Teaching Speaking Skills at a Vietnamese University and Recommendations for Using CMC

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Abstract
The poor quality of teaching speaking skill at a university in Vietnam results in a large number of graduates who have difficulty with communicating English. Utilising technology into teaching method is a fundamental practice in teaching EFL, where it is available and accessible. Suggestions of using CMC (computer mediated communication) in teaching pronunciation and conversation are put forward to improve students’ oral skill.

Introduction

1. Situation of teaching oral skill at HCS

First of all, let’s look at the way English is taught at HCS. Students start with the elementary level of English in the first semester and are supposed to obtain the intermediate level after graduation. The textbooks they use are the Lifeline set (Hutchinson, 2001). The textbooks cover four skills: speaking, listening, reading and writing. However, at the end of each semester, students are assessed based on a written test of reading and writing skills only. As a result, many students and even teachers are ‘examination-oriented’. They spend time developing reading and writing skills while ‘ignoring’ listening and speaking skills. This is likely to happen not at a single university in Vietnam, but across the whole spectrum.

According to the findings from recent research at the university, over three quarters of graduate students can not communicate verbally in English because of shyness, inadequate vocabulary, or simply lacking the necessary knowledge. Most of them wish that they had been taught speaking skills more properly at university (Bui, 2004: 33-34, translated). Students listed a number of reasons for this. For example, during lectures, Vietnamese rather than English is mostly spoken, both by teachers and students. Students do not have opportunities to communicate in English and they may be shy because the others cannot understand what they wish to communicate.

Acknowledging the poor quality of teaching English in many developing countries, the following reasons have been cited:

1. budgetary constraints causing
2. classes with too many pupils, inadequate teaching materials and badly trained and badly paid teachers, which results in
3. use of English diverging further and further from the proclaimed norm, while
4. the demand for a knowledge of English is unabated because of its high prestige, job requirements within the country, and its usefulness abroad after emigration. (Gorlach, 1995, p. 35)

What Gorlach (1995) said is true in the case of HCS. Class size ranges from thirty to fifty students, which makes it difficult for teachers to arrange activities enabling students to practice speaking. Over-sized English classes make speaking lessons stiff and unmoving (Bui, 2004, p.28, translated). Moreover, these English classes are often teacher-dominated, i.e. teachers speak whilst students listen and take notes – a format greatly lacking in interaction. Many studies have suggested that teacher-dominated classes instead of learner-centered classes prevent students from practicing oral skills effectively (e.g. Westgate, Batey, et al., 1985; Edwards, 1987; Pago, 1992).
Intelligibility. These are very important to Vietnamese because they often have difficulty in producing right stress syllables. Speaking also requires energy, especially in foreign language. Thus, breathing is a crucial aspect of pronunciation.

According to Hardison and Sonchaeng (2005, p. 598), practicing breathing helps increase the ability to pause language appropriately in long sentences and expand use of vowel space for greater fluidity. The following guidelines can be applied to help students improve their pronunciation:

**2.1. Breathing**

- **Breathing exercises**
  - Practice breathing exercises by focusing on the diaphragmatic breathing technique. This technique involves expanding the diaphragm to fill the lungs, which helps in maintaining a steady airflow for speech.
  - Use breathing exercises in conjunction with other pronunciation techniques such as flow of voice and argumentation.

- **Flow of voice**
  - Pay attention to the flow of voice, ensuring that each sentence is spoken with a smooth transition between words and phrases.
  - Practice speaking at a consistent pace, avoiding too rapid or too slow speech.

- **Argumentation**
  - Incorporate argumentation in language learning to enhance students' ability to express their ideas clearly and logically.
  - Encourage students to practice articulating their thoughts in a structured manner, using clear and concise language.

- **Argumentation exercises**
  - Practice argumentation exercises by engaging students in debates or discussions on various topics.
  - Use argumentation exercises to help students develop their critical thinking skills and improve their ability to express their ideas effectively.

In conclusion, the use of technological advances in teaching oral skills is essential for improving students' pronunciation and overall language proficiency. By integrating the use of technological tools such as CALL, teachers can create a more engaging and interactive learning environment that promotes the development of communication skills in students.
Dealing with songs and rhythm appears to be a good chance for teachers to correct the pronunciation of two consonants /m/ and /n/ at the beginning of words by some students from a certain regions of Vietnam can be eliminated through studying English. In Vietnamese language, it is still understandable if they make such a mistake, but in English, it is unacceptable, especially while singing. Thus, learning pronunciation in English may also help students to correct the mistakes they may make in Vietnamese language. Language, in general, can easily integrate with music, creating positive effect on language learners, particularly pronunciation properly.

2.2. Oral conversation online

The second solution for practicing discussion and argument with CALL is to use synchronous environment: oral conversation online. Many scientists and scholars agree that in the information technology era of 21st century, web-based learning has become the major trend of future teaching and learning models (Kinshuk and Yang, 2003, p. 5). While at the beginning CMC was restricted to text, audio conferencing has been commonly available since the mid 1990s, thus allowing remote users to communicate orally and synchronously with one another. “With the increasing availability of synchronous voice-based groupware and the additional facilities offered by audio-graphic tools, language learners have opportunities for collaborating on oral tasks, supported by visual and textual stimuli via computer-conferencing” (Lamy, 2004, p. 520). Voice-based synchronous CMC is regarded as “a specific mode supporting conversations that are both different from face-to-face ones, and influenced in significant ways by the interactions of learners with each other, i.e. human-machine-human interaction” (Lamy, 2004, p. 251).

Rosell-Aguilar (2005, p. 418) adds that audiographic conferencing systems have developed into ‘multimodal tools’ including visual, verbal and written elements, which can improve communication and interaction. A list of updated CMC research on audiographic online conferencing for language learning has been introduced (see Lamy, 2004, p. 522; Rosell-Aguilar, 2005, p. 418).

Because of the availability of synchronous voice-based groupware, the idea suggested here is the use of Skype audiographic online conferencing for students to practice discussion and argument in English online. The Skype program can be downloaded for free from www.skype.com. Reasons for selecting Skype for training oral skills include: 1) the program is free; 2) the quality of Skype’s sound and image is excellent, much better than those of similar programs, such as Yahoo Messenger: the current most popular program for synchronous communication; 3) it allows participants to send files (handouts) synchronously while discussing, without having to open emails; 4) most importantly, it is easy to find native speakers or international students to invite them into the conversations via the search tool; and 5) students of HCS are science students so it is not difficult for them to deal with computers. Besides, some other audiographic online programs, such as Wengo or Yahoo Messenger can be employed as a substitute.

It is ideal to cooperate with English native speakers and English learners around the world to invite them into the online discussions. This is not very challenging to teachers because nowadays they can join English Teaching Associations in Asia to seek cooperation and exchange ideas with other teachers in the region. Then they can encourage their students to use Skype to communicate with one another person in the global language: English. In addition, the role of teachers has been changing dramatically compared to the traditional one:

Teacher’s language expertise involves competence, knowledge, tolerance, understanding and cooperation to understand and appreciate students’ use of language; to contribute to the development of their language competence; to choose appropriate methods of teaching, distinguishing between essential matters and surface considerations; to evaluate language texts, schemes, programmes and equipment; to justify what they are doing in the classroom before colleagues, parents, administrators and the interested public (Collerson, 1977, pp. 110-111).

Teachers are not simply competent in language, but also in task design and application of technology into teaching and learning. As mentioned above, they should play the role of facilitator of the students’ learning process, rather than teaching students. Task design for audiographic conferencing is another matter that is not discussed in this essay (see Rosell-Aguilar, 2005 for reference). Task design for

Figure 1: Visualizations of pitch contours with sustained phonation. In View Screen A, the stress was placed on the second syllable of way; on B, stress was on We and year.

CALL can be used here, for example, the Real-Time Pitch program by Kay Elemetrics Computerized Speech Lab (Figure 1) to “display pitch contours in real time and offer the option of overlaying one contour on another in contrasting colors for comparison of learner’s utterance with that of a native speaker” (Hardson and Sonchaeng, 2005, p. 596). Such programs can be obtained easily in IT markets. Students can work in pairs, listening to the tape of a (native standard) person speaking while following along with the script; pay attention to pauses; and then practice with a partner. It is easy for students to adjust their pronunciation with the correct way of breathing. Students’ voices can be recorded for feedback by the software program.

2.1.2. Flow of the voice

To speak and communicate meaningfully, students should be able to control a variety of pitch levels. Pitch levels directly affect the intonation of sentences that they speak. In English, different intonations may mean different meanings, which can cause trouble for students when they communicate. For example, in Vietnamese language, there is only one type of intonation in question structures: rising tone at the end of sentence, while there are two in English with yes/no questions and WH-questions. As a result, when constructing questions in English, many students tend to raise voice at the end of sentence. That is why practicing a variety of pitch levels is so essential to students.

In this exercise, according to Hardson and Sonchaeng (2005), students practice various consonant-vowel consequences with variation in pitch to get used to different combinations of consonants and vowels and stress. Let us take an example of consonant /mi/. /mi/ is combined with other vowels to make sounds like ma, me, may, mow, moo. Students are asked to produce ma-ma-may-mow-moo with different stress on different syllables (e.g., ma me may mow moo; ma ma me may mow moo, and so on). Another way to practice is to produce a long sentence with a rise or fall in pitch on each word, for instance:

Real-Time Pitch program can also be used here to create feedback for students and highlight the connection between stress, intonation, and pragmatics. View Screen A in Figure 1 may pragmatically illustrate a response to a question such as What were you doing last year at this time? As pitch rise on is the stress syllable of the word the way. In contrast, in B pitch rise and stress are on different syllables which may indicate different meanings. This program is really beneficial for teaching pronunciation. It should allow for students to use extra time if they need practice.

2.1.3. Song: melody and lyrics

According to Harrison and Sonchaeng (2005, p. 603) “music is highly motivating, and helps blending and linking, the flow of speech and the rise/fall of the voice – all of which maximize pitch range”. There is also an interesting phenomena related to music and language observed by the writer: many people, who cannot understand a single word in English, are able to sing English songs with excellent pronunciation of their lyrics. That may be the reason why the idea of using songs in teaching and learning language is introduced by many educators.

In this exercise the set of five audio CDs and text books Let’s Chant, Let’s Sing (Graham, 2001) seems to be most favourable. The book is composed of children’s songs and folk songs whose lyrics are generally more comprehensible for students of a lower proficiency level (Hardson and Sonchaeng, 2005). The CDs can be installed on computers. The textbooks should be required for teachers and are not necessary for students for the above reason. The material can be used in the following process. First, students listen to the melody without lyrics, which is similar to the prosody of the language, to get used to the rhythm. After that they chant along with the music. Then, they listen to the music with lyrics, singing the song together. When students sing together, teachers can easily find out how many students still have problems with pronunciation without taking time checking one by one.

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audiographic conferencing is supposed to be perfect to use in CMC/CALL, in the Skype in particular.

The discussion in Skype now is named as a conference. The number of conference participants varies, depending on teachers’ targets. Groups of three to four are often organized for discussion. Sometimes the whole class may be required to join if necessary. Figure 2 illustrates an online audiographic conference.

Figure 2: Model of an online audiographic conference.

The above model depicts a conference among two Vietnamese (one teacher and one student) and one foreign invited guest. The teacher plays the role of the host of the conference, motivating the student to discuss, express his/her ideas to the foreign student and helping the conversation along. It is not necessary for the teacher to be host all the time. This role sometimes transfers to students or invited guests. Peer teaching sometimes creates unexpected excellent results (Wagner, 1982).

The process of an online audiographic conference is simple. It creates chances for non-native students to meet and discuss with foreigners in a real world. They can encounter different variations of English in the world, which make them aware of “world Englishes” (Jenkins, 2003). Joining such conferences, students have chances to meet and discuss with students in the world. Hence, they can improve not only their English communication, but also open their minds to the world.

Conclusion

Educators should be aware that the 21st century is a century of technology. Thus, advantages belong to those who can make use of technology. Teachers of English at HCS should turn their disadvantage of not having a Standard English into the advantage of using CMC/CALL to teach standard spoken English to their students. Teaching oral skills should be given attention to right at the beginning to create proper pronunciation for students. It is proper pronunciation which helps learners develop confidence in communication. CALL appears to be the best choice for training in pronunciation. When students can start to communicate verbally in English, internet conferences like Skype can be the place where they can meet and talk with foreigners to improve their communication ability in English as well as open their knowledge horizons. As mentioned above, teachers should be aware of the fast development of technology and discover the latest application of CALL in their teaching contexts.

References


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