Constructing a Natural Conversation Learning Activity to Improve Students' English-Speaking Skills

Hong-Min TU[a*], Chang-Yen LIAO[b], Te-Yang CHOU[c]
[a] *Graduate Institute of Network Learning Technology, National Central University, Taiwan*
[b]*Department of Hakka Language and Social Sciences, National Central University, Taiwan*
[c] *Graduate Institute of Network Learning Technology, National Central University, Taiwan*
*benjamintu1514@gmail.com

Abstract: As a medium of communication, language encapsulates four core competencies: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Notably, speaking, which facilitates direct communication, is critical. Yet, Taiwan's English pedagogy heavily emphasizes reading, inadvertently fostering a deficit in speaking skills among students. Addressing this, the current study proposes an English conversational practice system that adheres to language acquisition tenets, integrating 10-minute mini-lessons for English listening and speaking exercises. In these activities, students utilize a natural approach, engaging with the system-provided English conversational audio to refine their listening and speaking skills. The system, furnished with a recording function, empowers students to engage in self-paced English listening and speaking practice during their free time. The process of "listening to system audio, followed by speaking practice (recording), and re-recording" offers students corrective feedback from their recordings, enhancing their pronunciation, grammar, and fluency - vital elements of conversational competency. Additionally, the system incorporates a voice-based chatbot, facilitating situational speaking exercises based on the practice topics. The overarching goal of this study is to instill in students the skill to transfer their learning to diverse conversational contexts they might encounter, fostering habitual speaking to mitigate the disparity in the development of the four English language skills.

Keywords: conversation learning, mini-lessons, language acquisition, voice recording, natural approach

1. Introduction

The English education system in Taiwan has been overly focused on the "reading" skill (understanding English article content and grammar structures), which has resulted in Taiwanese students performing significantly better in "reading" skills than in "speaking" and "listening" skills (National Development Council of Taiwan, 2021).

Our language skills are acquired through the acquisition, while "acquisition" is a part of the learning process, referring to learning non-deliberately or unconsciously (Mani, 2016). Children acquire their native language skills through constant exposure to conversations in daily life (Clark, 2018). Similarly, students' speaking skills develop through listening to a large amount of external input in daily life and imitating what they hear and understand.

Based on the above, our aim is to develop an English conversation practice system for students that provides a conducive language learning environment and designs 10-minute mini-lessons. This will allow them to acquire English naturally through the imitation of the process of native language learning (Krashen & Terrell, 1983). This system enables students to engage in "self-paced English listening and speaking practice" or "situational conversation practice with a voice-based chatbot", using tablets or mobile devices during their free time.

Afterwards, students can listen to different conversation topics and practice listening and speaking independently through the "listening to system audio, followed by speaking practice (recording), and re-recording" mode. By utilizing recordings, students can improve

their pronunciation, grammar, fluency, intonation, and more, thereby increasing their confidence and courage to use English in spoken interactions (YanJu, Mei & Mohamed, 2017). Voice-based chatbots enable students to practice spoken language, meeting their self-paced needs (Chen, Vicki Widarso & Sutrisno, 2020), and are not limited by time or location (Han, 2020). Additionally, these chatbots provide students with an authentic language environment, contributing to enhancing their speaking skills (Huang, Hew & Fryer, 2022), ultimately forming the habit of speaking English.

2. System Introduction

In order to improve the current English education system in Taiwan, which finds it difficult to cultivate students' speaking skills in English class, the design philosophy of this study system is based on the "Natural Approach" (Krashen & Terrell, 1983) and "Interest-Driven Creator Theory" (Chan et al., 2018), using the habit loop's "cuing environment" and "routine activities". This allows students to immerse themselves in a language acquisition environment constructed by the English conversation practice system, and by being exposed to significant amounts of English language input, cultivates students' speaking skills and develops the habit of speaking English.

In the mini-lessons, teachers can select an English conversation topic that matches their students' English level and learning progress from the English conversation topic page. The blackboard page displays the English text and Chinese text (including Mandarin phonetic symbols) of the conversation content, and also allows for the playback of the English conversation audio. This enables students to practice speaking along with the English conversation content they hear.

This system enables students to engage in "self-paced English listening and speaking practice" or "situational conversation practice with a voice-based chatbot", using tablets or mobile devices during their free time. The voice-based chatbot will employ OpenAI as the conversation partner for students to practice speaking with. However, as OpenAI is based on text-based artificial intelligence, Microsoft Azure Speech Services will be utilized as the communication bridge between the learners and OpenAI. The process of situational conversation practice will begin with OpenAI presenting a topic related to the theme, and then the text will be converted to speech via Azure Speech Services and played back. Students will listen to the content and provide oral responses, which they will record. The recorded speech will be converted back to text using Azure Speech Services and sent to OpenAI. Through this process, students can apply the conversations they have practiced to real-life scenarios, thereby enhancing their speaking skills.

3. Preliminary Evaluation
3.1 Research participants

The research participants for this study were 55 students from a certain experimental primary school in Taoyuan city, Taiwan, ranging from grades three to six. Of the participants, 24 were boys and 30 were girls. Other participants included researchers and the English teachers from each class.

3.2 Preliminary Results and Conclusions

The objective of this study is to examine the impact of English listening and speaking exercises, implemented through mini-lessons and self-paced activities, on the oral proficiency

and habits of elementary students in grades three to six. Observations within the classroom setting have demonstrated that, with teacher guidance, students actively participate in English listening and speaking practice activities. Interestingly, after engaging in these mini-lessons, students show a growing willingness to communicate in English with their educators and classmates during the sessions.

Initial findings of this study suggest that English speaking and listening practice, delivered through mini-lessons and self-paced activities, positively impacts students' inclination and habits to communicate in English. As the research is set to continue over the full semester, we will maintain our classroom observations and accumulate data on students' midterm and final English grades. At the end of semester, we intend to carry out an English-speaking competency assessment, utilizing evaluative criteria from a preceding study on English speaking performance (West Hartford Public Schools, 2012). This assessment will encompass six dimensions: "accuracy," "comprehensibility and pronunciation," "fluency," "comprehension," "content," and "maturity of the language."

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