students
- To be offered more after-class activities to attend
- To be offered more topics by teachers

3. Discussion
From the questionnaire we can easily see that students from both Dorms and non-Dorms in our university had very similar experience in English learning before they came to college. That is to say, except for a small number of students, a great majority of them started their English learning from junior high school. Speaking of their oral practice in high school, only very few of them practiced English speaking a lot. Many of them only had little experience in oral English practice and most surprisingly, only 57% of them didn’t have any chance to communicate in English before they came to college. The results indicate that in most high schools in our country, English teaching is still focusing on improving students’ reading and writing ability. That is not because educators are not aware of the importance of students oral ability improvement, but because written English is still a major means of testing students’ English proficiency in college entrance examinations and other kinds of tests. Also, the traditional grammar-translation method of English teaching approach is reported to be still rather popular in those classrooms. This teaching and learning focusing on the test has led teachers and maybe forced students to ignore oral English practice. As a result, the students have developed an intellectual understanding of language structure and maybe the ability to read, but instead of gaining oral fluency they suffered what could be described as second language mutism, and that is exactly how the participants described the way they did before they came to college. Unfortunately, many high school students are still learning English this way.

When it comes to their attitudes towards oral practice, the two groups had big differences in their responses to questions. Almost all students from English Dorms reported they liked to speak English and almost 83% of them thought Oral English was very important. But for the same questions, only 37% of the non-Dorms reported that they liked to speak English and 28% of them considered oral English important. Participants’ responses to questions further prove that students’ attitudes to English learning can determine their learning style and commitment in carrying out a task.
the Affective Filter Theory by Krashen, the higher motivation they have, the more interested students are in learning and the better results they can get. Krashen 1987 It is obviously true for the two groups in this survey. The phenomenon that E-Dorm members are more active to join in the program as volunteers and are spending much longer time in oral practice than those from non-E-Dorms, which is easily demonstrated in Table 1 and 2 can simply be justified by their different beliefs about oral English.

The most encouraging part of the questionnaire lies in that students from both E-Dorms and non-E-Dorms were almost unanimously favorable to E-Dorm program in the survey. Feedbacks from the participants indicate that altogether 86.49% of them felt the program was efficient in improving their oral skill. Yes, to a great extent E-Dorms 71.6% non-E-Dorms 43.1% Yes. To some extent E-Dorms 16.6% non-E-Dorms 1.4% 67.1% with only a minor number of them 1.4% 34.1% 90.1% 1.4% 62.1% regarding it unsatisfying. That is to say, from the students' knowledge E-Dorm program is a worthwhile attempt in improving their oral ability. According to the psycholinguistic theory of natural second language acquisition, the best environment for learning a second language is in the language setting or to say, only when students are exposed to an authentic or natural language can they master it well. Ellis 1994. E-Dorm program simply creates an extracurricular language setting for students to practice their oral English, thus undoubtedly has greatly enhanced students' opportunities to speak English and prolonged their time in communication in English. Besides, because topics for students to discuss are closely related to class learning, students are forced to use some words and expressions in the textbooks thus their written English is also being improved at the same time. The most important of all, their interests in English learning are immediately stimulated because they no longer think that what they are learning from textbooks is useless. Furthermore, just as reported, because E-Dorm program put great emphasis on cooperative work, students' other abilities have also been promoted.

4 Conclusion

From the empirical evidence provided by this present research on students' beliefs about oral English practice conclusions can be safely drawn that college students' oral proficiency in English speaking is obviously an output of traditional grammar translation teaching method. At the same time, learners' attitudes towards oral English play an important role in their learning process. Above all, as a new attempt, EDC model has got great acclaims from students in its efficiency in improving their integrated skills, especially their speaking ability, by creating an authentic and natural English language setting outside the classroom for students and forcing teachers to use new communicative competence teaching approach in class. Effective as it is, there is still a long way to go to achieve better results. For example, to make the program more effective, teachers' more supervision and guidance are needed by students and varieties of extracurricular activities should be held for students to take part in and what the more students should be taught how to achieve a goal with self-discipline and great commitment, which most college students lack in their learning.

To further assess the efficiency of E-Dorm program, more researches are suggested to be carried out for more empirical evidence, for example, to conduct a contrast study on students' oral proficiency between E-Dorm and non-E-Dorm members. Surveys are also suggested to be carried out in this area over a large range of participants in order to establish the validity of language learning proficiency and their beliefs as well as their learning strategies. Lastly, other effective ways should be attempted in this field based on second language acquisition theory to improve college students' oral proficiency.

References

Continued on p. 74.