A Study of the College English Conversation Class

大學英語會話教學初探

Lee, Chinghwa
李菁華

**General Education Center**
China Medical College

ABSTRACT

Teaching spoken English is one of the thorniest tasks in the Second Language Education. The present study will pinpoint both the universal difficulties of oral English teaching and its specific problems, which college English teachers in Taiwan might confront in their unique teaching context. Ready remedies such as strategies to manage large classes, tips to reduce speech anxiety, and activities to promote learners' involvement are elaborated in details. In addition to feasible treatments, the study also provides further researchable issues on learners' affective factors, error correction, proficiency evaluation and speech spontaneity. In short, the study not only provides enlightening insights of conversation teaching but also intrigues teachers in Taiwan to probe the challenging field of oral language education.

Key phrases: English Conversation, Teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL),
College English Education, Second Language Acquisition (SLA)
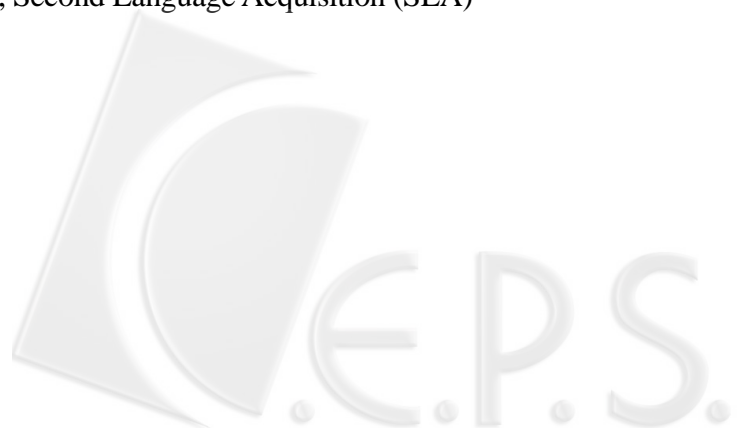
INTRODUCTION

Jack C. Richards (1990, 67) noted, "The conversation class is something of an enigma in language teaching." It surely is. When teaching the reading class, if the teacher devotes sufficient time and energy, he/she will be very likely to get positive feedback from the class. However, the English conversation class (ECC) is not the case at all. Even the most well prepared syllabus and intensive teacher involvement cannot guarantee a college teacher free from frustration in the ECC. David Nunan (1992,47) noted that one learner's performance is always colored by that of the person (interlocutor) he or she is talking with. He termed the complication "interlocutor effect." The label and its connotations can also be applied to the English conversation education: the ECC teacher's success depends mostly on learners' contribution; if learners, for some complicated reasons, are inhibited to open their mouths to utter their thoughts, the class is doomed to failure.

Being attracted by the ECC "enigma," the researcher intends to investigate the fundamental difficulties that complicate the English conversation teaching. To remedy the local problems, the study provides potential treatments including strategies to manage large classes, tips to reduce anxiety and activities to initiate speaking. Moreover, the researcher proposes more issues to intrigue teachers to search for insights of the ECC. The discussion is mostly based on the researcher's study and long-term instruction experience of Freshman English courses at China Medical College.

OBSTACLES TO TEACHING ORAL ENGLISH

The ECC teaching obstacles include both global difficulties and local difficulties. The former is mainly composed of the unique linguistic characteristics of spoken English outlined by H. Douglas Brown (2001,252-54). He lists eight
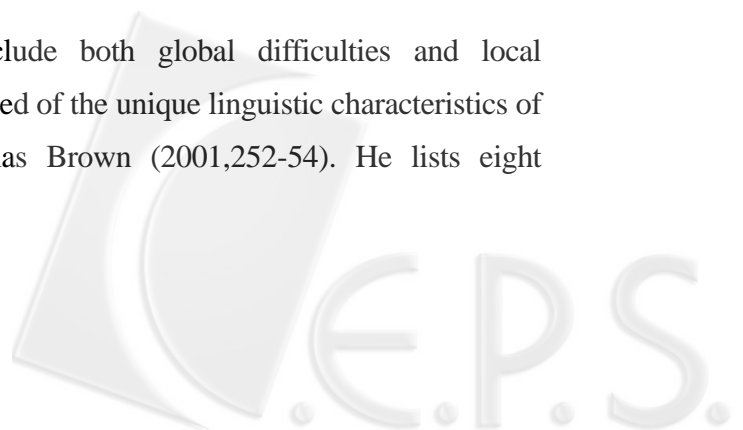
common obstacles to spoken language, including clustering, redundancy, reduced forms, performance variables, colloquial language, rate of delivery, prosodic features, and interaction. The local difficulties, on the other hand, refer to certain inherent limits which college teachers in Taiwan are likely to confront. The present study will focus on the local difficulties of ECC teaching and their potential solutions, including class management, stress alleviation strategies, as well as certain feasible and productive teaching activities.

## 1.   Global Difficulties (Brown 2001, 252-54)

Oral English language differs from written language in many ways. In this respect, learners around the world share certain universal difficulties when making attempts to acquire the speaking skill.

(1)   Clustering

In written language we are conditioned to attend to the sentence as the basic unit of organization. In spoken language, due to memory limitations and our predisposition, we break down speech into smaller groups of words. Fluent speech is phrasal, not word by word. Learners should learn to organize their utterances through such clustering. The task is obviously not an easy one for college freshmen in Taiwan.

(2)   Redundancy

Spoken language, unlike most written language, has a good deal of redundancy. Redundancy includes rephrasings, repetitions, elaborations, and little insertions of " I mean" and "you know." Unlike written English, redundancy in spoken language has its advantages—to make the messages easily understood, to offer the speaker extra time to organize his thoughts. It takes time and efforts for the teacher to make students detect the discrepancy.
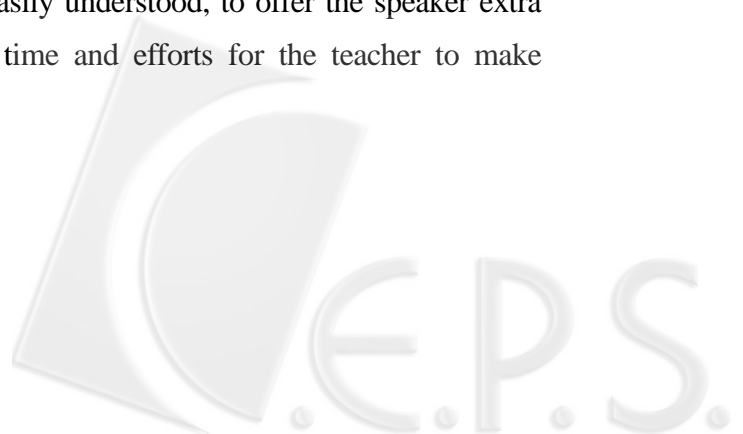
(3) Reduced Forms

Reduced forms can be phonological ("Djeetyet?' for "Did you eat yet?"), morphological (contractions like I'm), or pragmatic ("Mom, phone!). These reductions pose difficulties for those students who have been exposed to the full forms of the English language.

(4) Performance Variables

Hesitations, false starts, pause, and corrections are common in spoken language. Such performance variables form special problems in teaching spoken English.

(5) Colloquial Language

Learners who have been exposed to standard written English and "textbook" language sometimes find it difficult to express themselves by colloquial language such as idioms, slang, reduced forms, and shared cultural knowledge.

(6) Rate of Delivery

Unlike writing, where a person can stop and go back to revise, in speech the speaker may not always have the opportunity to start again and again. The stream of speech is supposed to flow continually. Language teachers are expected to help learners achieve an acceptable speed along with other attributes of fluency.

(7) Stress, Rhythm, and Intonation

The prosodic features of the English language are very important for comprehension. Those learners who can not deal with stress-timed language and intonation patterns are very likely to fail many subtle messages like sarcasm, insult, praise, etc.

(8) Interaction

Conversation is subject to all the rules of interaction: negotiation, clarification,

attending signals, turn-taking, and topic nomination, maintenance, and termination. To learners, how to respond adequately to keep a chain of communication moving on is a skill as troublesome as other linguistic obstacles.

2. Local Difficulties

Local difficulties of the ECC instruction in Taiwan involve obstacles resulting from its specific geographic, historical, and educational background.

(1) Class Size

One of the most salient difficulties of the ECC in Taiwan is the size of the class. In Taiwan, the college ECC is usually treated as a regular Freshman English class. Because of limits of teaching resources of most universities, the number of students admitted to the class sometimes is around 50, or incredibly more. In this case, most of the teachers find it difficult to allocate adequately sufficient time and attention to every student. Because of the enormous class size, some of the teachers even avoid to offer the ECC in the school curriculum, if possible.

(2) Multilevel Learners

Most EFL learners receive formal and standard reading and writing training in high school before they go to college. As a result, their performances in these two language skills converge to average ranks. But, high school education does not offer much spoken language programs. Students' performance of oral English varies from one individual to another. Diverse competence levels of heterogeneous learners in the ECC in college usually aggravate teaching problems of the ECC.

(3) A Performance Gap between Language Skills

Most college students in Taiwan are more adept at reading written English than at speaking oral English. They might make little of the teaching materials chosen for oral English teaching because the texts appear to be too easy to tackle with by
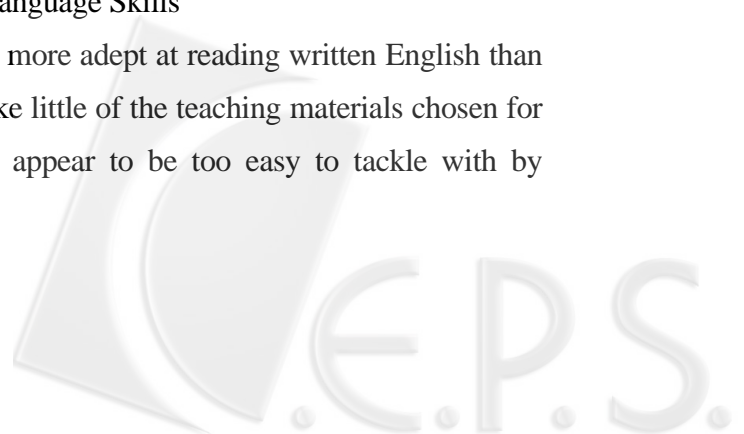
reading. But when they are asked to produce the contents orally, some suffer from great difficulties. The wide performance gap between reading and speaking skills usually results in anxiety and inhibition, which in turn impedes their progresses in learning and therefore hinders teachers' success.

(4) Students' Collective Anxiety

Unlike some Asian areas such as Singapore or Hong Kong, communities in Taiwan do not communicate in spoken English on a regular basis. For many college students in Taiwan, the ECC might be the only social context in which individuals are demanded to talk in oral English intensively. The unique situation usually makes extraordinary demands on the students.

Besides, in a normal process of native language acquisition, people always master spoken language before written language. However, in the ECC in Taiwan, most English learners reverse the process—they try to handle oral English after they have acquired average reading and writing skills, as we mentioned before. The unnatural process of language learning experience adds extra uneasiness to the learners.

Since the social context is lack of intensive language exposure and the English language learning process is somewhat different, students in the ECC share a collective apprehension. Many of them worry that they are unable to express mature thoughts and ideas adequately to obtain effective interpersonal communication or positive academic evaluation.

(5) Teachers' Uneasiness of Not Being "Native-like"

The unconscious anxiety also affects the language teacher. Many of the teachers in Taiwan acquire their language skills in the process very similar to those of their students. As the old generation in Taiwan, most of the language teachers experience even more disadvantageous and deprived language social context as they are in school days. In some cases, the apprehension accompanying their language learning
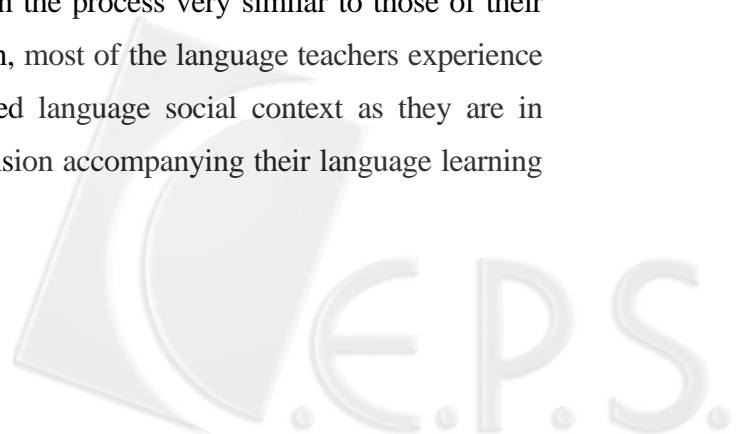
process haunts them now and then unconsciously; consequently, their confidence suffers when they are demanded to perform their oral language skills.

Besides, with the process of globalization marching on, the young generation gains favorable impetuses such as mass media impacts or convenient international trips, which help sharpen their oral language skills. Students with native-like pronunciation and intonation or international students from English speaking countries sometimes intimidate local language teachers who grow up in a much more conservative and impoverished society.

Although most English teachers still out match their students in every way, in some instances the performance discrepancy of oral English skills between the educators and the learners seems to diminish and therefore leads to educators' deteriorating self-assurance. They might worry that their spoken language flow is not as fluent as native English speakers, their utterance not accent-free, and their oral skills not proficient enough to manage monolingual English classes.

READY REMEDIES

According to the researcher's study, the following teaching strategies prove helpful and feasible as treatments to remedy the inherent obstacles in Taiwan.

1. Strategies to Manage Large Classes

There is no denying that language education profits more from small classes than from large ones. According to Brown (2001, 196), "Ideally, language classes should have no more than a dozen people or so. They should be large enough to provide diversity and student interaction and small enough to give students plenty of opportunity to participate and to get individual attention ."

However, if the school authorities are unable to offer small classes because of insufficiency of educational budgets or unwilling to do so owning to administrators' misconception that languages are learned by rote memorization, the teacher has to
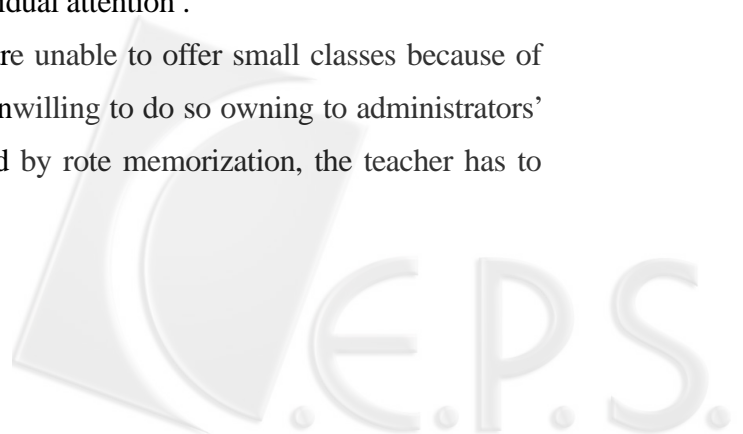
figure out alternatives to cope with adverse teaching circumstances. The following are possible treatments for large classes. They should be regarded as a package of strategies because each of them manifests a facet of a pedagogical practice with multiply dimensions. .

(1)   Interaction-Boosting Group Work

According to Brown (2001, 196-7), problems presented in large classes include:

✓   Proficiency and ability vary widely across students

✓   Individual teacher-student attention is minimized

✓   Student opportunities to speak are lessened

✓   Teacher's feedback on students' work is limited

To cope with a class of a large population, grouping serves as an efficient solution. A group of 5 to 6 members is most favorable. Too many group members might lead to uneven workload attribution in the team. Some learners may not make most use of their time in the learning activities since human resources are more than enough. On the other hand, a group of 2 or 3 students does not help lessen the ECC teacher's burden and therefore is not recommendable.

Generally speaking, students are supposed to fix in the same group through the whole ECC course. In this way, they are likely to develop intimacy, rapport and morale through constant interaction. However, occasional switch is allowable if there is mutual consents from both the given individuals and groups. When pair work is necessary, the group may be divided further into sub-units.

It is not advisable to assign group members by teacher's will, for example, to group learners by their seat numbers, achievement levels or other factors of convenience. It is beneficial for learners to have their choice to pick up their own partners. In this case, their anxiety in the ECC may relieve. The security and certainty to stay together with peers who they are familiar with help promote students' motivation to get involved in various teaching activities for spoken language education.
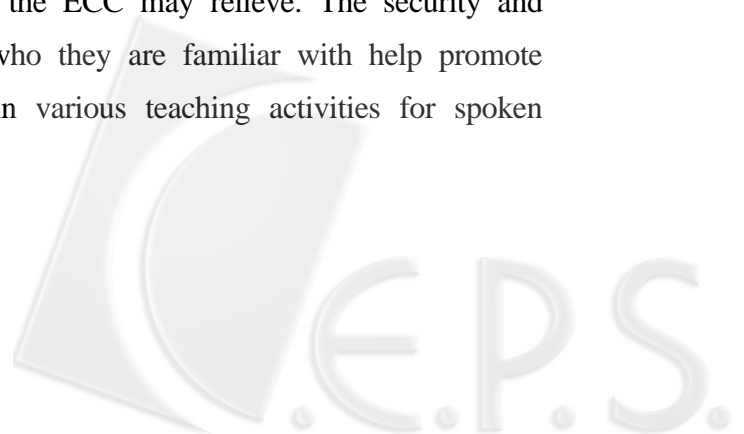
Jane King (1997, 204) also suggested that "(we should) have students choose their own partners since it is much easier for students to work out their own schedules for getting together outside the classroom. If you group students from different departments together, there will be great time conflict among them."

(2) Touring Supervision

After settling down the group work, assigning appropriate teaching activities and activating them, the teacher should go around to supervise the groups. On one hand, he/she can monitor students' performance in this way; on the other, the learners may consult the teacher whenever they trip over language problems. However, the teacher should not act as a judge, and should avoid interfering with the activities while they are in progress (Byrne, 106).

(3) Holistic Feedback

The teacher should make use of what he/she has learned while monitoring the activities to make comments on how well students have done. This should be done on a class basis (Byrne, 106). Thus, students have a holistic view of the class performance. Teacher's feedback and evaluation, accompanied with classmates' comments, offer students a better chance to rectify their weaknesses and to magnify their strengths for the coming presentations. Moreover, if the activity performance leaves anything to be desired, to address negative opinions in front of all students may dilute the potential clashes between the educator and the given group or its members and therefore help to maintain the rapport of the ECC.

(4) Time-Saving Assessments

Testing oral language proficiency in itself is thorny and problematic. In the case of a large class, the situation goes from bad to worse. Unlike the other three language skills, oral language performance cannot be effectively assessed by objective standard proficiency tests which students may take in the class during the same
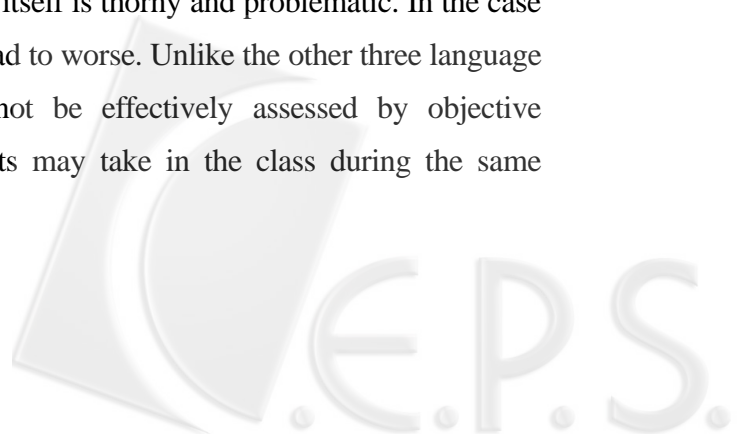
period of time span. Given the content validity, the teacher of the ECC has to ask each student to manifest his/her oral skills in order to rate learners' individual achievement. The measurement therefore is extremely time-consuming.

To rectify the drawback, grading students' learning progresses by groups may serve as an alternative. Taking the drama activity as an example, every student has the opportunity to demonstrate his/her oral proficiency on the stage. When examining the outcome of the learning activity, the teacher may evaluate both the oral performance of each individual and the communication strategies of the group. Since the activity presentation and class evaluation occur simultaneously, the teacher saves a certain amount of time.

(5)   Productive Treatment to Heterogeneous Students

The language teacher is warned against classifying students roughly into two opposing extremes, good students and bad students, and obliterating anything in between. The teacher should take hold of a positive and inviting attitude toward students of various performance levels and treasure the uniqueness of each individual.

The classroom instructions, explanations, lectures etc. should aim at the average level of proficiency in the class. However, when assigning class work, the educator may offer a wide variety of choices, ranging from a minimum that all students must do to challenging tasks for students with higher proficiency.

Sometimes students of varying ranges may be placed together to realize peer-teaching whenever appropriate; at other times, students of the same proficiency level may cooperate with each other to optimize the learning outcome. Thus, the educator is expected to alleviate the plagues brought about by classes of multiple proficiency levels.

2.   Tips to Reduce Anxiety

As most of the English teachers notice, the Second Language Education trend

moves from behaviorism to cognitive approach, from which the changing wind shifts again to the constructivist view of learning (Richards, 5-6; Brown 2000, 20-30). Humanistic psychologists such as Carl Rogers advocates that teachers should become facilitators of learning through the establishment of interpersonal relationships with learners and to manage a nonthreatening environment in which a person will form a picture of reality that is congruent with reality and therefore will grow and learn in it (Brown 2000, 89-90).

Since intensive anxiety is detrimental to the ECC, to lessen learners' anxiety comes to be the first priority of the ECC. When students are intimidated, they are most likely to become speechless. As silence is the first killer of the ECC, to be triumphant in the ECC, the teacher is suggested to make use of the following tips to remove learners' discomfort.

(1)   Lightening Learners' Affective Burden by Small Group Work

The teachers should group students before any teaching activities are initiated. Follow the grouping guidelines discussed before. Seat the group members in circles to facilitate face-to-face interaction, which may in turn help establish group intimacy and morale.

It is helpful to ask students to share their difficulties in both learning and using oral English by responding to questions such as "What is the most difficult part for you when speaking English?" An open discussion of speech anxiety will assure students that he/she is not the only one who cannot perform oral English communication skills adequately and therefore will relieve his/her speech anxiety (King, 200).

Brown (2001, 197) also advises us to assign as many "get acquainted" activities as possible at the beginning of the ECC so that the students may feel a part of community and are not just lost in the crowd.

Sometimes it is a good idea to leave students alone in the classroom for a couple of minutes, immediately after they start group activities such as oral drills or open
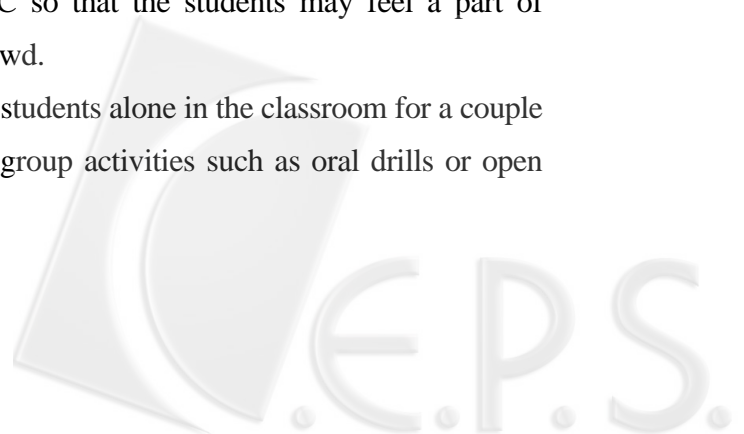
discussion. Generally speaking, teachers' presence and close watch usually make learners uneasy. In this respect, teachers' temporary absence may help involve students in learning. However, one should be extremely cautious about this practice lest his/her short absence should confuse the class and turn it into a chaotic situation because of anarchy. After all, teacher's supervision plays an extraordinary vital role in the ECC group activities.

(2) Using Native Language Judiciously

Although monolingual conversation classes are strongly recommended, it does not mean that the teacher must not utter any words in his/her native language. Atkinson (1993,47) noted "in some situations careful, limited use of the L1, at the right time, will help the students to get the maximum possible benefit from an activity." Judicious use of the first language not only can temporarily relieve teacher-student tension but also can boost teaching effects.

It is not encouraged for the teacher to demonstrate his/her speaking proficiency at the very beginning of the ECC course, for instance. We might frighten away students who are novices in dealing with oral English.

To take my personal experience as an example, in the first year I taught the ECC, after I finished my course introduction in English, I detected the classroom was pretty dim. I therefore requested one of the students sitting in the first row to lighten up the room. I said, "Turn on the light, please." Like being struck by a thunderbolt, the student was totally shocked. Before I realized what was going on, he ran out of the classroom as if he had been chased by a pack of wolves! He never came back anymore. His puzzled and terrified face is clear in my mind even today.

It is therefore recommendable for teachers of the ECC to elaborate their expectations, requests, and criteria of academic evaluation in native language in the initial period of the course. Or the inexperienced learners such as those of a lower-intermediate level might be overwhelmed and traumatized.
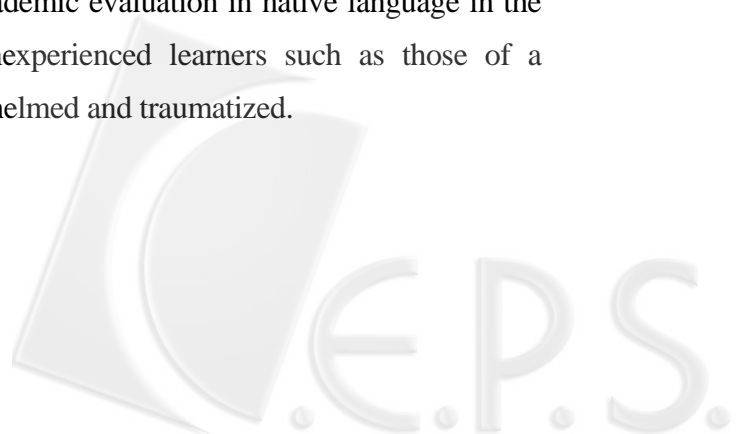
(3)   Learning the Implications of the Critical Period Hypothesis

Some students admit that they are impeded to speak English mainly because they are not confident in their pronunciation. Some teachers, as we just mentioned, share the same kind of speech anxiety, too. The Critical Period Hypothesis, first proposed by Eric Lenneberg and now acknowledged by most of the linguists, may help relieve the educators' and learner's collective speech anxiety. The Critical Hypothesis refers to an age span during which individuals can easily acquire a second language. Human can learn language normally only if they are exposed to a language during the age span, which extends from birth to approximately puberty. (Fromkin, 342-5; Cipollone, 268-9; Brown 2000, 53-4; Brown 1995, 75-112) After the period, the learner cannot produce spoken language without accent.

The ECC teacher may point out that the college students, as adult learners, will almost surely maintain a "foreign accent." In other words, to produce accent-free speech indistinguishable from that of a native speaker is unattainable for virtually every adult learner.

However, many researchers are continuing to quest beyond phonological factors impacting on language learning and reveal that accent is not the only construct that makes effective oral communication possible. Many findings suggest that certain learner characteristics and contexts may function hand in hand to defy the disadvantage of age effects (Brown 2000, 60).

Furthermore, in a multilingual, multicultural world, accents are quite acceptable since nonnative spoken language can be compensated for by other elements such as body language, knowledge of cultures and language syntax, all of which can be caught up with by intensive learning. When accepting that the nonnative pronunciation is only a minor flaw, both the teacher and students may shatter off the fetter of the phonological obsession and manage to address to each other in English language comfortably.
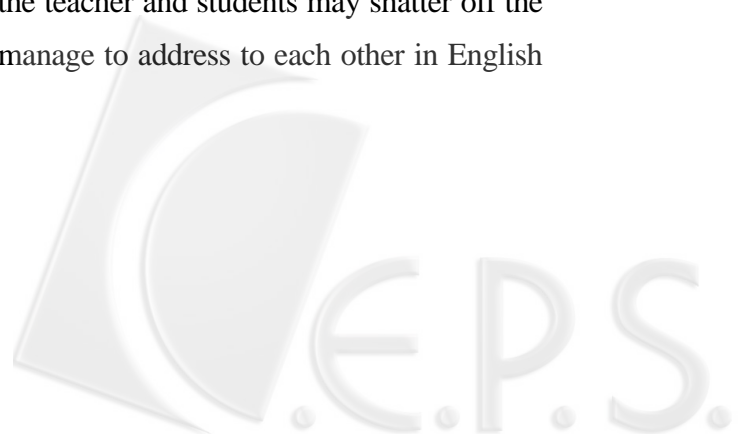
(4)　Providing Sufficient Rehearsal

Events tend to be more stressful if they are unpredictable. For example, most students find surprise quizzes to be more upsetting than scheduled quizzes that they can prepare for. To minimize students' pressure in the ECC, it is advisable for the teacher to give at least a week's notice of any teaching activity that requires intensive learners' involvement. A rehearsal can not only help lower anxiety but also promote students' performance level.

3.　Activities to Initiate Speaking

Variety of teaching activities in the ECC is indispensable. A dull and boring class inhibits learning. Therefore, a teacher should make use of activities to elicit speaking performance. When learners are eager to say something, we succeed in eliciting their intrinsic motivation, which in turn will benefit their learning. The following activities have been implemented by the researcher in the college ECC for many years. These feasible pedagogical games will be discussed in details. Also, theoretical accounts and teaching objectives of the practices are provided to justify the designs and their procedures.

(1)　Card Playing

When making attempt to do oral drills of the teaching unit "Tell me a Little About Yourself" of the textbook *Communicator I* (Molinsky, 28-29)*,* many students stumble over the long career names in the controlled dialogues. Detecting the problem, I design the following activity to help students, instead of asking them to repeat the terms by rote.

First of all, every group is given a pack of cards and each member of the team is told to choose for himself/herself a career name such as "meteorologist" or "anthropologist." Then the cards are attributed to them one by one. If any two members of the team get the cards with the same number, say "seven", they have to
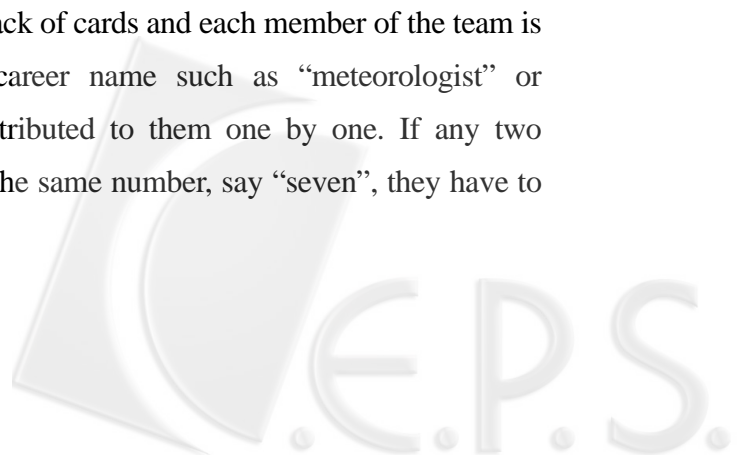
call out each other's career name. The one who succeeds in addressing the other's name is the winner.

The point of the activity is that everyone would like to choose a difficult term lest his/her opponents should pronounce the word easily and quickly. Meanwhile, to keep himself/herself from turning into a loser, every group member makes great efforts to utter these terms. In the process, the learners will eventually internalize these long and difficult career names. In spite of the tension from the competitive atmosphere, the class is loaded with laughter, screaming and, most important of all, joyfulness.

Byrne (1994, 100) classifies oral English teaching games into two broad types:

"(a) *they can be used to improve the learner's command of particular item or items of language*: sounds vocabulary, spelling, grammatical items or functions. Games of this kind are concerned with *accuracy* and their purpose is to reinforce and possibly extend what has already been taught.

(b) *they can be used to provide the learners with opportunities to use language rather than simply practise it*."

The card game designed for the career names fits Byrne's first characteristic. From the following details, one can find how the researcher's teaching game echoes Byrne's detailed description.

"…They (games) have been contrived or adapted to provide repetition (often frequent and rapid) of a particular item or items in an enjoyable context. They are effective because the learners are so involved in playing the game that they do not realise that they are practising language items.

…(They) are also *competitive*: one of the players is trying to win either for himself or on behalf of his team. … it has to be accepted that this can provide an impetus for using language with a purpose: the players in the game *want* to have a turn; they *want* to stay in the game (if this is one that involves elimination); they *want* to be the first to guess correctly or they *want* to gain points (and so on) (Byrne 1994, 100). "
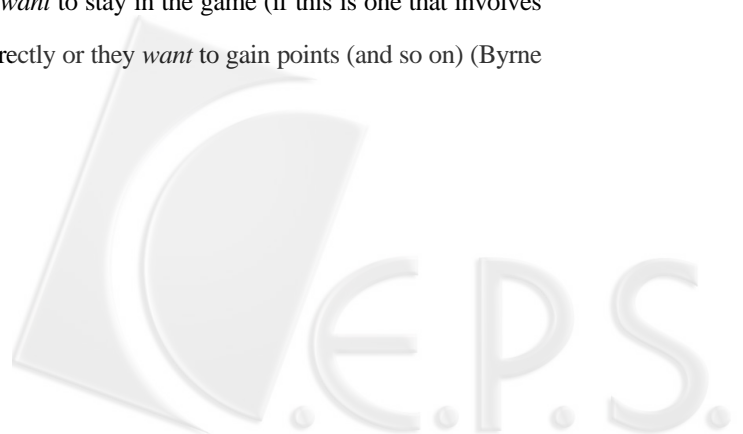
(2) Stage Plays

Although a play requires much devotion of time and energy to practice and to stage, it has been ranked among the most popular oral language teaching activities for college students. English plays possess numerous pedagogical strengths, which appeal to both teachers and learners

First of all, English plays involve fantasy; they contain an element of "let's pretend." Some of the situations used may be realistic because they are ones in which the learners are likely to find themselves but they are not real. The learners have to imagine they are somewhere other than the classroom. In this respect, stage plays help us to escape from the classroom on an imaginative level (Byrne, 115).

In addition, "they (English plays) provide learners to develop fluency skills: to use language *freely* because they offer an element of choice; to use language *purposefully*, because there is something to be done; and to use language *creatively*, because they call for imagination (Byrne, 115)."

Moreover, an English play activity, like readers' theather[1] "involves a great deal of repetition as students are rehearsing a presentation, the words become part of the students' repertoires without conscious memorization. The whole class, even the audience, begins to internalize the lines (Richard-Amato 1988, 143)."

Meanwhile, when giving the holistic evaluation of the English play on a class basis, the teacher may point out language performance defects by blaming a given

---

[1] "Readers' theater" is recommended by Goodman and Tenney (1979, 84-89). The activity is named "readers' theater" because that the actors hold their scripts and read from them with expression and feeling, as they were acting on the stage. In fact, the actors and the narrator generally sit on tall stools arranged in a semicircle in front of the audience. The narrator plays a key role; he/she sets the scene, introduces the characters, and gives comments. In short, he/she provides the glue that holds the dialogue together and makes it understandable (Richard-Amato, 142-43). "Reader's theater" is an alternative of a stage play, if the ECC teacher repels the latter because of time limits or other factors (黃裕惠, 387-95).
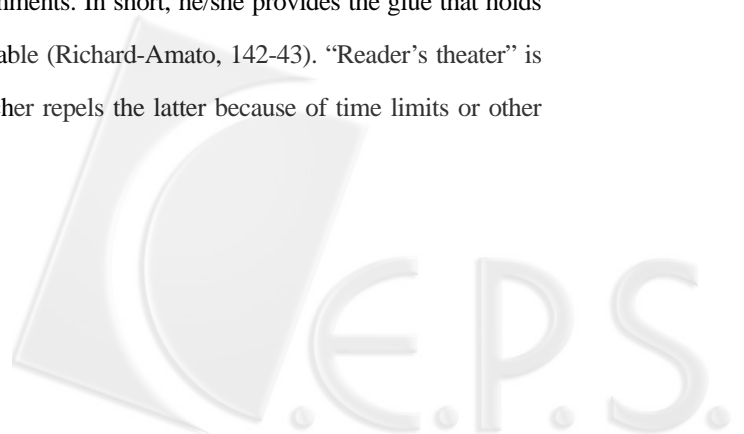
play or its characters, instead of naming the group or the students directly. For instance, the teacher may comment that Wu-Song, the renowned Chinese tiger killer, misses the phonological characteristics of specific sounds but should not say the player, say David Wang, mispronounces the words. In this way the teacher might mitigate David Wang's unpleasant feeling from the negative feedback.

We also find that with psychological masks of the dramatic roles' pseudo-identities, students are more willing to make attempts at spoken English. Richard-Amato (1988, 145) confirms the restraint-removing effect of the English play, too. He concludes, "Because students can lose themselves in the characters, plots, and situations, they are more apt to receive the benefits of reduced anxiety levels, increased self-confidence and esteem, and heightened awareness."

In terms of the practice itself, a successful English play activity involves many fundamental elements. The following suggestions might be of great help.

> Ask each group to write a play script adapted from a well-known western fairy tale or a Chinese folktale. Ready story contents may save students' time and energy. Meanwhile, when the play is staged, in case that the lines are not comprehensible, the familiar plots may keep providing audience sufficient hints to interact with the performance. Thus, the players are encouraged by their classmates' response to move along.

> Make it clear that language communication skills are the focus ability that we try to develop. In other words, language adequacy is of the top priority and therefore is the main target of evaluation; props, costume, sounds effect or other peripheral stage elements are of minor importance.

> Inform students at the very beginning of the course that there is a stage activity in order to provide them with sufficient time to generate ideas and collect information. But only to trigger the group discussion, rehearsal and presentation of the play after the group members are familiar with each other well enough from constant interaction.
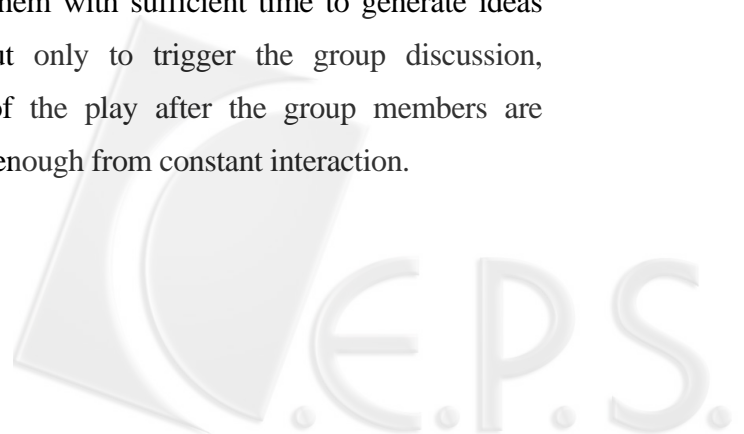
(3)　Open Discussion

College freshmen might not be skillful in oral English communication. But they are not satisfied with "baby talks" all the time, either. The teacher should lead them to express their own thoughts step by step. In other words, we should move from a totally controlled game like card playing to a semi-controlled activity such as stage plays. Ultimately, students should be given opportunities to talk freely or to assume the roles of autonomous speakers in authentic conversational contexts. Open discussion in which students may verbalize their opinions independently serves as an ideal communicative teaching activity by which they may gain language and communication skills that are expected on various occasions from greetings of daily lives to research reports of academic environments.

When going to the unit "A Serious Disagreement" (Molinsky, 90), I make use of the reader-response approach of literature and ask students to freely respond to the events or the characters of a given piece of literary works. For example, as Russell (1997, 52-53) suggests, we may give the readers opportunities to examine the ethical attitudes of the characters of "Runpelstiltskin[2]," a well-known fairy tale. By rank-order the characters according to their morality, students are expected to find wide opinion gaps among group members. When the speaker urges himself/herself to reveal and justify his/her belief, his/her intrinsic motivation is triggered to produce language, not just practice it.

[2.] "Rumpelstiltskin" is a fairy tales in which there is a miller who lies to the king about his daughter's ability to spin straw into gold. The greedy king promises to marry her if she would spin a roomful of straw into gold; or she will be put to death. The daughter is aided by a supernatural mysterious dwarf, Rumpelstiltskin, who demands her first-born baby in return for his help. Being desperate, the girl gives her word, but when the time comes to surrender her child, she regrets and asks for another chance. Taking pity on her, Rumpelstiltskin asks her to guess his name. If she succeeds, she may keep her baby. She finally does so with the unwitting assistance of a messenger who is lucky enough to learn the name by chance.
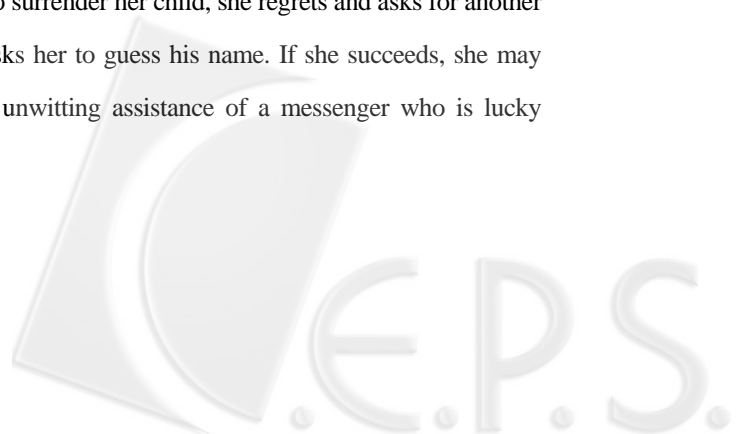
This activity may appear intimidating to lower-intermediate students, who therefore may need extra help. The teacher may offer them several possible sentence patterns to initiate their utterance. For instance, they may start by "I dislike _____ (character's name) most because_____ (reasons)." or " I do not agree with _____ (classmate's name). My reason(s) is/are _____." With rehearsal and encouragement, to some extent, students may successfully express their own opinions in front of the class.

For advanced learners, the film "The American Beauty" proves to be a good choice to initiate open discussion in that the movie provides controversial characters and issues in the modern American society such as homosexuality, marriage problems, love affairs, and generation conflicts, which generally appeal to adult students and therefore may motivate learners to involve in the discussion.

Open discussion is also a convenient bridge between language and literature teaching. An ECC teacher who believes in the importance of acculturation in language learning may also benefit from this activity tremendously.

OTHER RESEARCHABLE ISSUES

The ECC is a puzzle. Although the researcher fills in some parts of it with the study and past experience, many significant and essential pieces of insights are still missing. In the context of oral English education in Taiwan, more efforts should be made to devote to such issues as anxiety distinction, error correction, proficiency evaluation and speech spontaneity. Only by putting together these separate but related parts can we gain enlightenment to the whole picture of the ECC and map out practical pedagogical plans orienting educators to the territory.

1. Harmful Anxiety vs. Helpful Anxiety

We ECC teachers are constantly reminded by researchers such as Krashen that the best acquisition will occur in environments where anxiety is low and
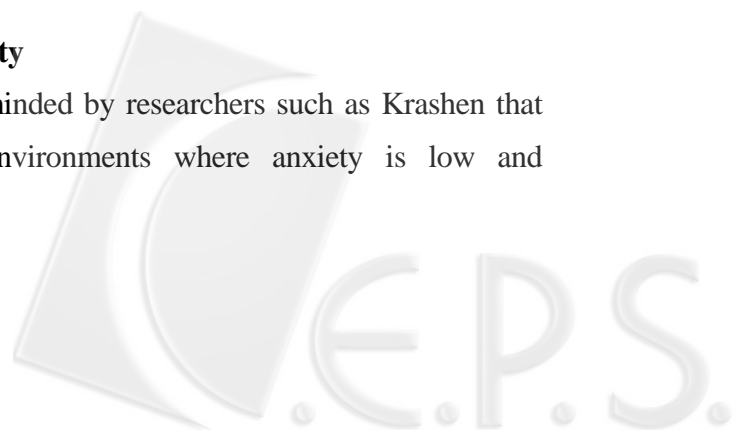
defensiveness absent (Richards 1999, 18; Brown 2000, 278). However, some educators worry that the environment might become so nonthreatening that the facilitative tension needed for learning is absent and fail to urge the acquisition to emerge (Brown 2000, 90).

Brown (2000,151) notes, "Another important insight to be applied to our understanding of anxiety lies in the distinction between debilitative and facilitative anxiety." But the board line of these two affective manifestations is too vague to define. Anxiety is a matter of personal perception; one task that is detrimental to an individual might be beneficial to another. If we could tell "good anxiety" from "bad anxiety," we could achieve language education goals more effectively.
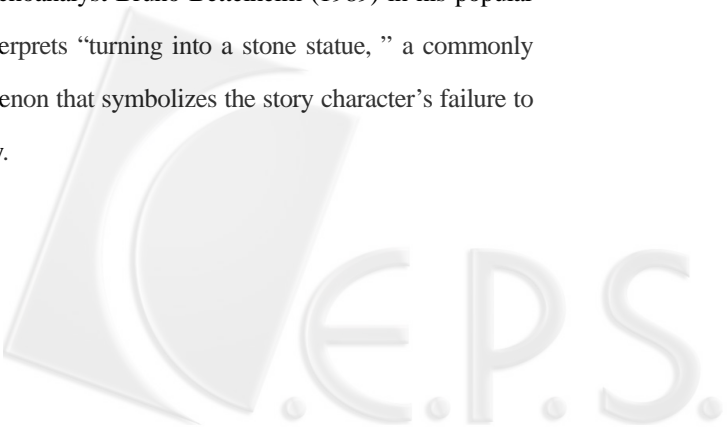
2. Accuracy vs. Fluency

In most EFL situations, students are dependent on the teacher for corrective feedback. In Taiwan, when students walk out of the ECC classroom, they almost have no chance to get such feedback. The learners' living communities do not offer them the context to make error-and-trial experiments in English language. If the ECC teacher does not provide sufficient corrective feedback, many errors might fossilize[3] and even impede interpersonal communication.

However, individualistic correction is time-consuming. Besides, if the ECC is loaded with error correction, learners may overemphasize their accuracy, at the

---

[3.] Fossilization refers to erroneous features that persist despite what is otherwise a reasonably fluent command of the language. This phenomenon is most saliently manifested phonologically in "foreign accents" in the speech of many individuals who have learned a second language after puberty, or the Critical Period we mentioned in the text. There is an interesting parallel metaphor in fairy tale interpretation. The contemporary psychoanalyst Bruno Bettelheim (1989) in his popular book *The Uses of Enchantment,* repeatedly interprets "turning into a stone statue, " a commonly occurred event in world fairy tales as a phenomenon that symbolizes the story character's failure to transcend to a higher plane of growing hierarchy.

expense of their language fluency. In some extreme cases, they are even inhibited to take risks to communicate verbally. Therefore, how to achieve the balance between accuracy and fluency is also a key issue for the college language education.

3. Objective Evaluations vs. Subjective Evaluations

Students in Taiwan, influenced by historical and social factors, are much more concerned with their academic achievement grades than their counterparts in many western countries. They rely more on objective evaluations than subjective evaluations in primary and high school days. As a result, subjective assessments appear more foreign and unacceptable to them. They even question if they will be evaluated fairly by subjective testing.

But objective evaluation, in the context of the ECC, is lack of content validity. After all, it is difficult for teachers to fully justify themselves when they gauge learners' oral proficiency level by written tests although it happens in the ECC in Taiwan.

However, objective evaluations possess unequal merits for teachers. For one thing, it saves time: we do not have to consume a great deal of time interviewing or examining students. For another, it saves troubles: we do not have to take pains to convince students that the evaluation criteria and results are reasonable.

But if we teachers are open to the temptation of the convenience of subjective tests and leave objective testing behind, we give up the opportunities to draw students' oral performance in a more natural way. The dilemma of weighing one evaluation against the other therefore becomes a researchable issue for college English educators.

4. Spontaneity vs. Rehearsal

One of the main goals of the ECC is to lead students to be autonomous speakers, who eventually can communicate in oral English meaningfully and spontaneously at any occasions. However, if the teacher puts too much emphasis on spontaneity in the
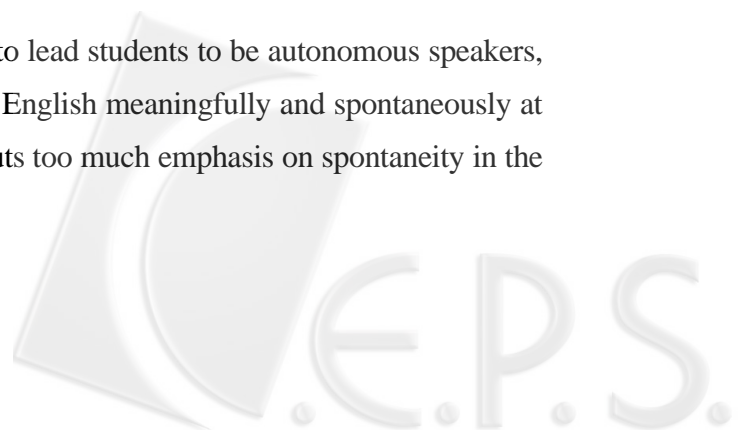
language classes, we are likely to force students to blurt out some broken and meaningless string of words, which afflict all the listeners.

If the students are given time to prepare in advance, they may present spectacular performance, with fluent English dialogues and natural body language, a consequence resulting from repeatedly rehearsals. The presentation is educational, partly because the audience may pick up and internalize the language and partly because good performers usually can bring about peer pressure, which in turn will motivate their classmates to aspire to a higher plane of achievement.

However, the rehearsal still casts a shadow of doubt on the oral English education: will the learners be equipped with sufficient skills by practice and successfully transfer them to a real communicative social context? The transition point of practice to production, therefore, remains to be one the college English educators' major concerns.

CONCLUSION

When the new era of globalization is approaching, the probability of face-to-face communication grows day by day. College language teachers assume an enormously important role in oral English education. Although the territory is full of challenges, it promises more fulfillments and prosperity than other language skill education.

The study outlines the obstacles to oral English instruction in both the universal teaching context and the specific education environment in Taiwan. Local problems include large class size, learners of multiply levels, a noticeable performance gap between language skills, and most important of all, educators' and learners' collective speech anxiety.

To remedy the situation, the researcher provides possible solutions obtained from long-term pedagogical experience. When managing a class with a large population, the teacher is suggested to make use of strategies such as
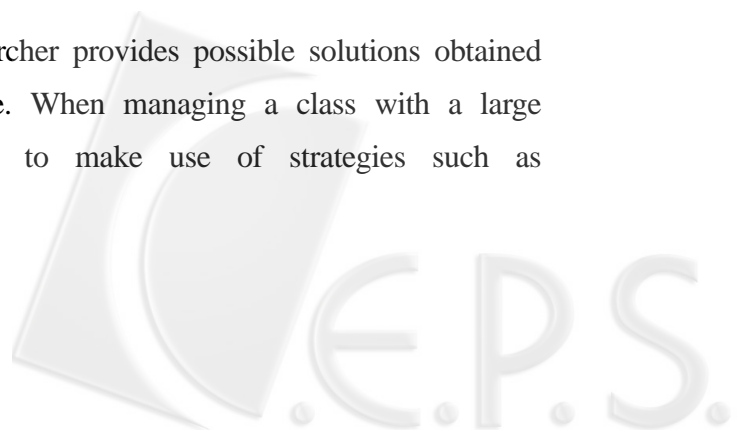
interaction-boosting group work, touring supervision, holistic feedback on a class basis, time-saving assessments and treatments that are productive to heterogeneous students.

To lower class anxiety, the ECC teachers are advised to lighten learners' affective burden by small group work, to use native language judiciously, to learn the implications of the Critical Period Hypothesis, and to provide sufficient rehearsal.

In terms of teaching activities, card playing game, stage plays and open discussion exemplify three typical pedagogical practices which are based on sound supporting theories and are proved both feasible and productive when applied in the college ECC.

In addition to remedial treatments, the study also presents other issues which deserve further research in the oral language education: to distinguish harmful stress from helpful anxiety, to balance language accuracy and fluency, to weigh subjective evaluations against objective assessments, and to launch transition from practice to production.

In short, the study not only provides enlightening insights of conversation teaching but also intrigues teachers in Taiwan to probe into the puzzling and challenging territory of oral language education. By means of collective efforts and attempts, the college English teachers in Taiwan are expected to upgrade students' oral English proficiency to such a level that they can freely and adequately express their thoughts both in the classroom and outside of it.

REFERENCES

1. Applebee, Arthur N (1974). *Tradition and Reform in the Teaching of English: A History.* Urbana: National Council of Teachers of English.

2. Atkinson, David (1993). *Teaching Monolingual Classes.* London: Longman.

3. Beebe, Leslie M (1988). *Issues in Second Language Acquisition.* Boston: Heinle & Heinle.

4. Brinton, Donna M., Marguerite Ann Snow and Marjorie Bingham Wesche (1989). *Content-Based Second Language Instruction.* Boston: Heinle & Heinle Publishers.

5. Britton, James (1986). *Language and Learning.* New York: Penguin Books.

6. Brown, H. Douglas (2000). *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching.* New York: Longman.

7. Brown, H. Douglas (2001). *Teaching by Principles, an Interactive Approach to Language Pedagogy.* New York: Longman.

8. Brown, H. Douglas and Susan Gonzo (1995). *Reading on Second Language Acquisition.* Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall.

9. Brown, James Dean (1996). *Testing in Language Programs*. Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall Regents.

10. Bettelheim, Bruno (1989). *The Uses of Enchantment*. New York: Random House.

11. Bushman, John H. and Kay Parks Bushman (1997). *Using Young Adult Literature in the English Classroom.* Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall.

12. Byrne, Donn (1992). *Techniques for Classroom Interaction.* London: Longman.

13. Byrne, Donn (1986). *Teaching Oral English.* London: Longman.

14. Carter, Ronald and Michael N. Long (1992). *Teaching Literature.* London: Longman.
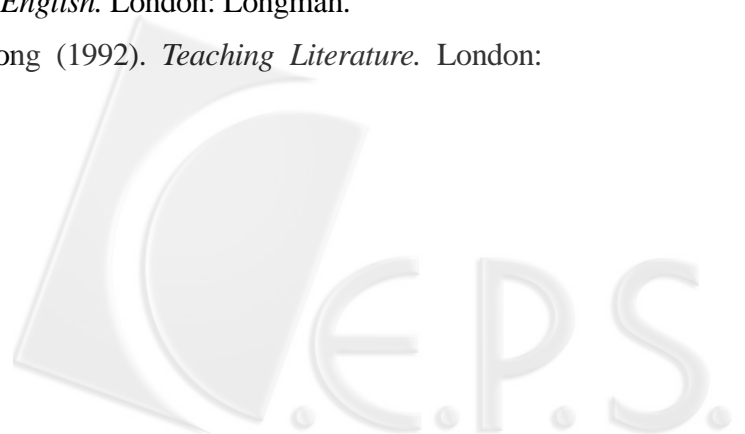
15. Cipollone, Nick, Steven Hartman Keiser and Shravan Vasishth (1998). *Language Files.* Taipei: 書林.

16. Cohen, Andrew D. (1994). *Assessing Language Ability in the Classroom.* Boston: Heinle & Heinle Publishers.

17. Dobson, Julia M (1996). *Effective Techniques for English Conversation Groups.* Washington D.C.: Newbury House Publishers.

18. Edge, Julian (1989). *Mistakes and Correction.* London: Longman.

19. Hughes, Glyn S (1983). *A Handbook of Classroom English.* 台北：文鶴 .

20. Fasold, Ralph (1991). *Sociolinguistics of Language.* Cambridge: Basil Blackwell.

21. Fasold, Ralph W. (1983). *Variation in the Form and Use of Language: A Sociolinguistics Reader.* Washington D. C.: Georgetown University Press.

22. Finegan, Edward (1989). *Language: Its Structure and Use.* Orlando: Harcourt Brace College Publishers.

23. Fromkin, Victoria and Robert Rodman (1998). *An Introduction to Language.* Orlando: Harcourt Brace & Company.

24. Goodluck, Helen (1995). *Language Acquisition: A Linguistic Introduction.* Cambridge: Blackwell.

25. Goodman, J. and Tenney, C. (1979). "Teaching the total language with readers theater." CATESOL *Occasional Papers*, No.5, 84-89.

26. Jeaton, J. B (1990). *Classroom Testing.* London: Longman.

27. Johnson, Keith (1997). *Language Teaching & Skill Learning.* Oxford: Blackwell.

28. King, Jane (1997). "Coping with ESL Students' Oral Presentation Problems." *Proceedings of the Fourteenth Conference on English Teaching and Learning in the Republic of China.* Taipei: the Crane.

29. Larsen-Freeman, Diane (2001). *Techniques and Principles in Language Teaching.* New York: Oxford.

30. Larsen-Freeman, Diane and Michael H. Long (1999). *An Introduction to Second Language Acquisition Research (Applied Linguistics and Language Study)* London: Longman.

31. Long, Michael H. and Jack C. Richards (1987). *Methodology in TESOL: A Book of Reading.* Boston: Heinle & Heinle.

32. Marckwardt, Albert, H (1980). *American English.* New York: Oxford University Press.

33. *American Beauty*（美國心，玫瑰情）. Videocassette. Dir. Sam Mendes. DreamWorks, 2000. 121 min.

34. McDonough, Jo and Christopher Shaw (1993). *Materials and Methods in ELT.*

35. Molinsky, Steven J and Bill Bliss (1995). *Communicator I.* Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall Regents.

36. Napoli, Donna Jo (1996). *Linguistics.* New York: Oxford University Press.

37. Nunan, David (1992). *Language Teaching Methodology: A Textbook for Teachers.* New York: Prentice-Hall.

38. Orando, Carlos J. and Virgina P. Collier (1987). *Bilingual and ESL Classrooms: Teaching in Multicultural Contexts.* New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company.

39. Pride, J. B. and Janet Holmes (1986). *Sociolinguistics.* New York: Penguin Books.

40. Richard-Amato, Patricia A. *Making It Happen: Interaction in the Second Language Classroom, From Theory to Practice.* New York: Longman, 1988.

41. Richards, Jack C., John Platt and Heidi Platt (1998). *Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching & Applied Linguistics.* London: Longman.

42. Richards, Jack C. and David Nunan (1990). *Second Language Teacher Education.* New York: Cambridge University Press.

43. Richards, Jack C. and Theodore S. Rodgers (1999). *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

44. Robin, R.H. (1997). *A Short History of Linguistics.* London: Longman.
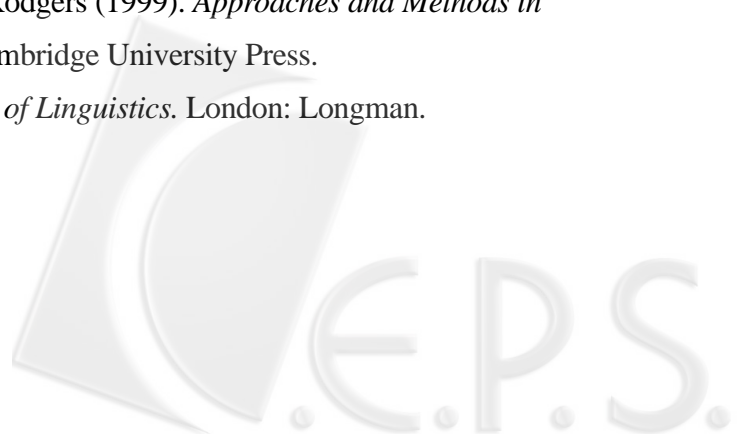
45. Russell, David L (1997). *Literature for Children: a Short Introduction.* New York: Longman.

46. Sadow, Stephen A (1982). *Idea Bank.* Boston: Heinle & Heinle Publishers.

47. Scarcella, Robin C., Elaine S. Andersen and Stephen D. Krashen (1990). *Developing Communicative Competence in a Second Language: Series on Issues in Second Language Research.* Boston: Heinle & Heinle Publishers.

48. Scott, Wendy A. and Lisbeth H. Ytreberg (1997). *Teaching English to Children.* Edinburgh Gate: Longman.

49. Underwood, Mary (1992). *Effective Class Management.* London: Longman.

50. Taylor, Insup and Martin Taylor (1990). *Psycholinguistics: Learning and Using Language.* Eaglewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall.

51. 林壽華譯 (1996)，（外語教學概論 Second Language Pedagogy: An Introduction）（台北：書林）

52. 胡明揚編 (1996)，（西方語言學名著選讀）（台北：書林）

53. 曾陽晴譯(1992)，《爛皮兒踩高蹺皮兒》〈台北：遠流事業出版有限公司〉

54. 張玉玲 (1997). A Secret Garden in Children's Literature in EFL Instruction. 《第十四屆中華民國英語文教學研討會》（頁 379-388）

55. 張月珍譯 (1997)，（杭士基）（台北：書林）

56. 張文軒譯 (1999)，（語言學導論）（台北：書林）

57. 黃裕惠 (1994). 〈朗誦劇與英語教學—教讀文學作品的另一選擇〉《第三屆中華民國英語文教學研討會》（頁 387-395）

大學英語會話教學初探

A Study of the College English Conversation Class

李菁華

中國醫藥學院通識教育中心講師

摘　要

　　隨著國際化的腳步加速行進，英語口語表達能力日趨重要，會話已成為大學英語教學中不可或缺的課程。而會話實為英語教學中最艱難的挑戰之一，其中兼具一般性與本土性的困難。前者大抵與口說英語在語言學上之殊異性有關；後者則特指在台灣地區實施會話教學可能面臨的的本土型問題。為增長教學的效益，研究者針對後項困境提出應變之道，其中包括大班管理策略、教學環境減壓方法、以及有效的口語教學活動。本研究同時也列舉其他值得深入探究的議題：有害壓力與有益壓力的區分、流暢性與正確性的平衡、客觀性評量及主觀性評量的揀擇；自發性口語表達的養成。透過本研究，期使大學英語教學工作者得以透視會話課程的基本性質，進而因材施教、循循善誘莘莘學子，具體達成教與學的目標。

關鍵詞：英語會話，大學英語教育，第二語言習得，外語教學