

IMPROVING ORAL ENGLISH ABILITY THROUGH SCAFFOLDING IN A VOCATIONAL COLLEGE IN NINGXIA PROVINCE, CHINA



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Abstract

This study is part of researcher's Ph.D. thesis, which was designed to improve the oral English ability of non-English major students at a higher vocational college by using scaffolding tools that focused on classroom interactional competence combine with translanguaging and the curriculum cycle. This qualitative study was held in a Financial English class with 36 students within 14 weeks at on vocational college in Ningxia, China. By measuring and analyzing classroom interactional competence utilizing various techniques in scaffolding oral competence, the improvement of students' oral English ability by the obvious evolution of four aspects of students' CIC, including Turn taking, Repair, Overlaps & Interruption, and Topic management. The study also showed that by implement of translanguaging, the teacher inputs had critical position during the whole process. The teacher used different interactional resources to open the learning space and shape the contributions of students through numerous strategies. Also translanguaging provided a bridge to help the students not only improve their oral English ability and also accomplish financial tasks.

Key words: Oral English ability, Classroom interactional competence, Curriculum cycle, Translanguaging

Introduction

In the "National Medium and Long-term Expert Development Plan (2010-2020)" (State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2010), it is explicitly mentioned that is necessary to cultivate a large number of international experts under international perspectives, understanding international rules, and participating in international affairs and international competition. This requires the training of expertise in higher education, mastering the main international communication tools- English, especially, oral English. Oral English ability is one of the necessary abilities for students' career development and plays an important role in their employment and sustainable development (Dong, 2015). Most of the non-English major undergraduate students are required to learn English in compulsory course. However, research in China into English in higher vocational colleges, especially oral English, is considerably

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weaker in term of quantity, quality, depth and breadth. Since Chinese English teaching has always attached importance to the teaching of language knowledge, the students pay more attention to reading, translation, writing and other test-taking skills, and have not invested time in oral ability (Ma & Huang, 2022). Even if their English ability of reading and writing has reached a level of fluency, students still cannot speak English with any degree of fluency.

For Chinese higher vocational college students, the most common opportunity for English communication is in the English class. In the environment of English classroom, the improvement of classroom interactional competence can help to enhance the opportunities and quality of learning (Walsh 2012). The teacher can improve the learning performance of students by facilitating their learning behavior, through evaluating and analyzing their classroom interactional competence (Walsh, 2013). Due to the weakness of the oral English ability of students in higher vocational colleges in China (Ma & Huang, 2022), translanguaging would be the common situation in the English classroom. In view of the differences in training objectives and ability between the students of higher vocational colleges and university students, this study mainly focused on the higher vocational college students. The purpose of this study was to show that the use of evaluating and analyzing classroom interactional competence with teacher inputs and translanguaging as a form of the scaffolding technique which can improve the oral English ability of higher vocational college non-English major student in China.

Literature Review

The classroom, like any other real-world environment, is composed of a series of interconnected, complex, and dynamic contexts (Walsh, 2006). In order to better understand how teachers and students, use their interactive skill to facilitate learning in classroom settings, Steven Walsh proposed the classroom interaction competence, or CIC, in 2006, which is the ability of teachers and students to use interaction as scaffolding to facilitate and assist learning. The concept of classroom interaction competence presupposes an understanding of interaction as the bedrock of classroom teaching and learning. CIC's role in teachers and students is to collaborate in order to create a language that is conducive to learning. This facilitation of learning takes different distinct forms (Walsh, 2011). CIC enables teachers to select the most appropriate language from the continuous interaction based on the classroom's content and situation (Escobar Urmeneta & Walsh, 2017). CIC effectively promotes interactional space, which maximizes the opportunities for learners to learn (Walsh, 2012). The learning space is not just about the opportunities to contribute; it is also about the breadth and quality of contribution. The teacher's interaction scaffolding abilities can assist students in communicating more clearly using the most appropriate language. Additionally, as a result of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the use of online classes in L2 classrooms necessitates that teachers develop additional online-related CIC, such as online class management (Moorhouse, Li & Walsh, 2021).

One critical role of CIC in the classroom is that teachers can shape students' learning contributions through CIC (Ohashi, 2018). Walsh (2011) outlined numerous strategies teachers use to shape learning contributions, including paraphrasing, summarizing, extending, and repairing. The teachers purposefully create blank utterances for students to fill in with the shape of the learning opportunities, which called DIU = 'designedly incomplete utterance'(Marguutti, 2010). Additionally, teachers can use non-verbal cues to identify student deficiencies (Sert, 2013). According to Ohashi (2018), teachers in L2 classrooms are likely to play two distinct roles: native speaker of the mother tongue and English language user, each of which requires a unique set of interactional resources. Teachers in various roles utilize a variety of interactional resources to facilitate the use of English and meaningful exposure to English in context (Ohashi, 2018).

In this study, it is necessary to define Translanguaging as a phenomenon that occurs when individuals use or learn multiple languages. In the classroom environment, translanguaging promotes communication with students by the switching of languages (Gabryś-Barker's, 2020). In the oral English, by introducing translanguaging students are more willing to participate in the conversation (Dougherty, 2021). There were many studies which illustrated the benefits of translanguaging for supporting the lower proficiency students (Burton & Rajendram, 2019; Gabryś-Barker, 2020; Iversen, 2020).

Data and Method

Participants

The participants of this study were 36 first-year Financial major students from a higher vocational college. The 36 students were divided into 7 groups of 5 students, and the last group contained 6 students. All the participants are from Financial English class and studied English for at least six years since middle school. The sampling method of this study was mixed method sampling. All the groups of students had mixed English proficiency, based on their exam results of General English class in the Pre-semester.

Data collection

In this study, the class of Financial English was used as an experimental class, which lasted one semester, 14 weeks, 160 minutes per week. There are types of data in this study. First Group Discussion recording data [GD] showed the process of group discussion. Second, Teacher teaching process recording data [TD] showed how researcher do in the first two steps in curriculum cycle. The data of 7 groups collected during the three different periods of semester, Session form week 1- week 4, Session 2 form week 5-week 9, and Session 3 from week 10-week 14.

Data analysis

Dealing to the conditions and quality of data, three groups (a total of 15 students) of recording data were selected out for data analysis. The transcriptions of conversations between students in discussion class and the teacher's teaching process used to analyze the conversation characteristics. The main points of analysis and research are as follows:

1.The features of the classroom interactional competence. By using the CIC, the frequencies of CIC ability used by each group member in the group discussion were counted, and the CIC ability of each group member will be analyzed to show how the change of CIC can help to develop oral English ability.

2.Translanguaging and teacher inputs. For translanguaging, the number of times students used English or Chinese in the discussion were accounted. For teacher input, the number of times teacher involved into discussion were accounted.

However, the increase or decrease of the frequencies during the whole experiment did not represent the development of students CIC or oral English competence. There were the qualitative data analysis for data to show how the students develop their CIC and the improvement of their oral English ability during the semester.

There are examples of data analysis as following.

The symbols and abbreviations used in transcription are described below:

S No.: No. is student number, ex: S1= Student 1

TT: Teacher

<>: Overlaps are indicated to connecting line.

[laughs]: The words in square brackets represent like laughing, coughing, and also back channel such as Mm, Uhum, No, Right and so on.

(): includes the translation from Chinese to English

Topic: Discussion question: Would each of the following assets be “good” money?
Why or why not?

Example 1:

1. S1: 我们先讨论吧。
(We can discuss first.)
- 2 S3: 用英语还是汉语?
(With English or Chinese?)
- 3 TT: 都可以, 尽量用英语
(Both, try to use English as possible as you can)
- 4 S1: 因为 Gold 面积太大了<
(Because the area of gold is so big<)
- 5 S2: >不是
(>NO)
- 6 S1: 而且笨重的很
(And heavy)
- 7 S2: I think...
- 8 Students laugh
- 9 S2: I think gold is...[S1Mm] gold is 很重, 很大数额的转款不方便<
(I think gold is...[S1Mm] gold is too heavy. If the amount of
transferring, it will be inconvenient<)
- 10 S3&S4: >不方便
(>Inconvenient)
- 11 S2: 第一条是不方便
(First one is inconvenient.)

Example 2

- 1 S2: 那就这样, 第一条是没有价值。
(Ok, that's it. First one is no value.)
- 2 S5: Don't<
- 3 S4: >Not<
- 4 S3: >No Value, 然后无法流通
(>No value, then can't circulate)
- 5 S2: 无法流通, 也就是没有流通性, 流通性怎么写?
(Can't circulate, also is no circulation, so how to speak circulation
in English?)
- 6 TT: 流通怎么说?
(how to speak circulation in English?)
- 7 S1: Cir, circu, circulation
- 8 S3: 再说一遍? Cricu
(Say that again? Cricu)
- 9 S1: Circulation
- 10 TT: 无法流通, 我们可以换一种方式方式说, 它不能进行什么?
(Can't circulate, in the other way, it can't be?)
- 11 S1 S2 & S3: 交换
(Exchange)
- 12 TT: 这样是不是简单一点? No way to>
(Is this way easier? No way to>)
- 13 S2 & S3: <Exchange
- 14 TT: Yep, no way to exchange.

According to the transcriptions, this group discussion showed the features used by students: different topic management (topic engagement, supporting point, breakdowns); turning-taking by using fillers, hold and pass turn; repair to clarify any error of using English; overlap and interruption shows listenership and speakership of each speaker. In the transcriptions, a great quantity of translanguaging occurred. Although the dialogues were mainly in Chinese, the students try to use English consciously, see Example 1 in following paragraph in Line 9. With *Mm*, it also showed that S2 wanted to hold his turn and share his idea and overlapping by S3 & S4 in Line 10 formed a relationship between the listener and the speaker. Example 2 in Line 2-Line 5 showed students' ability to correct each other. And in Line 9 S3 tried to make clear with answer by using "say that again?" in Chinese, because S3 could not listen clearly the answer from S1 in Line 8.

Finding and Discussion

The CIC table overall development

Criteria	Specific feature	Session1	Session2	Session3
1.Turn taking	Turning taking	74	65	48
	Turning holding	24	34	28
	Turning passing	3	23	16
2.Repair	Self-correction	-	1	13
	Peer-correction	8	1	8
3.Overlaps & Interruption	Overlaps & Interruption	22	23	20
4.Topic management	Topic engagement	15	24	18
	Supporting points	16	25	19
5.Translanguaging	Chinese/English	37/34	24/48	9/48
6. Teacher input		35	35	20

Classroom Interactional Competence

The evolution of these four aspects of students' CIC was apparent when viewed as a whole.

Turn taking. Turn taking can be viewed as a three-step process: taking the turn, holding the turn, and passing the turn. In the beginning stages of the Turn taking process, students were mainly passive. The discussion usually began with the teacher asking questions in the form of IRF (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975), even though the teacher may need to ask questions repeatedly or employ alternative questioning techniques to encourage student participation. At this point, there were frequent periods of silence. Rather than abruptly ending the dialogue, the teacher waited a suitable amount of time in order to create a conducive environment for student participation. This was consistent with Walsh's (2012) study findings. With time, and particularly during the middle and final stages, students can take the initiative to take turns without the teacher prompting them repeatedly. As the student advances through the learning stages, the teacher's participation in the class discussion decreases. Due to the students' varying English proficiency, there were also pauses in the discussion, which the students with superior English proficiency allowed to occur without interjecting. Encouragement inspired them to participate more actively in the discussion in order to create a comfortable learning environment for those with fewer abilities. Regarding holding the turn, progress was primarily measured by an increase in holding time and an improvement in contribution quality. The students' oral expression improved in fluency and precision. Therefore, the frequency of the three steps of Turn taking was more balanced in the middle and final stages. Students can carry out the entire process of taking turns without assistance from the teacher.

Repair. Initially, teacher-led correction was essential, whether for financial knowledge or English expression. Students engaged in two distinct types of repairs. First, assist one another with questions such as "How do you spell this word?" Second, students would not directly disagree with or disapprove of the opinions of others but would instead express their own ideas. During the middle and final periods, the teacher gradually reduced intervention and correction of students' discussion processes. The teacher adhered to what Firth (1996) refers to as the "let it pass" principle, even if there were still errors, so long as student comprehension remained unaffected. Concurrently, the students' repair techniques gradually enhanced. For example, pause or repeat some unfamiliar words to allow time for self-correction or soliciting peer correction directly from others.

Overlaps & Interruption. As the discussion's leader, the teacher required students to explain financial concepts through choral responses at the beginning of the stage. This was an effective tactic in a multi-party conversation, such as a classroom, where shouting and "ragged" choral repetition are commonplace (Walsh, 2012). Some students utilized a teammate's pause or the teacher's questions as opportunities for interruptions. Several students refrained from interjecting throughout the discussion. They indicated their agreement with the opinions of others through body language, such as nodding their heads or following others' utterances. This resulted in good "listenership," indicating that communication channels were open and functioning properly (McCarthy, 2003). In addition, there were a few students who were very passive. They were passive until the teacher asked them questions. All students, however, took a chance during the middle and final periods. When others voiced their opinions, they always did so in response to one another. Overlaps and Interruptions gave students the chance to practice their English. This was consistent with Walsh's findings (2012).

Topic management. Regardless of the period, the discussion of the students pertained to the topic. This was enhanced by two points. First, through the use of Translanguaging in the classroom, students can freely use Chinese when they deem it necessary. This afforded students more opportunities to enhance their CIC, thereby creating a favorable environment for open learning space (Walsh, 2012). It allowed students to collaborate on meaningful contributions, which is fundamental to learning through interactions (Walsh, 2012). Second, the topic of discussion was appropriate for the students' current language proficiency and level of financial knowledge. Notable was the fact that the Financial English class's teaching objective included both financial knowledge and English language proficiency. When implementing CIC and enhancing students' CIC, the teacher balanced the two distinct objectives and needs. For example, the teacher encouraged students to discuss financial knowledge using their own common sense and inspired them to think and study through guidance as opposed to correction. Regarding the language objective, the teacher permitted students to use Chinese and encouraged them to participate as much as possible by incorporating English keywords into their Chinese utterances. As their CIC ability increased, students were able to provide high-quality supporting arguments in correct and complete English at the final stage.

Teacher input and Translanguaging

The most notable improvement in Translanguaging was that students used less Chinese in class discussions while increasing their English usage and improving the quality of their contributions. Initially, the teacher was in charge of the entire discussion process; however, by the end, the teacher was largely absent from the students' discussions, unless they requested assistance or repaired incorrect pronunciation that impaired comprehension. In this study, both Translanguaging and teacher input were essential to the entire procedure. CIC plays a crucial role in the classroom because it allows teacher to shape students' learning contributions (Ohashi, 2018). This means that only high-quality teacher inputs can develop students' ZPD and improve their oral English proficiency through scaffolding. Both financial knowledge and English language objectives were taught in the Financial English course. Ohashi (2018) states that teachers in L2 classrooms are likely to play two distinct roles: native

speakers of the mother tongue and English language users. Each of these roles requires a unique set of interactional resources. This was also demonstrated by this study. In this Financial English class, the teacher played two roles: as a native speaker who taught financial knowledge and as an English speaker. The requirements for interactional competence varied between the two characters. As most of the students' financial knowledge was acquired in previous Chinese courses, the teacher used English key terms but explained their meaning in Chinese, providing a relatively familiar language environment for students while also serving as a bridge between what they have learned in Chinese and unfamiliar English terms. During class, the teacher created intentionally incomplete sentences for students to complete. This is a "designedly complete utterance" (DIU) (Marguutti, 2010) that can help shape the learning contributions of the students. Sert (2011) investigated how teachers use resources such as incomplete utterances and lexical explanations to address knowledge gaps. Moreover, teachers can use nonverbal cues to identify student deficiencies (Sert, 2013). In this study, for instance, when long periods of silence or laughter occurred, the teacher took turns explaining further. For the English language objective, Walsh (2011) outlined numerous strategies teachers use to shape learning contributions, such as paraphrasing, summarizing, extending, and repairing, all of which are demonstrated in this study. The teacher utilized a variety of interactional resources to facilitate the use of English and meaningful context-based exposure to English (Ohashi, 2018). Translanguaging was utilized in all the aforementioned interactional resources. Not only was it an essential component of the teacher's input, but it also played a significant role in the growth of students' oral English proficiency. Translanguaging can promote self-regulation in students (Velasco and García, 2014), while also expanding their zone of proximal development (Lantolf, 2000). It was demonstrated in the study that the oral English proficiency of students increased over time. In the initial stage, students primarily used Chinese for discussion, whereas in the final stage, they primarily used English, with Chinese used only as a prompt (for example, the first one, the second one, etc.) to assist other team members in catching the answer. This study supported the findings of García and Li (2014) that the use of Translanguaging can make the mother tongue (in this case, Chinese) a scaffold for understanding the new language (in this case, English) and help students not only acquire language skills but also complete academic tasks (which was financial knowledge in this study). This study demonstrated that Translanguaging also encouraged all students to participate in group discussions, including those with lower language proficiency, which is consistent with previous research (Burton & Rajendram, 2019; Gabry-Barker, 2020; Iversen 2020).

Conclusion

This study implemented CIC as scaffolding tool to improve oral English ability of non-English major students in higher vocational college. The scaffolding tool mainly made by CIC combined with translanguaging and parts of curriculum cycle was utilized. The qualitative data analysis methods of conversation analysis. The research findings revealed, by development of CIC, the oral English ability of students were improved. In addition, during the process of development of CIC of students, translanguaging showed a critical position of importance.

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