

## Review Article

# Educational Ecology in Teaching Oral English

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**Abstract:** Every year in Iran, thousands of high school students passed many English courses at high schools and pre-university programs. However, these students found that after they entered into the society, they still could not speak English. Why? With this question in mind, the purpose of this paper is to discover the problems in oral English teaching from the perspective of Education Ecology, and also, bring out the solutions to these questions.

**Keywords:** dumb English, Education Ecology, oral English teaching, high school English Test

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## I. INTRODUCTION

In an old-style English class, students only obtain inactively what their teachers want them to learn. In this situation, teachers value “how to teach” more than “how should students study”. We have long been indorsing “student centered”, but we still have a long way to go to understand it. Furthermore, out-of-date teachers put much importance on procedural knowledge, but overlooks oral English training. Thirdly, students lack actual language atmosphere. Some teachers cannot speak English well themselves, which will have adverse effects on students. Last but not least, students are scared of making mistakes, so they are not self-assured in speaking English. In long-standing, oral English will become a problem for them, and students will finally give away speaking English.

If we compare the customary English class to an ecological system, the teachers and students can be seen as ecological subjects, and teaching environment and teaching methods can be observed as ecological objects. We can know that this ecological system is not well balanced. So in order to improve oral English teaching, we should generate a stable ecological system for it. And the response can be found from Education Ecology.

In 1858, Henry David first stated the concept of ecology. Then in 1868, Haeckel defined it as the scientific study of the relations of animals with each

other and their environments (Haeckel, 1905). With more and more researchers being involved in this field, the implication of ecology has been enlarged, and many branches of ecology have come about. There are two main divisions of ecology: bioecology and humanecology. The Education Ecology is one of the significant branches of humanecology, which offers a new viewpoint for education. One definition of Education Ecology is that it is a discipline mixing natural, social sciences and the humanities researching in the interrelation of a person as an individual and/or a social system with the multidimensional background in a complete outlook in the facet of education as means encouraging the development of the sphere, process and result of human activities, the content of interrelation, human and environment qualities/characteristics.

To put it simply, Education Ecology is mostly about the relations between education and the environment. Researches on the Education Ecology started from the British academic Ashby who first put forward the idea of ecology of higher education, which stands for the landmark of applying ecological principles into the study of higher education. Later in 1970s, Cremin and Eggleston took the lead in the study of Education Ecology. Afterward, a mounting number of scholars did many researches on Education Ecology (Cremin, 1976; Eggleston, 1979).

Moreover, domestic and foreign researchers have done many researches on oral English teaching.

Task-based approach appeared in the late 1970's in India, which is a new model of teaching, and this approach highlights communicative language teaching and learning. In Iran, task-based approach has become a research trend. Many Iranian teachers think that task-based approach can be utilized to alter students' outlook toward oral English, thus improving their oral English. Canadian scholars Gardner and Lambert did a research on oral English learning from the perspective of social psychology (Gardner and Lambert 1972). They contemplate the learning of oral English is driven by instrumental motivation and integrative motivation. Wilga M Rivers ponder that the interaction between teachers and students is of great significance to oral English teaching. She maintains that oral English teaching should follow this principle firmly (Wilga M Rivers, 1978).

There are numerous researches in the field of Education Ecology and oral English teaching. Though, the study of oral English teaching based on Education Ecology is sporadic.

## II. CHARACTERISTICS OF ORAL ENGLISH AND EDUCATION ECOLOGY

This part emphasizes on the characteristics of oral English and Education Ecology. By examining the indispensable qualities of Education Ecology setting and oral English, the author will draw to a conclusion that it's achievable to develop oral English teaching with the ideas from Education Ecology.

### A. Features of Education Ecology

Just like other themes, many principles are obligatory in ecology, that is, the ecological principles. Ecological principles usually contain ecological system, niche, co-evolution, competition, cooperation and ecological balance. Taking the research purpose of this paper into consideration, the author will mostly focus on ecological system and ecological balance.

In traditional sense, Ecological system is a biological community of interacting organisms and their physical environment. As time goes by, the implication of ecological system has been momentarily widened. Nowadays, ecological system not only refers to the natural ecological system in biology, but also the ecological system in human civilization and deeds. And both natural and human ecological systems share some common features.

### 1. Mutualism

Environmentally, mutualism refers to the impression that the living of one organism depends on the life of another creature, and these two organisms will contact with each other both directly and indirectly. As for Education Ecology, mutualism is very ostensible between students and educators. For instance, when it comes to the assessment of one specific teacher, the

main question to consider is the performance of his or her students. Consequently, students are crucial for the success of teachers. For another, students trust on teachers to improve not only their knowledge but also social qualities. Also, a harmonious association with teachers can well endorse the overall progress of students. In order to attain their distinct goals, communication between students and teachers is essential. Through communication both in and outside the class, students and teachers understand mutualism.

### 2. Integrality

In ecology, many organisms establish a steady and ordered community. And every organism itself is also an unchanging and ordered community, which consists of many parts. In order to function well, the ecological system has to be well combined.

For instance, in a tangible school environment, if a student wants to make to the top in the class, he or she wants to make many preparations such as pre-learning, practice and reviewing. And he or she needs to manage these rudiments so that they can be well unified. Suitable results will be realized if the study elements are well integrated. By the same token, if a teacher wants to achieve satisfactory teaching results, he or she needs to integrate teaching elements such as ascending students' learning interest, creating harmonious class environment and providing reasonable evaluation. In contrast, students and teachers also form a community in which student and teacher can impact each other. The relation between students and teachers applies great significance. Teachers should trust students first in order to gain the trust of students, and students and teachers share equal status and common respect. And these are the integrated elements for starting a harmonious relationship between students and teachers. With integrated studying elements, teaching elements and harmonious teacher-student relationship, we can definitely attain expected consequences. Basically, the Integrality of Ecological System is achieved.

### 3. Covariance

Covariance in ecology means that the development of one organism will stimulus another organism or some relative organisms, and these organisms will change correspondingly. In the real school environment, covariance happens very normally. For instance, if a teacher is zealous in the class, the students will be affected and perform actively in the class. And if a teacher sees the laziness in students' eyes, his or her desire might gradually wane. In this case, the school situation can be seen as an ecological system, and the reaction between students and teacher is the covariance of ecological system.

#### 4. Dynamic Balance

In ecology, the structures and purposes of the parts of the ecological system are continuously changing themselves so that to be synchronized with each other. This is called the lively balance of ecological system. In the school environment, teachers will set a teaching goal for a certain period. In the process of realizing this teaching target, students need to constantly adjust their studying plans to catch up with what they have learned in the class. And the teachers should repetitively correct teaching plans, so that they will not be too far ahead of the schedule or lag behind.

#### B. Features of Oral English

Oral language, as a face to face verbal language, is an essential instrument to communicate with others. Oral English is a term relative to written English, which includes the active oral speech and passive oral speech. Active oral speech refers to speaking and the passive oral speech refers to listening. As for the language learning, human learned to speak first, then writing. So the same will go for the study of English. There are three basic rudiments for the learning of oral English.

The first element is vocabulary, which is the foundation of oral English. It's a common occurrence that many students seize up while speaking English because they cannot find one appropriate English word.

The second element is grammar. If we compare oral English as a treasure chain, the vocabulary can be perceived as the pearls, and grammar would be the thread that strings the pearls. Accompanied by the structure of sentences, grammar shows an indispensable part in the learning of oral English.

The third part is pronunciation. Without the help of non-language tools, you can comprehend what others say only when you know their pronunciation. And mutual communication occurs only when both sides can understand each other's pronunciation. Furthermore, the pause, stress and intonation will affect oral English learning directly.

**In line with these elements, we can generalize four characteristics of oral English.**

##### 1. Synchronicity

When one speaks English, he or she cannot prepare every sentence and then speak it out. In point of fact, speaking and linguistic thinking should proceed in synchrony.

##### 2. Interactivity

Like other languages, oral English needs active communication between listeners and speakers.

#### 3. Situationality

As for the same contents and topics, the way we express them varies with different situations. For example, in a face to face situation, one might say *hi, my name is John*. But in a telephone situation, he will say *hi, this is John speaking*. So we can see the way we talk should obey the situation, or else we may make mistakes or offend others.

#### 4. Comprehensiveness

Oral English necessitates comprehensiveness in aspects including grammar, intonation, gestures and pronunciation. If one speaks deprived of altering the intonation, the language will be gloomy. Furthermore, body language makes the language more bright, which plays an imperative role in transmission of information to others. To achieve the comprehensiveness of oral English, one needs to synchronize these rudiments correctly.

##### • Summary

After studying and equating the characteristics of Education Ecology and oral English, the writer found the resemblance of these characteristics, which will offer theoretical support for the study of oral English teaching based on education ecology.

From the background mentioned above, we can know the action of speaking and language thinking goes in synchrony, consequently these two elements depend on each other to occur. Without linguistic thinking, we have nothing to speak; without the need to speak, there will be no requisite for linguistic thinking. From this viewpoint of ecology, we can say the living of one organism depends on the being of another organism. So synchronicity of oral English follows the mutualism in ecology.

In ecology, in order to function well, the ecological system has to be well combined. As for oral English, the listener and speaker have to do their distinct jobs, that is the listening and speaking. Moreover, the listener and speaker form a community, in which the listener and speaker vigorously interconnect with each other. In this sense, interactivity of oral English follows the integrality in ecology.

In ecology, covariance means the evolution of one organism will affect another organism or some relative organisms, and these organisms will change congruently. The same goes for oral English, that is, the way we define the same contents differs with the change of situations. So the situationality of oral English follows covariance in ecology.

In ecology, dynamic balance means the structures and functions of the ecological systems are continually regulating themselves so that to be coordinated with each other. Likewise, a good English

speaker can coordinate elements like intonation, pronunciation and body gestures. If he incorrectly conveyed the wrong message to others, he would regulate some of the elements. So the comprehensiveness of oral English follows the dynamic balance in ecology.

In the following part, the author will examine the problems in oral English teaching from the perspective of Education Ecology.

### III. PROBLEMS IN ORAL ENGLISH TEACHING

This part the author will analyze the problems in oral English teaching from the perspective of Education Ecology. A balanced ecological system should follow some definite values, which includes the law of limiting issues, flower pot effect and law of niche. The author will illustrate the problems from these three aspects.

#### • *Lack of Limiting Factors*

Consistent with a scientific research, it is not the amount of nutrients but the quantity of nutrients that are required that determines the output of grains. If we want to increase the output substantially, the only way is to increase the amount of these needed nutrients. These needed nutrients are called limiting factors, which are more significant than other aspects. Some phenomena in oral English teaching violate the law of limiting factors.

##### 1. Students' lack of interest

Take the author's experience as an oral English teacher as example. When the author asked his students about their opinion about oral English, almost all of them told him that their oral English was not good. Few students told him that they liked speaking English. As we all know, interest is the best teacher. The author chose English as his major because he like English. Nevertheless, many students lack interest for oral English. Since interest is an imperative limiting factor for the learning of oral English, oral English became one big blockade for many Iranian students.

##### 2. Lack of English environment

Another significant limiting factor for oral English is English setting. All of us can master our native language because we were born to this language location in which everyone speaks the same language. But when it comes to the learning of second language, we do not have the language environment, so it becomes tougher to learn it. In our English class, the dominated environment is still Farsi environment instead of English setting. Some teachers themselves cannot speak English fluently, which will have negative influences on students. In the long term, students will stay at where they started and barely make any development on oral English.

#### 1 *Lack of Oral English Practice*

Flower pot is a fake living setting. Because of those comfortable circumstances created by human beings, flowers in the pot can grow well in a short period of time. But, without careful attendance, those flowers will weaken and then perish.

In our English classes, teachers often plant students in flower pots. Iranian teachers often put excessive importance on procedural knowledge, such as words and phrases. And students are often required to remember the procedural knowledge. However, these knowledge can only provide nutrients for students for a short period of time, but cannot assure the long-term expansion. When it comes to reading, the students may comprehend the meaning of the text. But they cannot speak English, because all they know is about words and phrases, and they haven't learned the skills for organizing these words and phrases.

#### C. *Teachers as the Authorities*

According to the ecology theory, niche refers to dissimilar locations of species. The species of the same position have to contest with each other and it's unbearable that two kinds of species will get along with each other for a long period of time. Under the situation of reserve shortage, species strive with each other extremely to get the greatest survival benefit especially ecological position. The following two cases in oral English teaching disrupt the Law of Niche.

##### 1. *Disharmony of teacher-student relation*

One of the important points of learning oral English is talking in English frequently. English teachers unavoidably play the significant part of starting a conversation in English classes. Nonetheless, the disharmony of teacher-student relation often stops the communication between students and teachers from happening. Habitually, Teachers' bias in English classes lead to the disharmony of teacher-student relation.

Iranian teachers tend to categorize students into good student and bad student in relation to their performance. According to the Law of Niche, B will try harder to compete with A. However, teachers' partiality will greatly exasperate B' self-confidence. Therefore, the relation between B and the teachers becomes disharmonious. Progressively, B will lose assurance in oral English learning, and he/she will blame the teacher for his/her less satisfactory performance in English speaking.

On top of the partiality occurring in classes, teachers' partiality in other situations such as additional activities may also cause the disharmony of teacher-student relation. This violates the Law of Niche because

students cannot have a neutral setting to study and to compete with each other.

## **2. Teacher-centered teaching**

The emphasis of English learning should be put on speaking. Although many teachers know that and often encourage students to speak English on a regular basis, they are really hindering students from doing so. In fact, students are regularly required to rehearse procedural knowledge such as words and phrases, and students are limited by the grey practice like this.

A successful teaching should be student-centered. Students have the right to choose their own studying methods, at the same time, teachers should give a correct leadership to students. Thus students and teachers have distinct responsibilities and positions. The Law of Niche is dishonored in teacher-centered teaching because teachers compete for a position which does not belong to them.

## **IV. BUILDING OF BALANCED ECOSYSTEM FOR ORAL ENGLISH TEACHING**

In Education Ecological system, the teachers and students can be seen as ecological subjects, and teaching environment and teaching methods can be observed as ecological objects. Though, in the ecological system of oral English teaching, the subjects and objects violate three laws in Education Ecology. So, this ecological system is not stable.

From the standpoints of subjects and objects, this part of the paper emphasizes the building of balanced ecosystem for oral English teaching. The process includes three parts: providing limiting factors for pupils, converting accent to oral English practice and student-centered teaching.

### **A. Create Limiting Factors for Students in Oral English Teaching**

In Education Ecology, students are the main subjects. As the author mentioned before, limiting factors are robust to the survival and growth of the subjects. Consequently, by providing students with the limiting factors, they can attain a better presentation, which is encouraging to the balance of ecological system.

#### **1. Arousing students' interest in English speaking**

As Confucius said: "People who know it are no better than those who love it; Those who love it are no better than the ones who love to know it." It's a worldwide truth that interest is the best teacher. Many students are not eager to learn English since they are not interested in English. Hence, the first step in oral English teaching is to stimulate students' interest in oral English learning.

In an English class, we can often catch that most students are hushed through the whole class, or some students are undetermined about whether they should speak or not. Nervous psychology, which is the anxiety and fear one expresses when he/she speaks in a foreign language, can abolish students' self-assurance in speaking English. Thus, teachers should take some actions to avoid worried psychology.

First, teachers should create a relaxed atmosphere in English classes. This entails teachers to abandon the outdated idea of "teachers are the absolute authorities". Teachers should not imagine students' submissive obedience, as an alternative, teachers should be the close friends of students. Harmonious teacher-student relation will put students at ease in the class. Additionally, the choice of English topic should be wisely deliberated. Normally, students will not feel nervous about familiar and life-related topics, such as movies, novels, music, basketball, social affairs, etc. Students all have their own opinions about these topics. But, political, military and technological issues are too complicated for students, which will make students feel strained. Of course, the level of difficulty should be uninterruptedly adjusted in line with the overall level of the students.

Second, learn how to ask questions and admire students. Usually, teachers like appointing one of his/her students to answer questions. This behavior will put students in strong anxiety. Altering the way of raising questions will achieve much better effect. For instance, the class can be divided into groups, and for every question raised by teacher, students in the group will discuss the question together and then the representative of this group can answer the question. This can not only greatly evade students' concern but also surge the interaction between students. Besides, teachers should never condemn students' wrong answers. The learning of a language is the process of practicing and making mistakes. Teachers should inspire students to speak in English without worrying making mistakes. It is what they learn from these mistakes that lead to the controlling of English. More outstandingly, for any progress students make, teachers should give a positive response to them by using the terminologies like wonderful, well done and good job.

#### **2. Providing language environment for students**

As we all know, a child can easily master a language because he/she lives in the language environment. In an English class, Iranian students barely have any opportunity to practice oral English. Consequently, teachers should try to provide students with English environment. This can be done via extracurricular.

Extracurricular activities like English Club, English Salon can provide students with good English environment. By participating in these activities, students are driven to speak English because they are exposed into the English environment. By communicating with classmates on a regular basis, their oral English can be greatly improved.

Muti-media classroom should also be open to students so that students can watch English movies or listen to English songs. In this kind of situation, English learning are turned into a normal process. In the long-term, the effectiveness of oral English teaching can be momentarily augmented.

### **B. Switch the Emphasis to Oral English Practice**

The objects like teaching environment and teaching methods also play a significant part in Education Ecology. These objects can provide subjects with promising conditions to develop. We can provide students with these promising circumstances by substituting the teaching emphasis to oral English practice.

According to the Flower Pot Effect, procedural knowledge like words and phrases cannot help pupils advance their oral English. However, it is not accurate to require teachers to consume some time in the class for oral English practice, as they have to finish the teaching targets of every semester. Teachers can only provide students with a few occasions to speak English in the class. But this is far from satisfactory. Students need more time to practice oral English. This involves founding of the second class. A second class refers to a public stage for English communication. There are some different forms of second class.

A good English speech necessitates a lot including intonation, pronunciation, stress, body language, eye contact as well as a clear idea that you want to convey to the audience. Hence, English speaking competition provides students with a delightful chance to practice oral English. Teachers can select some passionately discussed topics from the newspaper or Internet. Students then prepare speech draft on their own. In the process of speech writing, students are highly motivated to learn the pronunciation of words, how to express an idea in a more detailed way and how to act while giving a speech to others. And by competing with each other, students can learn from each other. For example, student A has a good pronunciation, but the body language of student B is more natural. Also, teachers should reassure cautious students to join in the competition, which can resourcefully build up their self-confidence. So English speaking competition can not only improve students' oral English but also build their confidence in English speaking, which make English speaking competition a great opportunity to practice English.

The class can be divided into several groups, three to five students for each group to have role play. Every day when the class is ended, the teacher can allocate a task to one of the groups, which is to give a short scene play in English before the start of next English class. The topic should be thought-provoking and easy for role playing.

In well-developed parts, teachers can make complete use of the multimedia room. Once in a week, students can have an English movie class. After a clip of English movie or other English videos, teachers can organize a dubbing competition immediately. Dubbing is interesting and is encouraging to the learning of intonation and pronunciation. In a less developed area, English teacher can use the recording machine. For every sentence played in the recording machine, students are required to repeat. With the use of multimedia devices, English teaching is no longer a boring task, as an alternative, students are willing to learn English and speak in English.

By providing students with the second class, students can not only learn the procedural knowledge in the class but also exercise oral English in the second class.

### **C. Switch to Student-centered Teaching**

According to law of niche, species of the same position have to compete with each other and it's intolerable that two kinds of species will get along with each other for a long period of time. In a balanced ecological system, students should be in the dominated position of learning. Yet, teachers usually occupy this position, which openly causes the disharmony of teacher-student relation.

So we should establish harmonious teacher-student relation and adjust teaching methods to realize student-centered teaching.

#### **1. Harmonious teacher-student relation**

A good teacher-student relation should be harmonious and self-ruled. This ecological atmosphere can stimulate students to study with enthusiasm. A good teacher will never give up on students with bad performance. Instead, the teacher will care more about these students by continuously inspiring them. In response, these students will become more and more confident in study, and their performance will recover.

Apart from treating every student similarly, teachers should also give full respect to students. Since every student has a different experience, everyone may have different personalities. Also, student culture is different from the adult culture because students are still juvenile both physically and spiritually. Teachers

want to fully understand the exclusivity of student culture and learn to examine students' conduct from their viewpoint. In this way, students will be happy to converse with teachers because they think teachers can understand them.

Emotional relation between students and teachers is the core of a harmonious relationship, which is also the foundation of well-organized teaching.

## 2. *Teach less, learn more*

Give a man fish and he can eat for a day; but if you teach him how to fish, he will eat for a lifetime. The idea of TLLM advocates that teachers should stimulate the eagerness of students by acknowledging their particular role.

In an English class, teachers need not to demonstrate every detail in the textbook, instead, they should learn to make these lifeless and dull knowledge interesting for students to learn. In addition to broadcasting the policy, communicating professional knowledge and resolving doubts, teachers should teach students how to form vigorous studying habits and effective studying strategies. In this way, students can improve their self-study ability and achieve justifiable growth.

## V. CONCLUSION

This paper mostly focuses on the study of oral English teaching with the ideas from Education Ecology. By listing and linking the characteristics of oral English and ecological system, the author finds the shared grounds for both parties, which provides the theoretical basis for the subject. The problems in current oral English teaching from the perspective of Education Ecology violate three important laws in Education Ecology. Only when we respect the laws and principles in Education Ecology can we make substantial improvement in oral English teaching.

There is still a long way to go in oral English teaching. The phenomenon of *dumb English* is still very common in Iran. An Iranian student spends an average of ten years studying English. But, the majority of students only get procedural knowledge such as words and phrases, while oral English is always the weakest part. At the same time, English is establishing its role as a global language because of American dominance in economy and politics. Therefore, it is in urgent need for Iranian students to speak English fluently. In order to achieve this goal, the oral English teaching should deserve much more attention. In this way, Iranian students can improve their oral English considerably.

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