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How Can a Chinese Teacher of English Succeed in Oral English Classes?

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Introduction

Oral English is an important course for EFL college students in China. However, for a long time there has been a controversy about who should teach oral English, a native English speaker or a Chinese teacher of English. Undoubtedly, a good oral English teacher should be a good English speaker. Many native English speakers have proven to be successful teachers in oral English classes in China. However, this does not necessarily mean a good English speaker is a good oral English teacher. Apart from fluency and accuracy of the English language, a good oral English teacher must have a good grasp of the teaching syllabus, have a good understanding of the teaching objects (students), and have a good mastery of teaching techniques. To help Chinese teachers of English gain confidence and do well in their oral English classes, it is necessary to objectively evaluate their advantages and disadvantages compared with native English speakers in oral English classes.

I. The Course and Its Aims

According to the teaching syllabus, in China, college English majors are supposed to take oral English in the first two years of their college curriculum. Usually, they would have it once a week.

1. Aims of the Course

By the end of the first scholastic year, students are expected to be able to carry on daily conversations in simple English, to ask and answer questions based on some reading or listening material, and to talk briefly for about two minutes about the content of a text after one or two minutes' prior preparation. By the end of the second year, students are expected to be able to carry on conversations with native English speakers not only about daily life but also about social issues. Given some reading or listening material, they should be able to retell the content and discuss the topic for three to four minutes with one or two minutes' preparation beforehand.

2. Students' Background Conditions

By the time they have entered college, Chinese students have already had six years' experience of studying English. However, they have been studying hard preparing for university entrance exams. So most of them, being accustomed to memorizing new words and expressions and paying attention to grammar points and language structures, find it hard to express themselves in oral English. On the other hand, they may find that the textbooks for oral English, which are largely full of dialogues and

conversations, appear to be of little or no use to them, because they find few new words or expressions.

II. Requirements For an Oral English Teacher

What's needed for an oral English teacher?

According to Zhang Zhengdong's description (Zhang Zhengdong: p320) of Myrna Delson-Karan's idea, in educational evaluation, the following items may be taken into consideration for the evaluation of a teacher of second language teaching.

Proficiency at the Target Language

This includes the teacher's ability to understand, to speak, to read and to write English; accuracy in pronunciation; knowledge of foreign customs, culture and cross-cultural communication; knowledge of linguistics and of the essence of language acquisition; and his/her ability to initiate, to sustain, and to close basic communicative tasks in an appropriate way.

Teaching Effectiveness

This includes the teacher's ability to prepare a lesson plan focusing on the teaching aim and to work towards the aim with certain teaching strategies.

Presentation of Foreign Culture

The teacher should bear an open attitude towards foreign culture, share with students what he/she knows about how foreign culture differs from his/her own, and present them in teaching.

Classroom Management

This includes proper arrangement of seats, board, and time to fit for certain activities. This also includes the teacher's ability to be clear in the classroom and to change modes of presentation and types of questions. The teacher is also supposed to be able to engage students in the learning process, to provide opportunities for feedback and to use group and individual activities so as to bring students' initiative into full play.

Psychological Elements and Personality

The teacher should have patience, confidence, imagination, enthusiasm, humor and creativity. He/She should be friendly, sympathetic and on good terms with the students, and have an affirmative attitude towards the students and occasionally encourage them if necessary.

As for oral English teachers, the above mentioned abilities are of course necessary. He/she also needs to acquire the following abilities, as suggested by Stephen Tchudi and Diana Mitchell in Explorations in the Teaching of English:

Oral language involves a complex interaction of speaker and listener, of voice, tone, style, intonation, nonverbal expression... the spoken language cannot truly be "taught". People learn to speak and listen by doing it successfully. Conversely, they become inarticulate and inept when their oral language experiences are unsuccessful or constrained... Learning the skills of oral English is closely related to

using them, and we believe the teacher should focus attention on making the classroom a place where the use of spoken language is strongly supported. x(p270)

III. Advantages and Disadvantages of Native English Speakers and Chinese Teachers of English in Oral English Course

The teacher should be an expert or at least should be able to do, with ease, whatever the students are expected to do. A native English speaker can certainly do whatever the students are asked to do himself. And he/she knows everything about the English language and about the western culture. He/She can talk freely, which assures the Chinese students as well as the Chinese teacher of English that the native English speaker is the only choice and the best candidate for teaching oral English.

Many native English speakers are successful teachers of oral English. The reasons for their success may be summarized as follows:

1. A native English speaker himself is foreign, new and different and thus interesting in every way to the student.
2. He/She is the best model set for the students to learn the language he/she speaks and the culture he/she comes from.
3. He/She gives the students a natural language environment as well as a chance to talk with a native speaker, which gives them a feeling of accomplishment when they can, by and large, get their ideas across to him.
4. He/She can talk about his/her country, his/her life and everything that is new and interesting. So the students are interested in what he/she talks about.
5. He/She is good at teaching, which is both a science and an art.
6. He/She is able to discard those useless, less-than-effective things in the textbook. Instead, they would talk about something useful, everyday affairs or current news, through which the students feel that they have acquired the ability to talk about them too.

There are some other reasons that account for a native English speaker's success in oral English class, e.g., the teacher's personality-- being humorous, friendly, etc.

Unfortunately, there have been cases in which native English speakers have turned out to be poor teachers in oral English classes because they have no teaching experience or teaching training. In these cases, the students may simply have some listening practice or gain little at all if the teacher speaks non-standard English or always speaks too fast for the students to comprehend.

In comparison with a native English speaker, a Chinese teacher of English in oral English classes may have some disadvantages in language proficiency and in familiarity with western culture. But having got a Bachelor's or even a Master's Degree of Arts after four or seven years' of postgraduate or graduate study of the English language, a Chinese teacher, though a non-native English speaker, should understand how to teach English.

It's also possible for any Chinese to learn about foreign culture through various ways. Whether the teacher can succeed in oral English classes seems to be a question of whether he/she has proper psychological elements and knows the right way to manage the class.

In teaching, a Chinese teacher of English may encounter some of these problems.

1. He/She may find there are almost nothing new to the students in the textbooks, so he/she may

wonder what to teach in class.

2. He/She consults some information for something about foreign culture and brings it to the classroom, which really can arouse students' interests of listening but changes the oral English class into listening practice. And the teacher himself/herself makes great progress in speaking English but is usually over-exhausted because of the long time of which the teacher speaks in class.
3. He/She asks the students to read or recite dialogues, but they make little improvement in expressing themselves appropriately in interaction activities.
4. He/She tries some classroom activities, e.g. pair work or group discussion, only to find that some students remain silent or speak in Chinese or are constantly looking for some new words in the Chinese-English dictionary.

These problems emerge because Chinese teachers of English have been accustomed to teaching English by telling students the uses of new words, expressions and grammar points, and by asking students to recite or memorize something, so, oral English, which can not be "taught" at all, becomes a difficult course for them to handle.

IV. How Can a Chinese Teacher of English Succeed in Oral English Classes

To succeed in oral English classes, a Chinese teacher of English should first change his/her concept of "teaching" oral English. Oral English learning is mainly a matter of practice but not a matter of teaching. This is to say, the use of language is more important than knowing about the usage of language. Students should be given enough time to communicate with each other in authentic situations.

When the teacher realizes this, he/she will try to make oral English classes activity oriented and student centered. What he/she focuses his/her attention on will be how to encourage the students to speak English more often and more fluently.

The teacher may guide the students to do some pair work or group discussions, but if they are not interested in the topic, if they have little knowledge about the topic, or if they lack the means of expressing themselves in English, they may fail in communication.

Here are some techniques and methods that are essential for a Chinese teacher of English to employ in successful classroom activities:

1. The first time a teacher meets his/her students, he/she should try in some way to get to know about their interests so that he/she may find some interesting topics for discussion, and so that the students may feel that the teacher is interested in each of them which allows for a better relationship between the teacher and the students to be established. This may be done by asking each individual to make a short talk or by designing a questionnaire, in which one can get some detailed information about each student's likes and dislikes in their college life, their attitude towards certain social problems, and their problems in study and life, etc. It seems that the latter is a better choice because in this way one can keep the answers for a long time and refer to them whenever there is a need.
2. As for the use of textbooks, Chinese teachers of English should learn from some native English speakers: just ask the students to go through them by themselves before class so that they can do some situation practice or role-play in class. In preparing for the role-play, it is necessary for the teacher to create some "information gap" exercises. This may be achieved by giving each student a role card so that each may know what to do himself without knowing anything about some other role. To make sure that the students use the expressions they are supposed to use, the teacher may write them on the blackboard. This may help them to use the expected expressions.

When asking for "free conversation" work, the teacher should make sure that the students know how to express their ideas in English, otherwise they can not carry it out. To do this, the teacher may encourage students to form small groups according to their different interests to do some extracurricular activities. For example, there may be a sports group, a music group, a current events group, a social problems group, a school life problems group, a study method research group, a drama group, a western culture study group, or even a fashion group, etc. They are supposed to collect some reading material on a specific aspect in their everyday reading of newspapers or magazines in English and do some reports of their extracurricular activities every time they meet in class. They may do some different things in their extracurricular activities, such as making up dialogues, conversations, or discussions or debates, or they may just simply discuss some of the latest news. This can really help them in working independently and in speaking more in English. When the students are interested in the topic and some of them have got some knowledge about the topic they are given, they can have real practice of oral English. And as time goes on, they will get used to learning from each other instead of referring to a Chinese-English dictionary.

To get students familiar with Western culture, a teacher may create some situational contexts or employ role-play games for the students to experience this culture and know its difference in comparison with their own.

A teacher himself/herself should have as wide a range of knowledge about Western culture as possible. There are many festivals in Western world and the teacher can celebrate together these festivals with the students in the way they are observed in the West.

3. It's necessary for a Chinese teacher of English to make good use of audio and visual aids. The most common audio aid may be radio. For freshmen, they may be asked to listen to Special English Programs of VOA every day and retell in class anything they find interesting. If it is available, students may be shown some video English teaching programs, or some famous original version of Western films. These will help the students with pronunciation and intonation and enlarge their knowledge about Western culture.
4. To help students speak accurately, it's important for the teacher to correct students' errors. However, it is not acceptable to make corrections when they are speaking. It's suggested that the teacher take down notes of errors students make in class. If they are common problems, he/she can present them as language points and ask the students to do some practice; if they are mistakes committed by individual student, just point them out at the completion of the individual performance or give the student a note with the corrections.
5. To help students speak fluent English, paraphrasing and retelling have been proven effective.
6. Finally, it is necessary to change the activities of pair works or group activities so that the students do not get bored. Sometimes, a drama, a game, or simply an English song may cheer up the students and make them work more efficiently.

Conclusion

Having analyzed the aim and the criteria of the oral English course, the students' conditions, the reason for some native English speakers' success, and some problems Chinese teachers of English may encounter in oral English classes, it may be concluded that both native and non-native English speakers have a role in teaching oral English. In order to teach oral English well, a Chinese teacher of English needs to make up for the disadvantages of being a non-native English speaker and for the cultural differences. Both native and non-native English speaking teachers need to be aware of the importance of varying their roles in their teaching behaviors, not only as an authority figure but as an assessor, or an organizer, or a participant. A qualified and sympathetic teacher must have a full understanding of his/her students' needs and interests as well. If a teacher knows his/her own advantages and disadvantages in oral English classes, and those of his/her students, he/she is sure to succeed in oral English classes.

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